

The Nathaniel Abraham case and the conditions facing Michigan's children

"Here is this mother begging for assistance and no one responds"

By Debra Watson
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The recent murder trial of Nathaniel Abraham focused national and international attention on the treatment of children in the US, particularly in the state of Michigan. Thirteen-year-old Nathaniel was convicted of second-degree murder November 16 by a jury in Pontiac, Michigan for the October 1997 murder of Ronnie Greene, Jr. His sentencing is scheduled for January 13, when he could receive up to life imprisonment with the possibility of parole.

Nathaniel was tried as an adult under the provisions of a 1997 Michigan law that sets no minimum age for the prosecution of children for serious and violent offenses. Nathaniel was only 11 years old at the time of the shooting and functioned at the mental level of a six- to eight-year-old. While Nathaniel's mother Gloria Abraham repeatedly sought help for her son, her efforts continually fell on deaf ears.

On November 19 an important report was delivered to a conference in Michigan's Oakland County, which comprises part of the Detroit metropolitan area. The report, titled simply "Facts about Oakland County," addressed society's measures of economic security, child health, child safety, adolescence and education. Michele Corey, Community Advocacy Coordinator for Michigan's Children, along with Jane Zehnder-Merrell of the Michigan League for Human Services authored the report.

The WSWWS recently spoke with Michele Corey, who commented on the Abraham case, "The state of mental health services for kids is entirely inadequate. This is what made me cry about the case, here is this mother begging for assistance, reaching out for help and no one responds. Mental health services have been lacking, and the eventuality that happened is just horrible."

"Facts about Oakland County" outlines nine areas where family poverty threatens the development of children. "The percent of children in poverty is the most widely used indicator of child well-being," the report begins. "This is due, in part, to the fact that poverty is closely linked to a number of negative outcomes for children. Family poverty threatens a child's development in a multitude of ways. The more profound and extended the poverty, the higher the likelihood of long lasting and extensive impact."

Poor children are more likely to be hospitalized and to experience low quality medical care. For these families, childcare is of poor quality and children are more likely to attend substandard schools. In addition, the daily effects of hunger and malnutrition as well as high levels of interpersonal domestic conflict in the home are exacerbated by exposure to violence and to environmental toxins in the neighborhood.

The authors note that in Oakland County the rate of poverty for young children is almost twice the rate for school-aged children: "There was an increase in young child poverty in Michigan from 1989 to 1995, despite a growing economy and falling unemployment rates." In Oakland County, for families with children from birth to age four, there was a 40 percent

increase in poverty. In Macomb County, also part of the Detroit metropolitan area, the poverty rate increased 56 percent for young children and 27 percent for children age 5 to 17.

Oakland County as a whole has one of the highest incomes in the country. But while affluent Bloomfield Hills had less than 1 percent of children living in families below the poverty level, in Pontiac in 1995 more than one-third of school-aged children lived below the poverty level. All the state's large school districts had poverty rates between 20 and 50 percent. Saginaw, Flint, Dearborn, Kalamazoo and Lansing each had between 3,000 and 7,000 children living in families with incomes below the poverty rate. The figure for Detroit was a staggering 50 percent, over 50,000 children.

Another indicator of economic insecurity is the share of students who receive free and reduced-price school lunches. In 1998 children in families at incomes below 185 percent of the official poverty level of \$13,650 for a family of three qualified for the School Lunch Program, funded by the federal government. Nearly 20 percent of elementary school students received school lunch subsidies in Oakland County in 1995. In Pontiac the figure was 70 percent. In Ferndale, Hazel Park and Southfield between 40 and 50 percent of children in elementary school received subsidized or free lunches.

Other basic figures for major Michigan cities reveal markers for conditions that impact adversely on children. In Pontiac, 27 percent of mothers received inadequate prenatal care, 11 percent of all babies were born with low birth weight, and the 1997 infant mortality rate was 14.4 per 1,000 live births. For black infants born in Pontiac the infant mortality rate was 28 in 1997, even though between 1991 and 1997 the number of babies born to teenage girls there dropped by nearly a third.

"The overall Michigan infant mortality rate has been consistently higher than the national rate, and the national rate ranks as one of the worst among industrialized nations of the world," the agency notes. "The mortality rate for children born into poor families is 50 percent higher than that of other children. Furthermore, black infants die at a rate three times higher than do white infants. In the city of Pontiac infant mortality is a staggering nine times greater for black infants than white infants.

Half of deaths of children ages 1 to 14 result from injury and half of those are motor vehicle accidents. The other two major causes of injury death for children ages 12 to 14 in Oakland County are fire and homicide. Child Death Review Teams have been formed to track these deaths.

