Impoverished California parents arrested, charged with raising children in substandard conditions

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Two homeless parents, Daniel Panico, 73, and Mona Kirk, 51, of San Bernardino County, California, were arrested Thursday on suspicion of willful cruelty to their three minor children. The two parents had been living with their children in a trailer and makeshift shelter outside of Joshua Tree National Park.

The shelter was discovered by a patrolling San Bernardino County Sherriff's deputy. It was described as a 4-foot-tall makeshift shelter, approximately 200 square feet in area. According to reports, the roof of the shelter, which was comprised of salvaged tin and a "kiddie pool," was lined with twigs and mattress padding, apparently for insulation in the winter.

The family reportedly owned the land plot and used a trailer for shelter as well. Several pet cats were also owned by the couple.

The plot had no electricity or running water, while holes around the property were reportedly filled with refuse and human feces. The shelter contained canned food, a camping stove and various children's toys, bikes and storybooks.

"Children should not have to live like that," said Cindy Bachman, a spokeswoman for the sherriff's department. "As parents, they have a responsibility to provide the basic necessities for their children to grow up and be healthy and safe."

The case is receiving widespread media attention, particularly as it comes on the heels of revelations of parental abuse in the city of Perris, which is about an hour's drive southwest of Joshua Tree. In that particular instance, 13 children were alleged to have been regularly beaten, shackled and starved by their parents.

More importantly, however, the Joshua Tree case reveals that Panico and Kirk are being punished not because of any willful acts of harm against their children, but because of their extreme poverty.

Captain Trevis Newport of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Morongo Basin Station, clarified that the children, ages 11, 13 and 14, were not being held captive and were not being abused by their parents aside from any "abuse" caused by conditions of extreme poverty. "They're homeless," Newport said. "It's a shelter, the shape of a box … nowhere near what it sounded like when it came out."

Community members who know the parents attest that they appeared to be engaged and responsible in spite of the conditions faced by the family. They reportedly brought their children to community events, including scouting, on a regular basis. The children did not attend public school and were apparently home schooled.

According to neighbor Linda Klear, recently interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*, the family was often seen together at the local library and Hi-Desert Nature museum. According to Klear, the children "were very much loved." The eldest boy, she said, was a voracious reader and always had his head in a book.

Leanna Munroe, who had known the family for nine years, agreed with Klear's comments. "The Sherriff's Department is punishing these kids for being homeless," she said.

Also according to Klear, the family has a small fixed income which wasn't enough to get by on. The family had previously made an agreement to rent a home for $1 a month and after that arrangement ended, began taking care of a nearby vacation home in which they were occasionally allowed to reside.

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Klear stated that the family was proud and often refused assistance. “They don’t want handouts,” she said. “I’m hoping this woke them up.” The argument, however, that the family could have avoided having their children taken away by being more responsive to individual philanthropy only underscores the class character of their arrest.

Both parents arrived in handcuffs for arraignment proceedings at Joshua Tree courthouse on Friday. Children and Family Services are looking after the three siblings while parents are being held at Morongo Basin Jail in lieu of $100,000 bail.

Aside from not being able to make bail, both parents indicated that they could not hire an attorney and asked the court to appoint one to represent them. Not guilty pleas were then entered on their behalf.

Panico spoke to the judge during the proceedings after the pleas were entered. He said, “I’m wondering why all this is happening. I want to say something. It’s ridiculous.”

The situation confronting Panico, Kirk and their children must be placed within the larger context of growing impoverishment and homelessness under capitalism. Despite the fact that the Inland Empire area, which includes San Bernardino, is considered one of the poorest in California, the basic living costs are extraordinarily high.

Apartment rentals, for example, averaged $1,393 a month in 2017. This amount is well out of reach, not only for the homeless but for increasing numbers of employed workers as well. Those who have a place to live are often forced to share living spaces with multiple friends and family members to defray the cost.

In a growing number of cases, some even are forced to endure homelessness with no other options for housing.

Last month, authorities in the Southern California city of Anaheim evicted more than 1,000 homeless at a large encampment near Angel Stadium.

The presence of former IT workers, school staff and others at the site reveals that the overall composition of the homeless is changing. Traditionally comprised of those with obvious mental health and substance abuse issues, the homeless are beginning to look a great deal more like the working class as a whole.

Little to nothing remains of the social safety net created by the US ruling class in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the Second World War. This process began with Bill Clinton’s welfare reform in the 1990s and accelerated under subsequent administrations, culminating in sharp reductions to food stamp benefits under Obama and now massive tax cuts for the rich under Trump.

The Orange County area, like all urban areas across California, is notably expensive. The general cost of living in Orange County alone stands at 43 percent above the national average.

With rising costs of housing and fewer opportunities for decent paying jobs, the crisis of homelessness is poised to reach epidemic proportions. In the West Coast states of Washington, California and Oregon, there were 168,000 people officially counted as homeless in 2017. This represented an increase of 19,000 over the previous year.

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