

The murder of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes: lurid press coverage obscures UK's deepening social crisis

Paul Bond
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The shocking killing of six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes by his father, Thomas Hughes and his partner Emma Tustin, has prompted endless lurid press coverage in Britain. This media sensationalism not only covers over the worsening social crisis that gave rise to the horrific murder but is purposely designed to prevent any broader understanding of it.

Complex social questions about a brutalising society are reduced to stories about “evil” individuals. The tragedy is presented as inevitable. Nothing can be changed, other than the degree of punishment to be inflicted on the guilty.

Routinely describing his killers as “monsters” exploits instinctive sympathy for Arthur. Calling him “the boy who never stood a chance” makes him another inevitable victim of this social degradation. The press deliberately looks no further than the killers themselves. According to the BBC’s Phil Mackie, “No-one can be blamed for what happened other than the people who were supposed to be looking after [Arthur].”

No one should accept that premise, which only sanctions the argument that individual monstrosity requires a monstrous state response. The horror manifests in appalling personal stories, but its origin is not individual. It is social. It must be tackled as such.

There is a long history of using such cases for strengthening the state. Millions in the UK will recall the killing of two-year-old Jamie Bulger in 1993. Eleven-year-olds Jon Venables and Robert Thompson were tried and convicted as adults. Any consideration of the tragic circumstances leading up to the killing was dismissed. Publicly identified, they were sentenced to indefinite detention. The European Court of Human Rights subsequently ruled their trial unfair, and the fixing of their sentences by the Home Secretary a breach of their human rights.

In opposition, Labour used the case to prove its law-and-order credentials. Tony Blair, then shadow home secretary, used calls for harsher legal measures to bid for party leadership. When Labour came to power, Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham had to apologise “unreservedly” to Home Secretary Jack Straw for saying the boys should be released when they turned 18. Lynch-mob hysteria won the day. Blair

would go on to wage an illegal war in Iraq that cost almost 200,000 lives.

Workers must resist being swept up in this latest disorienting narrative. It is necessary to think critically about society and the changes that must be made.

Arthur’s father was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 21 years imprisonment. Thomas’s partner Tustin was sentenced to life for murder, with a recommended minimum prison term of 29 years. At the beginning of the first lockdown, in March 2020, the couple combined their families in Tustin’s home in Solihull, with her two children. Arthur was beaten, undernourished and dehydrated, his food and drink poisoned with salt. Doctors said the bruising on his body fell within medical definitions of child torture.

Arthur never returned to school when they reopened on June 8, 2020. Over the weekend of June 12-15, he was forced to stand alone in the hall for up to 14 hours at a time. On June 16, Emma struck Arthur’s head against a hard surface repeatedly, causing an “unsurvivable” brain injury. He was taken to hospital, and life support was switched off the following day.

The press has focused on how the couple’s lies about Arthur were accepted by social workers and police during lockdown. Combined with narratives of “evil” individuals to pillory social care providers alerted by other family members, this has been used to condemn the visiting social work team that reported no safeguarding concerns.

But if errors were made then this is because social care, like other health provision, has been slashed to the bone. Emeritus professor of social work Ray Jones told Radio 4’s *World at One* that social care providers “are all struggling because of 10 years of cuts to services.” The Social Workers Union said, “Most social workers just don’t have enough time to spend on individual assessments due to work demand and changing workload allocations.”

No one should believe this latest tragedy will mean a reversal of such cuts. Conservative MP Tim Loughton hypocritically intoned, “Funding for children’s social care has lagged behind and social workers are overstretched and undervalued, when in truth they should be revered as our fourth emergency service.”

But Loughton was children's minister in 2010-12, when David Cameron's Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition government was imposing austerity measures across all social provision.

The pressure intensified under demands for rapid adjustments to working practices forced by lockdown conditions, for which no additional funding was granted even as big business was subsidised to the tune of billions. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reported that lockdown saw a 23 percent rise in calls from adults concerned about a child's welfare due to the intense pressures placed on vulnerable and sometimes dysfunctional families. The Department of Education noted a rise in serious injuries and deaths of children during the first half of 2020.

Rather than admitting a failure to provide adequate care provision, this has been presented as an argument against measures to combat the pandemic. Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, told the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*, "there's no doubt that lockdown was such a shock to the whole nation that it weakened the system of support," and "we must not close schools again."

Social care professionals note that Arthur's was an "extremely rare" case, but it is not the first. Most recently, sixteen-month-old Star Hobson was beaten to death in September 2020. Her mother, Frankie Smith, admits child cruelty but accuses her partner of the killing. The parents of Lily-Mai Hurrell Saint-George have pleaded not guilty to charges of murder or manslaughter over the death of the 10-week-old in January, with multiple rib injuries.

Such cases are used to generate emotive heat, not light. Previous cases triggered reviews that saw no fundamental changes. They are a well-worn tactic of the British ruling class to evade addressing underlying causes.

In 2000, eight-year-old Victoria Climbié was murdered by her carers in Haringey. The press lamented a "crisis in welfare". An inquiry, under Lord Laming, heard damning evidence of social workers stretched to the limit trying to cope. Overwork, insufficient staff, and inadequate training emerged as clear factors, just as they would at the next such review by Laming, in 2009, following the death of 17-month-old "Baby P," also in Haringey. The review was held amid public anger whipped up by the pornographic media coverage of the toddler's death. By that time, the Labour government had spent nine years failing to implement Laming's earlier recommendations. Social care provision would be targeted by whichever party came to power at the impending general election a year later.

Little store can be set by the independent review now launched by social services. Such reviews are a standard governmental practice, shifting the blame onto individual care providers who are left shouldering the burden of a collapsing social system.

Of course, better social care systems alone cannot tackle the broader societal collapse indicated here. But it will not even be

tried, as the demands for law and order grow ever louder. Comments by Julian Knight, Tory MP for Solihull, at a wreath-laying photo opportunity, summarised the agenda. His priority was "to ensure that those who have failed [Arthur] are accountable," before condemning the "unduly lenient sentencing scheme."

Arthur's death points to a brutalised society. It is not just that social care has been gutted. All of society's protective measures have been eviscerated. Rising pensioner and child poverty express the total collapse of working-class living conditions. Cuts in Universal Credit welfare payments mean greater immiseration for thousands of the poorest. Foodbank use is soaring. There is a crisis of homelessness.

The inequality gulf is widening. In 2018, United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston reported that one fifth of Britain's population lived in poverty, thanks in part to a willful agenda of "radical social re-engineering" aimed at ripping up every aspect of post-war welfare provision. The British ruling class, forced to adopt such provisions out of fear of a restive working class and the challenge of socialism, have spent the past decades dispensing with them. Margaret Thatcher's declaration that "There is no such thing as society", only "individual men, women and... families" has become a brutal political reality.

Laming now warns that funding cuts mean social care has become "a crisis service, rather than a preventative service." How could it be otherwise when every other social provision has collapsed? Capitalist society stands exposed. It has failed.

Social care provision is required to support the most vulnerable, but an entire society needs to be rebuilt that will prevent that point being reached routinely. The fabulous wealth monopolised by the corporate elite needs to be seized and directed towards providing a decent life for all, with good housing, education, health care and well-paid jobs matched to foundations in which social life and culture is raised to an infinitely higher level so that no individual, no family and above all no child will ever again be left to descend to such degraded conditions. It means that millions must commit themselves to the struggle for socialism.



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