Murder-suicide in Southern California leaves seven family members dead

By Kate Randall
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A horrifying social episode came to light Tuesday morning in Southern California when a family of seven were found dead in their home in suburban Los Angeles, victims of an apparent murder-suicide.

Police found the bodies of parents Ervin and Ana Lupoe and their five children: eight-year-old Britney, five-year-old twin daughters Jaszmin and Jassely, and twin boys Benjamin and Christian, two years and four months old.

Police investigators believe Ervin Lupoe, 40, wandered from room to room, possibly beginning as early as Monday evening, fatally shooting his wife and children. When police entered the home and found the bodies, a handgun lay in Ervin's hand and a suicide note was found nearby. All of the victims had been shot in the head, some of them multiple times.

News of the tragedy shocked and angered the community of Wilmington, a largely Hispanic neighborhood about 20 miles south of downtown Los Angeles. Neighbors described the couple as quiet but friendly; loving parents, devoted to their children and involved with their education.

But the initial shock of the event was almost immediately brought into focus when the Lupoes' neighbors, acquaintances and workmates—as well as the millions of Americans who heard of the shootings through news reports—learned that the murderous incident had been immediately precipitated by the couple's loss of their jobs just a week earlier.

Around 8 a.m. Tuesday morning, Ervin Lupoe faxed a two-page typewritten letter to the local ABC television affiliate. Following identification of the bodies, KABC-TV made the letter available in redacted form on its web site.

In the letter, Lupoe described how he and his wife had been fired from their jobs at Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles, where he had worked as a special procedural technician, she as a mammography technician.

The health network has declined comment on details of the firings, but according to Lupoe's letter, the couple was being investigated "for misrepresentation of our employment to an outside agency for the benefit to [ourselves], childcare." He wrote that after an initial interview on the matter on December 19, he was told by his administrator on December 23, "You should not even had bothered to come to work today, you should have blown your brains out."

According to the letter, over the next few days he contacted his union rep as well as the company human resources person handling the matter. There then followed a back and forth between Kaiser Permanente and the Lupoes over the truth of the "blow your brains out" statement. While initially denying the statement had been made, Lupoe wrote, he was then asked at a meeting to consider "how I would accept [the individual's] apology" for making it.

Lupoe continued: "I left the office and two days later my wife and I were terminated. Our administrator also stated that we would not be eligible for unemployment, my wife applied anyway." He wrote that the couple were unable to obtain their licenses from the company "so that we may look for other employment."

The letter ends with the following chilling statement: "So after a horrendous ordeal my wife felt it better to end our lives and why leave our children to [someone] else's hands, in addition it seems [Kaiser] Permanente [wants] us to kill ourselves and take our family with us. They did nothing to the manager who stated such, and did not attempt to assist us in the matter, knowing we have no job and 5 children under 8 years with no place to go. So here we are."

Investigators believe that by the time Lupoe had faxed his letter, and made a subsequent phone call threatening to kill his family, at least some of them had already been slain. By the time emergency responders arrived at the home, all of them were dead. As of yet, there is no evidence that Ana Lupoe was involved in the plot.

Neighbors gathered outside the home following the shootings, crying and consoling each other over the tragedy. Such incidents—which, unfortunately, compose an all-too-common feature of contemporary American life—always provoke questions such as "How could they do such a thing?" and grief over the "senseless" deaths.

In this instance, however, placed in the context of the spiraling economic crisis that threatens to devastate the lives of millions of working people, this tragedy took on a bit more "sense." It casts the facts and figures of the financial calamity, and the manner in which they impact the most psychologically vulnerable, in a brutally human form.

At a meeting in Wilmington Tuesday night, police and local
officials stood before an audience of 200 residents at a local church trying to explain the tragic chain of events. Residents were angry, citing Lupoe's faxed letter as evidence that the couple's "horrendous" ordeal at the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center had driven them to take drastic measures.

The San Jose Mercury News quotes Carmen Adame, who said, "Their employer led them to this." She said Lupoe and others in their community were being forced to work under unreasonable conditions. "Employers are abusing this economy because people don't want to lose their jobs," she said.

Another Wilmington resident, Xavier Hermosillo, told city officials, "People are frustrated with their government. This is a societal decline."

Councilwoman Janice Hahn supplied a list of phone numbers, including a suicide prevention hotline offering bilingual services. She directed people facing economic problems to a number of agencies and crisis centers.

The Mercury News reported on the response to Hahn's advice: "One resident stood up and said, while she appreciated the information, what Wilmington needed was jobs."

Jaime Solache, a retired truck driver who lives a few doors from the Lupoe home, attended the meeting. "All the hotlines in the world won't help if we don't have jobs," he said, according to KTLA.com. "I just pray this never happens again, but I won't be surprised if it does."

Wilmington, a working class neighborhood located between the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, has a population of about 55,000. The annual income of more than half of its households is less than $30,000. Home prices are collapsing, and more than 1,000 homes went into foreclosure from January 2007 to September of last year. Foreclosures are expected to increase significantly when the full impact of the crisis begins to be felt.

Many Wilmington residents who previously worked at the nearby docks have lost their jobs as dock traffic has plummeted in recent months. Longshoremen working on a casual basis have not found work since the end of November. The official unemployment rate for Los Angeles as a whole stands at 9.5 percent, a 14-year high.

Following the Lupoe murder-suicide, investigations into Ervin Lupoe's personal finances showed how this economic climate, combined with the loss of his and his wife's job, was plunging him into debt and increasing desperation. He was at least a month behind on his mortgage, owing $2,500 and a late fee, and owed thousands more on a home equity line of credit.

He also owed the Internal Revenue Service at least $15,000 for back taxes, and a check he written to the agency for that amount had recently bounced. On Monday, Lupoe had called his attorney to check on money he was owed in an auto accident settlement.

About three weeks ago, he took his three older children out of Crescent Heights Elementary School, telling the principal the family was moving to Kansas. His sports utility vehicle was found packed with snow chains and winter clothing for him and his family. They never made the trip.

Within hours of the shootings, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa set up a news conference outside the Lupoe home, offering his take on the devastating situation. "A man who recently lost his job allowed the despair to put him over the edge," he said. "Unfortunately this has been an all-too-common story in the last few months. But that does not and should not lead people to resort to desperate measures."

The mayor was alluding to the fact that there have been five cases of murder-suicide in Southern California in the last year. The majority of the shooters in these incidents were facing work-related or financial crises.

The mayor also advised people to reach out for financial advice and mental health counseling. Again, there was no mention of concrete measures to provide jobs, or to counteract the housing crisis.

Ironically, the very agencies that provide such counseling are threatened with drastic cuts due to the California budget crisis. Ken Kondo, press spokesman for the LA Department of Mental Health, said that calls to the department's hotline have more than doubled since last year, with 22,000 calls specifically related to economic stress received in the last six months alone.

"Since the rise of foreclosures and unemployment we have seen a huge increase in calls," Kondo told Deutsche Press-Agentur. He said the cuts "would have a terrible impact, especially with the amount of traumatic incidents we are having."

Some of the most brutal incidents in the region over the last year:

- On Christmas eve, a man dressed as Santa Claus arrived at the home of his former mother and father-in-law in Covina, Calif. He killed his ex-wife and eight of her relatives and later killed himself.
- Last October, an unemployed and financially distraught financial manager shot his wife, three children, his mother-in-law and then himself in the Porter Ranch area of the San Fernando Valley.
- In February 2007, an apparent murder-suicide claimed the lives of five family members in Yorba Linda. A 14-year-old son survived.

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