

Jury finds mother of teenage Oxford High School shooter guilty of involuntary manslaughter

Kevin Reed
8 February 2024

Jennifer Crumbley, the mother of Oxford High School shooter Ethan Crumbley, was found guilty on all four counts of involuntary manslaughter by a jury on Tuesday in Pontiac, Michigan. The trial and its outcome mark the first time that a parent in the US has been criminally charged and convicted for the violent actions committed by his or her child.

After 11 hours of deliberation, the 15-person jury and two alternates decided unanimously that Jennifer Crumbley, 45, was responsible for the deaths of four students—Madisyn Baldwin, 17; Tate Myre, 16; Hana St. Juliana, 14; and Justin Shilling, 17—who were shot and killed by her son in between classes on November 30, 2021.

The jury verdict is the product of a two-year campaign waged by Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald, a Democrat, along with the corporate media locally and nationally, to place the focus blame for the horrifying school shooting carried out in the exurban community of Oxford, which is 40 miles north of Detroit, on the parents.

The father and husband, James Crumbley, faces the same charges of four counts of involuntary manslaughter as his wife. His trial is scheduled to begin on March 5.

That the Crumbleys behaved irresponsibly is evident from the facts that came out at the trial. The feeling, on the part of parents who lost children and others impacted by the mass shooting, that some level of justice has been achieved is understandable, but it is fundamentally wrong.

Jennifer Crumbley's criminal conviction sets a reactionary and dangerous legal precedent. It is part of an effort by the political and judicial establishment to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the broader conditions behind school shootings and deflect attention from the fundamental, underlying social causes of the increasing number of such incidents across the country.

Among the actions taken by the Crumbleys that facilitated the 15-year-old Ethan's crime was buying him a 9mm SIG Sauer semi-automatic handgun as a Christmas gift just four days before he used it to carry out the school shooting.

Video presented to the jury showed Jennifer Crumbley and her son at a local shooting range. In the footage, Ethan is smiling as he discharges the weapon and then shows his mother how to fire it. Illustrating her cavalier attitude toward possession of a deadly

weapon, Jennifer later that day posted on Instagram, "Mom and son day ... my first time shooting a 9mm. I hit the bullseye."

The evidence presented to the jury also showed that Ethan was able to bring the loaded gun to Oxford High School because the Crumbleys failed to secure the weapon and ammunition in their home. When Jennifer was asked during her testimony about the negligent handling of the weapon, she said, "That's his thing," referring to her husband.

When Jennifer testified, she expressed the wish that her son had acted differently, but said that looking back, she would not have changed her parenting decisions.

In her closing argument, Prosecutor McDonald presented the jury with a video surveillance image showing Jennifer Crumbley walking out of the shooting range with the 9mm SIG Sauer handgun in a case. After the verdict, the jury foreperson commented on this photo and told CNN, "The thing that really hammered it home is that she was the last adult with the gun."

During the testimony by 21 witnesses for the prosecution, it was shown that Ethan was in a deteriorating mental condition and his mother was either completely unaware of his problems or ignored them. The prosecutors exploited this situation and argued that Jennifer did not act in the critical moments before the shooting in ways that could have stopped it from happening.

A significant portion of testimony by prosecution witnesses focused on a meeting that took place at the school on the morning of the shooting, at which the Crumbleys were in attendance. When the parents were presented with pictures drawn by their son depicting bloody gun violence and accompanied by the words, "The thoughts won't stop, Help me," the parents did not mention that Ethan had access to a gun and argued that he should not be taken home that day because they had to return to work. Jennifer Crumbley remained in the meeting for exactly 11 minutes.

It is quite possible that the unprecedented decision to file criminal charges against the parents of an under-age school shooter was at least in part driven by the belief that the behavior of Jennifer and James Crumbley was so patently irresponsible that a jury could be convinced to find them criminally liable for the actions of their son.

