

Class justice in America: Eight-year-old charged with murder

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On occasion, a criminal case involves facts so tragic and a state response so brutal that the true nature of class relations is laid bare.

Such is the case in Birmingham, Alabama, where the district attorney's office announced Tuesday that it is charging an eight-year-old boy with first-degree murder. The boy allegedly beat a one-year-old child to death because she would not stop crying. Now he faces a possible thirteen-year jail sentence.

The state has also charged the deceased child's grieving mother, 26-year-old Kattera Lewis, with manslaughter for allegedly leaving the children alone—something Lewis and her attorney deny.

The events leading up to the charges provide a picture of social reality in the world's foremost capitalist superpower.

On the night of the child's death, Kattera Lewis was living with a family friend and her friend's five children on Birmingham's northeast side. The neighborhood is typical of so many working-class areas—streets filled with potholes, no streetlights, and poverty rates for nearby zip codes ranging between 20 and 45 percent.

Located 2,000 feet from the deafeningly loud landing strips at Birmingham's international airport, the small house at 71st Street and 2nd Avenue was home to at least 8 people, including 6 young children.

Lewis and her child were living under the stress of such cramped conditions because she—like millions of Americans—was unable to win a coveted voucher for a housing subsidy under Section 8 of the Fair Housing Act. Lewis was placed on a waiting list, which commonly entails a wait of 3 to 6 years. Waiting lists have grown longer as a result of the Obama administration's decision to slash funding for the subsidy program.

After confronting a lifetime of economic brutality, the young mother and the eight-year-old boy have been hit with the full force of the state. On October 11, police arrived at the house and took both the boy and Lewis into custody. A six-year-old sibling was also questioned and gave testimony that the police will likely use to corroborate the murder charge.

Birmingham Police representative Lieutenant Sean Edwards spoke about the child as if he was a hardened criminal: "I guess the eight-year-old took it upon himself and began to commit violent acts against the one-year old, and the one-year-old could definitely not defend herself."

The charges against the mother are part of a brutal campaign to portray the most impoverished sections of society as criminal and subhuman. Birmingham Police spokesman Edwards said the manslaughter charge "definitely sends a message that this type of behavior, this type of irresponsibility on behalf of a parent, is totally unacceptable."

The response of the state and the media has a certain unhinged character, reflecting a society in deep crisis. The corporate press has leapt on the story, publishing the mother's mug shot under headlines such as: "Mom denies she partied while eight-year-old killed toddler" (*New York Post*), and "8-year old charged with murder of one-year-old while mothers went to nightclub" (*Time* magazine). Echoing these antisocial sentiments, the *New York Times* wrote Wednesday that there are "no easy answers" to the question of whether the state should charge an eight-year-old with murder.

These are the latest in a spate of charges against children by prosecutors in the United States. In August, prosecutors in Detroit, Michigan charged an eleven-year-old with manslaughter in a gun-related death. Earlier this year, Tennessee officials filed murder

charges against an eleven-year-old who shot his eight-year-old neighbor.

The United States incarcerates children at a rate that far surpasses the rest of the world. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, almost 3,000 children have been convicted and given life sentences without the chance of parole. On any given day, 10,000 children are held captive in adult jails and prisons, where they face high chances of sexual assault. Tens of thousands more are held in juvenile centers that are so commonplace they are called by their nickname, “juvies.”

For the working class and youth in America, the so-called justice system is ruthless and remorseless. The prosecution of children is of a piece with the “law and order” agenda of both big-business parties. Every social problem in the United States is treated as a police question, an occasion to increase the powers of the state and its bodies of armed men.

But while the courts imprison children who do not have the mental capacity to understand the implications of their actions, police officers who kill or maim children regularly escape prosecution. No charges have been brought against the police officer captured on video gunning down twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland in November 2014. This week, the prosecutor involved in the case selectively leaked another “expert opinion” aimed at preparing public opinion for the cop’s exoneration.

For every 1,000 people killed by the police, only one officer goes to jail. These are not the only criminals whose actions are sanctioned or even praised by the government. No criminal charges have been brought against those responsible for CIA torture, for waging wars of aggression, for the drone murders of thousands of civilians, for ordering the bombing of the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan, for illegal NSA surveillance, or for the 2008 financial crash.

This is the state of the “justice system” in the United States, the function of which is to terrorize and brutalize the working class and enforce the ruling class’s policies of poverty, inequality and war.



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