

Alleged Nashville shooting brings social relations into relief

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The alleged shooting of a homeless man by an apparently well-off young woman in Nashville, Tennessee last month might serve as a metaphor for the growing class inequality in a city that has become one of the most unequal in the nation.

Gerald Melton, 54, was shot once in the stomach August 26 after he allegedly objected to the sound of loud music and exhaust fumes coming from a Porsche driven by Katie Quackenbush, 26.

Melton was sleeping outside in the Music Row area near downtown Nashville when Quackenbush, an “aspiring” singer/songwriter, pulled her car in at 3 a.m. near where the homeless man was sleeping.

An encounter led to disputed verbal exchanges before Quackenbush (a.k.a. Katie Layne) pulled a gun and fired twice before driving away without calling for help or reporting the shooting, Nashville police said.

She would only turn herself in much later.

Quackenbush is the daughter of a prominent Amarillo, Texas attorney who defended his daughter after she was charged with attempted murder and released on \$25,000 bond.

“She didn’t try and kill this guy,” Jesse Quackenbush said. “She had no intention of killing him. She didn’t know that she hit him,” the *Tennessean* newspaper reported. *People* cited this crude and reactionary comment by the attorney: “I know there has been a problem in Nashville, so I’ve read, with the homeless attacking, raping and killing people. There has also been a problem with local citizens killing homeless people. So, my daughter is ending up as a poster child for all these pre-existing problems with the homeless.”

Melton, also known as a talented musician but a loner, remains in Vanderbilt University Medical Center in stable condition with a gunshot wound to the

stomach.

Homelessness is a growing problem in Nashville which likes to tout itself as the up and coming “It” city. As the city grows, so does wealth disparity and the number of homeless.

On an average night in January 2015, there were 2,365 homeless in Nashville with 1,124 in emergency shelters, 560 in transitional housing and 470 living on the “street” (i.e., sleeping on steam grates, in cardboard boxes, under bridges, etc.), according to the U.S. Conference of Mayors’ 2015 Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness.

That marked an almost 5 percent increase compared to 2014-2015 putting Nashville in the “top” 10 cities with growing homeless populations, with only Austin, Texas; Oklahoma City; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Los Angeles; and Washington D.C. experiencing greater increases, the *Tennessean* observed.

“The numbers illustrate a homeless struggle in Nashville that has worsened even as the city prospers economically on many fronts. Rising housing and rent prices in Nashville have made housing affordability more elusive than ever, forcing more people to the streets, homeless advocates say,” the newspaper opined.

Nashville is one of the most unequal cities in the US. According to a 2015 Brookings Institution analysis of Census Bureau data, Nashville ranked sixth out of the 50 largest metropolitan areas for income disparity. Residents in the 95th percentile have an average annual income of around \$170,000, 7.9 times more than those in the 20th percentile, who earn little more than \$21,000.

Most disturbing is that many of the homeless in Nashville and America are children, according to Richard Schweid, author of *Invisible Nation: Homeless*

Families in America. Schweid is a former *Tennessean* reporter and began his research for the book in Nashville.

“In addition to the high number of single men experiencing homelessness, thousands of children and their families are without a home, and the city does little to help them,” he commented.

In the shadow of chic new apartment buildings in Nashville surrounded by expensive niche restaurants, the homeless and unemployed—men and women of all ages—station themselves on what seems like every other street corner to sell the weekly street newspaper “The Contributor,” in hopes of earning \$1.25 for themselves on each sale.

For those young people with jobs busing tables, waiting tables, manicuring expensive lawns and laboring at “Music City” construction sites, housing prices put first homes out of reach. High and rising rents have prompted city officials to talk of the need for affordable “workforce” housing, which suggests not homes for human beings, equals in a community, but dormitories and servant quarters for the “help.”

Nashville has seen the second-highest spike in the U.S. since 2009 in the percentage of unsheltered homeless people—69.1 percent—and the third-highest over last year, 43.3 percent.

Considering 10,000 parents and students who are homeless and those in transitional housing or shelters, one commentator estimated as many as 23,000 homeless in Nashville.

High and rising rents contribute to the problem. The average rent, for instance, for a one-bedroom apartment has increased from \$915 a month to \$1,129 over the past two years.

The 2017 report by the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, however, claimed that the numbers of homeless were going down, including a 39 percent decrease in the chronically homeless.

But members of the Metro Homelessness Commission (MHC) aren’t buying it.

“I think we know, particularly those of us who have been in the service provision arena for many years, that the count is woefully wrong and under-representative,” MHC member Paula Foster told WKRN news.

The alleged shooting August 26 has brought the issues sharply into focus.



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