

Jury trial of Oxford High School shooter's mother on manslaughter charges opens in Pontiac, Michigan

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28 January 2024

The trial of Jennifer Crumbley, mother of Oxford High School shooter Ethan Crumbley, opened last Thursday before a 17-person jury in Oakland County Court in Pontiac, Michigan.

Jennifer and her husband, James Crumbley, are being tried separately on four counts each of involuntary manslaughter. The charges are for the shooting deaths by their son of four Oxford High School students—Justin Shilling (17), Madisyn Baldwin (17), Tate Myre (16) and Hana St. Juliana (14)—on November 30, 2021. The shooter also injured seven others, including a teacher.

Ethan Crumbley, who was 15 at the time, surrendered himself to authorities after the shooting. He was prosecuted as an adult and charged with 24 crimes, including murder and terrorism. He pleaded guilty to all charges on October 24, 2022. On December 9, 2023, he was sentenced to life in prison without parole by Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Kwame Rowe.

Although parents have been held liable for violent actions by their children in the past—with charges of child neglect or failure to secure deadly weapons—the prosecution of the Crumbleys marks the first time parents are being charged with involuntary manslaughter and held responsible for the killings carried out by their child.

If convicted, the parents face sentences of up to 15 years in prison.

The prosecution of the parents by Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald, a Democrat who took office on January 1, 2021, for the horrifying high school massacre is inconsistent with the prosecution of their son as an adult at age 15. As we wrote on the WSWS in opposition to the charges being brought

against the parents:

How can the court insist that the parents are responsible for the murders committed by Ethan Crumbley when he is not being afforded the protections available to juvenile offenders?

As we also explained at the time, although the parents bear moral responsibility for what took place at Oxford High School, criminal responsibility is an entirely different matter. The effort to convict Jennifer and James Crumbley and send them to prison is, in essence, an attempt to scapegoat them for the broader, toxic social problems of capitalist society that are behind the epidemic of mass shootings in schools and workplaces across the US.

On the first day of the trial, Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast said Jennifer Crumbley, 45, is responsible for the shootings even though she did not pull the trigger. Keast argued that the mother was aware of the deteriorating mental condition of her son and “despite her knowledge of his growing social isolation, despite the fact that it’s illegal for a 15 year old to walk into a gun store and walk out with a handgun by himself—this gun was gifted.”

The prosecution has maintained the parents are guilty because they purchased the 9 mm semi-automatic Sig Sauer pistol their son used in the shooting as a Christmas present, and did not adequately secure it in their house. Ethan Crumbley fired the weapon at least 30 times methodically and deliberately, aiming at the heads and chests of his victims, in the hallway of

Oxford High School in between classes shortly before 1 p.m.

The assistant prosecutor said that “by the time this gun was bought, the school shooter was in a downward spiral that had begun months before.” Keast showed the jury text communications between the parents on the day of the shootings in which the emotional and mental state of their son was not mentioned.

Even though both parents had been called into the school and met hours before the shootings took place with a school counselor and their son concerning violent drawings he had made in class, no mention was made of Ethan’s condition.

The prosecutor told the jury, “On November the 30th, Jennifer Crumbley was still given the opportunity to prevent these murders from ever happening. Instead, she chose to do nothing.”

The parents said nothing during the meeting about the gun to which their son had access, did not request that his backpack be searched by school staff, and Jennifer Crumbley left the meeting after 11 minutes.

In her opening statement, Jennifer Crumbley’s attorney, Shannon Smith, made a reference to a song by Taylor Swift and said, “Band-Aids don’t fix bullet holes.” She argued that by putting the parents on trial, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald was “attempting to put a Band-Aid on problems that can’t be fixed with a Band-Aid.” Smith argued that Jennifer Crumbley did not know much about the guns in her house.

According to court documents filed by the prosecution last November based on “jail communications,” the mother is attempting to blame the shootings on the father. However, attorney Smith filed a response in which she wrote, “The obvious goal of the prosecution at this point is to try to create a rift between the defendants and defense counsel and to make it appear to the public ... that the Crumbleys are not united. This could not be more untrue.”

Smith also demanded that any concerns the prosecution had about the case first be disclosed privately. Her statement continued: “The prosecution knows very well that any filing by attorneys in this case are almost immediately picked up by the media and lead to inflammatory articles about the Crumbleys. There is no reason, other than gamesmanship by the prosecution, that the defense should not be made aware

of the alleged basis to believe any conflict issue exists.”

Smith added that the Crumbleys have repeatedly waived any concerns about a potential conflict, signed numerous waiver forms, and met with independent lawyers to assure them they had waived any potential conflicts. “In fact, the [Crumbleys] have never filed a motion that the other party did not join,” Smith argued, adding, “Quite frankly, it is none of the prosecutor’s business.”

On the second day of the trial, prosecutor Keast portrayed Jennifer Crumbley as “aloof” and more interested in her horses than the health of her teenage son. Questioning Edward Wagrowski, a former detective and computer crimes expert with the Oakland County Sheriff’s Office, the prosecution presented text messages Ethan Crumbley sent to his mother eight months prior to the shooting saying he was scared because of “demons.” The prosecutor said Jennifer never responded.

In the cross-examination of Wagrowski, defense attorney Smith asked if there could be reasons why Jennifer did not reply or even see the messages from Ethan in a timely manner. When Smith referred to a weak wireless service in the area or the possibility that Ethan Crumbley was joking, the witness said, “I don’t know what she’s thinking, no.”

The trial of Jennifer Crumbley is expected to last two weeks. James Crumbley’s trial on four counts of involuntary manslaughter will begin in early March.



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