

Ohio jury acquits young woman on murder charges in baby's death

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On Thursday, a jury in Warren County, Ohio acquitted 20-year-old Brooke “Skylar” Richardson on charges of aggravated murder, involuntary manslaughter, and child endangerment related to the death of her baby in May 2017. The crimes with which Richardson was charged carried a life sentence. Richardson still faces up to a year in prison for one count of “gross abuse of a corpse,” although she may be given probation because this is her first offense.

The jury’s verdict, delivered after less than five hours of deliberation, comes as a rejection of barbaric laws and the common practice of prosecutors excessively charging individuals for what amounts to non-criminal behavior.

Richardson’s defense counsel presented evidence that the 18-year-old found out she was pregnant more than 30 weeks into her pregnancy, delivered her baby, Annabelle, stillborn in her parents’ house, and buried the baby’s remains because she was sad, scared, and did not know what to do. Richardson’s stillborn delivery and burial of her baby’s remains occurred just days after her senior prom.

The defense also presented evidence that the police coerced a false confession from Richardson, who told police during interrogations that she may have heard the baby make noises after delivery, tried to cremate the remains with a lighter, and that she did not return doctors’ calls because she “didn’t really want to have [her] baby.”

The prosecution viciously painted the high school cheerleader as a self-centered teen who callously burned and then threw away her baby’s corpse because the child would get in the way of Richardson’s “perfect life.”

To substantiate this, the prosecution pointed to the fact that the baby’s father was not Richardson’s

boyfriend and that Richardson planned to attend college after graduating. The prosecution’s evidence consisted mostly of Richardson’s text messages, social media posts, and her “confession” to interrogating police officers.

In 2018, Richardson’s case caused controversy when the Twelfth District Court of Appeals of Ohio found that an exception existed in physician-patient confidentiality when the life of a “child” was in danger. The appeals court ignored Richardson’s insistence that her fetus and then stillborn baby did not meet the legal definition of a “child,” finding in favor of the prosecution.

Richardson’s case garnered a significant amount of media attention, with the Warren County Prosecutor’s Office deeming Richardson’s actions as the “perfect crime.” This resulted in Richardson facing brutal harassment in her community.

Although the media and legal system in Ohio wanted to see Richardson in prison for the rest of her life for giving birth to a stillborn baby, the jury, made up of regular citizens of Warren County, could not treat the young woman so harshly for her hardships. These jurors saw through the reactionary rhetoric of the media and prosecutors and saw the reality of a young woman who has already been through enough suffering.

Teenage and unplanned pregnancies persist because of a lack of sexual health education in schools across the US and the barriers to accessing contraceptives. Additionally, teens and young women who unexpectedly become pregnant and cannot care for a child increasingly come up against the law in trying to terminate their pregnancies.

In April, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine signed a “heartbeat bill” into law, banning abortions in the state after six weeks. A court partially blocked the bill in

July. The Warren County Prosecutor's Office's decision to charge Richardson with crimes that carried a life sentence shows that the state will stop at nothing to impose cruel treatment on young women with unplanned pregnancies.

The rights to physical autonomy and to make reproductive health decisions must be strongly defended in a democratic society. Richardson should not face any criminal charges, much less prosecution, for the traumatic experience she suffered. Nor should any woman face the possibility of criminal prosecution for giving birth to a stillborn baby or trying to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

While the jury's verdict in Richardson's case is a welcome, humane development, the soundness of jury decisions cannot be relied upon in every case. The state apparatus, including zealous prosecutors, will continue to whip up reactionary public sentiment in an attempt to criminalize what amount to non-criminal offenses, particularly among the most vulnerable.



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