

# Pennsylvania: Mother of seven dies while jailed for unpaid fines

**Samuel Davidson****16 June 2014**

The death last Saturday of a 55-year-old mother of seven in a Pennsylvania jail is a tragic demonstration once again of the brutalization of the working class and the poor in the American justice system.

Eileen DiNino, 55, the impoverished mother of seven children, was found dead in her cell on Saturday, June 7, less than 24 hours after being placed in jail for being unable to pay mounting truancy fines imposed upon her when several of her children had missed too many days from school.

According to the politicians of both the Democrat and Republican parties, the answer to every social problem in America is more police, more prisons and more repression.

In 1995, the Pennsylvania legislature amended the Pennsylvania Truancy Act to hold parents responsible if their children fail to attend school by imposing fines and possible jail time. The law states that a parent can be fined up to \$300 per violation and sent to jail for five days. The act was signed into law by then governor Tom Ridge, who went on to become the first US secretary of Homeland Security under the G.W. Bush administration.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required school districts to report truancy rates, which forced districts to become more aggressive in pursuing truancy violations or risk losing federal and state funds. Pennsylvania also ties state funding to attendance rates and budget cuts are forcing cash-strapped school districts to become more pernicious in imposing fines on parents.

While debtors' prison was supposedly abolished in the United States in 1830, tens of thousands of poor people are routinely placed in jail for failing to pay fines and other court costs.

Ms. DiNino had no income. She was living in a home

owned by another family member in Reading, Pennsylvania, on the eastern end of the state, about 65 miles northwest of Philadelphia. Her three older children had already moved out of the home, but she was still raising the four younger ones.

The county coroner has performed an autopsy but has not yet released a cause of death, saying that he is awaiting a toxicology report. Ms. DiNino suffered from high blood pressure and was taking medication for it and other health problems, but prison officials reported that they had not given her any medication.

When Ms. DiNino presented herself to the Berks County judge who sent her to jail for the weekend, she had over \$2,000 in fines that she could not pay. Not all of the money was a result of truancy violations. Once in the legal system, court costs and other fees are quickly added on. An Associated Press examination of Ms. DiNino's fines shows that for one truancy violation \$10.00 was added for postage, \$60.00 for the county constables and \$8.00 for a "computer project."

Expressing the real contempt and hostility showed for the poor, and mothers in particular, according to the AP, District Judge Dean R. Patton, who sent Ms. DiNino to prison, said that while he had lost sleep over her death he felt "that a short jail stint can sometimes 'break the habit' of parents who'd rather party into the night than take their children to school the next day."

It is likely that the "short jail stint" would not have been the end of her dilemma. More than likely, had she lived she would have soon been visited by the county youth service agency, which may have tried to take her remaining children away from her and place them in foster care on the claim that she wasn't caring for them.

Ms. DiNino's plight is not an isolated one. The *Reading Eagle* reported that since the year 2000 more

than 1,600 parents have been jailed in Berks county alone for truancy violations or the fines associated with them. More than two thirds of them are women and most are single parents living in poverty.

In 2011, the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania NAACP filed a lawsuit against the Lebanon School District, which in the 2008-2009 school year alone fined parents over \$500,000, more than 10 times per parent than neighboring Lancaster School District.

The tragic death of Ms. DiNino underscores one of the thousands of brutal indignities that the working class and the poor are subjected to in American society every day.



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