

Lost for Life: Children locked away in America

Joanne Laurier
28 July 2014

Directed and produced by Joshua Rofé

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Its prison population is more than 2.4 million., with millions more on probation or on parole. Slightly under one-quarter of the world's prisoners are held in American prisons.

Moreover, the US has the only courts in the world that hand down life sentences to individuals convicted of crimes committed before they were 18. Although the practice is banned under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 37: "Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age"), children are locked away in America for life and die behind bars with no chance of rehabilitation.

The origins of the juvenile justice system date back more than one hundred years. When a separate system for young offenders first came into being, it was based on the notion, as one commentary explains, that the juvenile court should "intervene on behalf of youth deemed to be in need of help based on their life circumstances or their delinquent acts. The primary motive of the juvenile court was to provide rehabilitation and protective supervision for youth." Such conceptions have been largely abandoned in the US in recent decades. Starting in the late 1980s, state legislatures enacted more punitive ("tough on crime") laws, including ones that treat children like adults, undermining the already inhumane juvenile justice system.

In *Lost for Life*, his 2013 documentary, filmmaker Joshua Rofé presents four examples of homicide and resulting life sentences for the teenage offenders. The movie's web site reports the staggering, and scandalous, fact that more than "2,000 people in the US

are serving life-without-parole sentences for crimes they committed as juveniles [some as young as 13]." To the credit of the filmmakers, they are trying to bring to light a grotesque social ill not widely discussed or even known about.

Four years of filming produced stories that are heartbreaking, involving traumatized young men and their families who are left searching for answers. Ultimately, however, *Lost for Life* itself is very limited in what it has to say about the subject.

The first segment concerns two Idaho young men, Brian Draper and Torey Adamcik, both now 21 and arrested at age 16. They decided to kill a high school classmate in 2006, videotaping themselves before and after the murder. Of the two, Brian seems more aware of the implications of his crime. Facing the camera, he tries to explain what the filmmakers present as essentially unexplainable:

"Columbine created a sub-culture for disenfranchised kids who don't fit in anywhere ... They were in the spotlight, I wanted to be in the spotlight." Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was the scene of a shocking mass shooting and double suicide April 20, 1999. (It's interesting to note that most of the youthful interviewees are psychically damaged, not economically deprived.)

Interspersed throughout the interviews are clips of the media reaction to the events, with headlines such as "Cold-blooded killer--Killed for fun" and "Adult Crime, Adult Time."

One of the most articulate of the inmates is Jacob from Colorado. Now 34, he was arrested at age 15 for killing his mother and stepfather. The circumstances were so tragic that Mary Ellen Johnson wrote a book, *The Murder of Jacob*, which points to the fact that nobody paid attention to the "red flags" being waved

by Jacob and his brother about the “terror” perpetrated by their parents.

“There is no chance of rehabilitation ... your life is worthless,” says Jacob. This sentiment is echoed by Torey: “You sit here and rot ... watching yourself decompose. It’s horrible.” At one point in the film, Marty Beyer, a child welfare and juvenile justice consultant with a Ph.D. in clinical/community psychology from Yale University, asserts that the number of “kids who cannot be rehabilitated is small.” Even so, most juvenile offenders never receive proper counseling or treatment.

In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, director Rofé noted that “[O]ver-sentencing and over-incarceration are an epidemic in the United States...I also have friends who either served obscene sentences for crimes they did not commit and were saved by the Innocence Project or are still serving despicably long sentences due only to the color of their skin.

“That said, my film is about people who are guilty, they are the supposed ‘worst of the worst’ of juvenile offenders, and I was sometimes shocked to find how much I liked some of them. They were human and they were and are in pain. Some of them are hoping for a second chance although they were never really given a first chance. The notion of empathy took on an entirely new meaning for me, but I also met juvenile lifers who are so far from the realm of redemption that it’s terrifying. Terrifying because they look and sound just like our friends and neighbors.

“Ultimately, I was left to wrestle with this: Is a kid’s life worth more than the worst thing they’ve ever done?”

The imprisonment of children is an outrage, but if the makers of *Lost for Life* are outraged, they largely keep it to themselves. The film as a whole does not go far beyond stating the obvious. Furthermore, for the sake of so-called “balance,” the movie’s creators give a platform to such outfits as the National Organization of Victims of Juvenile Lifers, which boasts of a site called killerkids.org. Indeed, “Killer Kids” is the subject matter--and title--of several sensationalist and noxious “reality TV” shows. In fact, the documentary’s opening shot is that of a victim’s mangled corpse.

What the filmmakers apparently don’t dare to say--or don’t understand enough to say--is that the perpetrators of these often horrible crimes are the products, above

all, of a toxic social atmosphere and circumstances, and it is that atmosphere and those circumstances that ought to be indicted, first and foremost. Endless war and equally endless official defense of militarist bullying and killing, criminality at the highest levels of the government and the financial world, vast social inequality which is championed by the media and the establishment, the trampling on democratic rights by police forces at every level ... these are some of the conditions that would have to be taken into account in any serious evaluation of these “senseless” homicides.

In any event, the powers that be have no interest in “closure” for victim’s families or anyone else. These are simply opportunities for the authorities to whip up backwardness, eroding sympathy for society’s swelling number of youthful unfortunates, and provide themselves with additional repressive powers against the population.

Attempting to probe a sensitive and explosive issue, the filmmakers found it impossible to criticize or significantly withstand the current reactionary mood in official circles. Rofé and company took the easy way out.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact