

Baby's death on Australia's Gold Coast points to worsening social conditions

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A passerby made the horrifying discovery last week of a dead baby girl, nine months old, washed up at Surfers Paradise, a prominent tourist beach on Australia's Gold Coast. Though the plight of the infant's parents, a homeless couple, had been known to police and government authorities for months, they have now been accused of criminal neglect and the father has been charged with murder.

While the immediate cause of the tragedy may be complicated, a picture has emerged of the desperate poverty gripping layers of workers and youth in Australia, caused by decades of attacks on public services and living standards carried out by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National Coalition alike.

The tragedy is all the more revealing because the Gold Coast embodies the obscene poles of wealth created by capitalism, with homeless families living in tents, near sewers and under bridges, close to some of the most expensive homes in the country.

Police say they believe the baby drowned after being thrown into the Tweed River at Tweed Heads, about 30 kilometres south of Surfers Paradise, and was carried onto the beach by ocean currents. Police soon arrested the couple, describing them as "known to the police," and later charged the father, a 48-year-old indigenous man, with murder. The mother, a 23-year-old former university student, underwent treatment at a mental health service, but police refused to rule out charging her with murder as well.

Police told a Gold Coast court the father had a history of "street offences" and mental health issues, including schizophrenia. He was living on a meagre disability pension. At one point, the couple and two infant children were known to be living in a tent on beach dunes. These facts alone are a damning indictment of

the lack of mental health and homelessness services.

It quickly emerged that both parents suffer from mental illness, and had, for months, been living homeless on local beaches and in parks. Concerned residents, both in Queensland's Gold Coast, and Tweed Heads, in the neighbouring state of New South Wales, had long asked authorities to assist them, only to be bureaucratically brushed aside.

The death has had a strong impact in the Gold Coast and Tweed Heads communities, which include substantial working class suburbs. It appears both parents had attempted to give away the baby to people—even random strangers—reflecting a state of desperation and psychological instability.

One Gold Coast resident, Erin Sorensen, posted on her Facebook page that she had informed the police of the situation two months earlier, saying: "It was winter and the dunes were freezing every time the sun went down. I didn't think that was good for a baby or toddler... I reported it straight away and monitored the following week. And if authorities did the job correctly this little girl would still be here!"

Another resident wrote to the Gold Coast City Council in May, expressing similar fears as the family spent winter nights sleeping on a wooden platform in a park. At night the baby could be heard crying. A council official wrote back after five days, telling the resident to raise the matter with other authorities as it was not a council responsibility.

One anonymous person asked the *Gold Coast Bulletin*: "Why was the baby left with the parents—just why?" Child Protection Services (CPS) in Queensland were made aware of the family's situation but took no further action, despite subsequent complaints, after the father reportedly turned away a social worker.

Tweed Heads resident Willem Ungermann said the

baby's parents frequented the park near the Jack Evans Boat Harbour, where the baby was allegedly thrown in the river. Homelessness had "got very, very bad over the last two years," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Homelessness, exacerbated by the exorbitant cost of housing, has become an increasingly urgent problem in Australia. With hardly any new public housing units being built, and waiting lists expanding dramatically, individuals and entire families are forced to seek assistance from relatives, friends and charities.

According to an ABC Fact File in August, the number of homeless people Australia-wide had risen to 116,400 homeless—the highest level ever recorded. The rate of homelessness had increased by 14 percent since 2011, or from 47.6 per 10,000 people to 49.8. Young and indigenous people were over-represented, with 58 percent of the homeless aged 34 or younger and 20 percent indigenous.

In the Gold Coast alone, an estimated 1,700 people were homeless in 2016, representing a 27 percent increase compared to 2011. The true number may be greater. Homeless advocate Kathleen Vlasic told the ABC that the high volume of transient people and tourists in the Gold Coast could make homeless people difficult to identify. "They can wander through Surfers and they're not really going to stand out like a sore toe," she explained.

Reverend Jon Brook, whose charity provides free meals, said dozens of homeless people are forced to stay in unsafe conditions and areas such as campgrounds, dilapidated buildings or boarding houses. He noted an increase in multi-generational homelessness, with some homeless families consisting of three generations.

Incidents of children being harmed or killed as a result of the worsening social conditions are being reported across the country in rising numbers. Requests for child protection interventions increased by 25 percent in 2016–17 alone.

Wendy Coe, a former coordinator of a non-profit homeless service on the Gold Coast, wrote in a letter to the *Brisbane Times*: "A baby is dead. A family is in ruin. A brother will never see his sister again. It is a tragedy unfathomable and yet it was highly predictable."

Coe said she was first alerted to the fact that a homeless couple with two little children was "sleeping

rough in Surfers" six months ago when a friend copied her into an email she sent to a Gold Coast city councillor. However, Coe was unable to assist. "I know there is nowhere for a family to go for crisis accommodation," she wrote.

The response of the Queensland state Labor government has been characteristically inhumane. Rather than address the issues of homelessness, mental illness or poverty, it has vowed to increase criminal sentences and broaden the definition of murder to include manslaughter.

These measures will succeed only in vilifying desperate parents and obscuring the horrific social conditions that lead to such tragedies. The deaths of children are a malignant byproduct of the austerity measures and cuts to welfare, championed by all state and federal governments over the past forty years.



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