Defense attorney Shannon Smith confined her arguments to claiming that Jennifer Crumbley was a "hypervigilant but imperfect parent," who could not have foreseen what her son was

going to do. Smith attempted to present a picture of the Crumbleys as doing “normal stuff” with their son, such as playing games and going on vacation together.

Defense attorney Smith never talked about the Oxford High School shooting within the context of the years of mass shootings in the US or referred to any studies showing widespread instances of mental illness and depression among American teenagers.

Since 2008, there have been 512 school shootings in the US, and nearly half of this number have occurred since 2021, according to data published by CNN based on incidents reported by the Gun Violence Archive, Everytown for Gun Safety and *Education Week*. School shootings have occurred in all but five US states during this time frame.

There has been a steady and dramatic increase in the number of school shootings each year, including 82 in 2023. The only year with a significant decrease in shootings was 2020, when many students were not in school for months due to the pandemic. In 2022, there were 46 fatalities in 79 school shooting incidents, including the horrifying massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas where 19 students and two teachers were killed.

None of the causes for the increasing number of school shootings in the US, driven by a combination of poverty, war, police violence, the availability of guns, extreme right-wing politics and racism, and untreated psychological problems, were brought up by Jennifer Crumbley’s lawyer. In the end, attorney Smith blamed Ethan Crumbley exclusively, referring to him as a “master manipulator” who duped his mother while he plotted the school shooting.

After he surrendered to police on the day of the shooting, Ethan Crumbley was charged as an adult on 24 counts, including first degree premeditated murder. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison without parole on December 8, 2023.

The negligent behavior of the Crumbleys prior to the deadly shooting by their son at Oxford High School is itself bound up with socioeconomic and cultural conditions in the US. After Ethan was born, near Jacksonville, Florida in 2006, the family first moved to Issaquah, Washington in pursuit of work. At the time of the shooting, Jennifer worked as marketing coordinator for a local real estate business and James was unemployed.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained within days of the shooting:

In 2016, Crumbley’s mother, Jennifer Crumbley, a realtor, wrote an open letter to incoming President Donald Trump, whom she voted for. In her confused and desperate letter, Crumbley describes her family’s economic existence as part of the American lower-middle class. ... The world Ms. Crumbley describes is a world of perpetual economic anxiety and desperation. But with this is mixed backwardness, cultural poverty and historical ignorance that Trump and his movement feed on. Nor should one discount the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse and the glorification of his example by the right-wing media, which took place just two weeks before the shooting at Oxford High School.

The response of the corporate television news to the Crumbley verdict has been one of enthusiasm, largely referring to the conviction as a “historic” step forward and victory for “accountability” for mass shootings.

Kris Brown, president of Brady: United Against Gun Violence, a Washington-based nonprofit, told the *Wall Street Journal*, “Today’s decision sends a powerful message to parents and other parties that they can be responsible for their actions that foreseeably contribute to gun violence even if they don’t pull the trigger.” Brown’s organization has filed civil suits on behalf of a family against both the gun dealer who sold the handgun to James Crumbley and the school district.

Kevin Cole, a professor at the University of San Diego School of Law, told the *Journal*:

There’s a potential to have accomplice liability when a merchant sells an item to a person who uses the item to commit an offense, for instance. The conventional rule was that unless the accomplice had a purpose or a conscious object, that the crime be committed, you weren’t responsible as an accomplice.

Jeffrey Swartz, a criminal law professor at Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan, told the *Journal* the conviction sets a dangerous precedent. “Anything in your house that could be a weapon, could be a basis for you to be held liable if your child did anything to someone else.”

Detroit criminal defense attorney Michael Bullotta, a former federal prosecutor, told the *Detroit Free Press*, “This was a guilty verdict in a case that I, along with several national pundits, have viewed as a major overreach in applying the law of involuntary manslaughter.”

Bullotta continued:

Now that we have an example in the books of what facts are enough to subject parents to 15 years or more in prison, I expect that prosecutors in Michigan and nationwide will consider charging parents, not only in school shootings but in many other crimes their children commit. It is quite frightening to imagine where this precedent will lead.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact