Infant still in critical condition after Georgia police raid

Muhammad Khan
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A police raid on a home near Atlanta, Georgia last Wednesday resulted in the serious injury of a 19-month old toddler. During the raid, a stun grenade was thrown into the home which landed in the child's crib and exploded next to his face. The child, Bounkham "Bou Bou" Phonesavanh, is being held in a medically induced coma and is currently in critical condition, facing multiple surgeries.

Bounkham has suffered a collapsed lung, in addition to severe burns to his face and a deep gash in his chest. He is unable to breathe on his own and has been given only a 50 percent chance of survival. The Phonesavanhs do not have health insurance and are relying right now on donations to fund the surgeries that Bounkham will require.

The family was temporarily staying at the home of relatives in the Atlanta suburb of Cornelia after their Wisconsin home in burned down. Wanis Thonetheva, the intended target of the raid, was the nephew of the couple who owned the home.

A public official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told the *Washington Post* that the drug raid was conducted over a single $50 methedrine sale. The premise of the no-knock raid and the use of the militarized SWAT team was that Thonetheva had a criminal history and was found, during an earlier drug arrest, in possession of an AK-47. However, the raid in which Bounkham was injured turned up no weapons and only a drug "residue" was found. Additionally, Thonetheva was not at the home at the time of the raid. He was arrested several hours later at another location.

The Atlanta police claimed that there was no indication that children were inside the home but their statements have been contradicted by the family and their lawyer.

"They had been in this home for about two months," the Phonesavanh's lawyer, Mawuli Mel Davis, told WSB-TV. "This is a stay-at-home dad who was out in front of the home, playing with the children on a daily basis. Any surveillance that was done would have revealed there was a father with four children who played in that driveway."

Sheriff Joey Terrell acknowledged that no surveillance had been conducted. He defended this by saying that doing so would have risked revealing that the officers were watching the home.

"It's going to make us double, triple, and quadruple check to know that there aren't innocent parties in the house," Terrell said. "It's going to make us approach each situation differently."

But the track record of Georgia police suggests otherwise. Radley Balko, author of *Rise of the Warrior Cop*, has written extensively on police brutality and in a recent article in the *Washington Post* detailed some of the other incidents which the Atlanta and Georgia police have been involved in.

In 2000, police conducted a no-knock raid on a home in Riverdale, Georgia which resulted in the death of Lynette Gale Jackson. Earlier, Jackson's home had been broken into while she was inside of it and she procured a handgun for her protection, as a result. When the police conducted the no-knock raid, less than a month later, she pulled her pistol on them thinking that she was being robbed and was gunned down.

In November 2006, on the basis of a fabricated tip from an informant, Atlanta police initiated a no-knock raid on the home of a 92-year old woman named Kathryn Johnston. Johnston, in a situation similar to Jackson's, did not realize that the men entering her home were police officers, and she pulled a pistol on them. Johnston was also gunned down.

Johnston's case gained a fair amount of notoriety at

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the time because of the illegal practices that the police had engaged in. Atlanta police were found to have lied on the search warrant affidavit, claiming that a crack sale was conducted in the home, in order to get the no-knock warrant. These claims were later found to have been falsified by an informant trying to get the police off of his back. It was also revealed later that police planted marijuana at her home.

In September 2009, a pastor by the name of Jonathan Ayers was shot dead after trying to flee from armed police who were dressed in street clothes. Ayers had been counseling a young woman whom the police were investigating. She had allegedly sold an undercover cop $50 worth of cocaine. The officer who shot Ayers was found to have failed to take several firearms training classes, required for certification as a police officer, and had received zero training in the use of lethal force.

Balko notes numerous other cases in which police raids were conducted either on the basis of false information, or on the wrong home. Some of those cases ended in deaths. Police recklessness is encouraged through programs like the federal Byrne Justice Assistance Grant Program which rewards police departments for making frequent drug busts on the basis of weak or falsified evidence. Balko also notes that the “reforms” prompted by cases like Johnston’s are either rejected by the politicians outright or are reforms in name only.

But there is a broader social and political context to these police raids. Social conditions in Atlanta, as in most other parts of the United States, have deteriorated over the last several years, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, official unemployment in Atlanta currently stands at 10.4 percent, which is significantly higher than the country’s official average of 6.3 percent. According to a recent Brookings Institute paper, Atlanta possesses the largest “5/20 ratio” of all the big cities in the US. This statistic measures the distance between those just earning an income in the top 5 percent by those earning an income at the bottom 20 percent of society.

At the same time, the number of officers in the employ of the Atlanta city police department has now exceeded 2,000—up from just under 1,500 in the year 2000. The buildup and militarization of the police in Atlanta mirrors the buildup and militarization of police forces around the country.

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