In Oakland County between 1988 and 1997 the rate of children placed in out-of-home care due to abuse or neglect rose by one-fourth. A 43 percent increase in children placed with relatives between 1988 and 1997 is not included in official accounts of out-of-home placements. Thirty-four percent of all victims of abuse or neglect are under the age of five. The most common type of child maltreatment is physical neglect, which

accounted for 35 percent of all confirmed child maltreatment in Oakland County in 1998 and almost 45 percent statewide.

Late adolescence, ages 15 to 19, finds young people three times more likely to die than their younger counterparts. While deaths by accident, suicide and homicide have decreased throughout the state, in Macomb and Oakland County they have been on the rise since the end of the 1991 recession.

The report concludes with a section on education comparing Michigan, Oakland County and the larger cities in the county for test scores and special education statistics. Significantly, poor children are substantially at risk for such emotional and developmental impairment. According to the report, "Almost 20 percent of all children enrolled in the Pontiac and Hazel Park school districts have a special education diagnosis, resulting in increased financial and other pressures on those districts."

The percentage of children in these districts who qualify for special education and are diagnosed with mental or emotional impairment or learning disabilities (as opposed to a diagnosis of speech or other disability) substantially exceeds the percentage in Oakland County or Michigan as a whole.

Special education costs 2.3 times as much per student as regular education. The strain on schools and low-income areas adversely affects the whole community. Families are also impacted by the extra responsibilities posed by caring for special education students. For severely mentally and physically disabled children, expensive specialized childcare might be needed. The authors point out that parents might have to quit their jobs to care for the needs of the disabled child because services for such children are expensive and scarce.

The WSWS interviewed Michele Corey about her report and about the Nathaniel Abraham case.

WSWS: Since this report was given just days after the verdict in the Nathaniel Abraham case was delivered in the Oakland County Family Court, I wonder if you discussed the case at the conference?

Michele Corey: The report was presented at a program we put together for the Child Abuse and Neglect Council, organizations from the Oakland County Schools and other social services organizations serving the county. I had some discussion with participants about the Nathaniel Abraham case outside of the main sessions. I know there is a lot of outrage about it in Oakland County. I was surprised that no one in the national media, or even in this area for that matter, picked up on this.

WSWS: Your recent report links poverty, low birth weight and other factors to mental and learning disability. Did you have this in mind when you put together the report?

MC: No, we just tried to set out the facts as we found them. However, I think that that is absolutely the issue. This whole idea of looking at outcomes, particularly early outcomes as societal outcomes, as to how our communities are functioning, is the issue. We look a lot at the health-related outcomes only in relation to healthcare but not to other systems, including families. For example, with technology we now save babies that may not have been saved before. That is not bad, but there are real implications as far as community and family are concerned. This is not addressed. And, of course, poverty. There is study after study linking poverty to adverse health outcomes. What is the impact on the family and on the community as a result of poor health?

WSWS: How long have you been working in this field? Do you see changes in child welfare in Michigan? Were the statistics in your report an eye-opener to you?

MC: I have been doing this for 10 years. None of it is surprising to me.

The State of Michigan performs very badly in early indicators such as low birth weight. This is very telling because early childhood is an extremely important time in the development of a child. We have to look at what goes on when we haven't made investments up-front. I can tell you that urban communities are making absolutely Herculean efforts and

there have been improvements in important areas like teen pregnancy. You can see in the old urban core cities like Saginaw, Flint, Pontiac they are making improvements, but indicators are worsening in outlying areas.

The efforts being made are occurring under great duress, and that is part of the issue. These are things that one community cannot tackle. Until we really start looking at how do we stabilize our families and communities at a state and national level, even those communities that are making efforts face some pretty insurmountable barriers.

WSWS: Was the case of Nathaniel Abraham unusual, or do you know of other cases?

MC: I don't know any other cases as such, but I do know that the general situation is becoming more and more distressing. Our policies are moving us in the wrong direction; recent education policy changes are toward expelling students with behavior problems, rather than addressing these problems. The state is expanding mandatory expulsion into gray areas where there should be more discretion. They are kicking more kids out of school without any alternative direction.

And the state of mental health services for kids is entirely inadequate. This is what made me cry about the case, here is this mother begging for assistance, reaching out for help and no one responds. Mental health services have been lacking, and the eventuality that happened is just horrible.

WSWS: What do you think is indicated by the way the state treats its children?

I can't help but think as our policies get more punitive, not just in the juvenile justice system, but other institutions and areas, it is the wrong direction. What is interesting is that the demand for changes like this is coming from the state leadership, not from local school districts or other local organizations that work with children.

WSWS: What you feel is most important about the Nathaniel Abraham case?

MC: The most important thing is that the family really cried out for help. I hate to say that the child is doomed now. The point is there were a lot of steps before where something could have been done.

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