

# Two dead children found inside Detroit freezer: A symptom of deep social decay

By Lawrence Porter  
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Last month, court bailiffs, evicting a family in a low-income housing development on Detroit's east side for failure to pay rent, discovered two dead children, ages 9 and 13, wrapped in plastic bags inside a large freezer.

The horrific tragedy captured national headlines, used by the political establishment and mass media as an opportunity to demonize the poor and give political credence to the ongoing reorganization of the former industrial center following the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history.

The single mother of the children, 35-year-old Michelle Blair, who has two other surviving children, has been charged with murder and child abuse. She reportedly confessed to the police that she killed her children after she says she found out they were sexually abusing another child.

The Detroit press has described the events as the "heinous" action of a wayward mother. Right-wing *Detroit News* columnist Nolan Finley—infamous for his shameless class arrogance in the service of the financial elite—charged that the deaths, and the increase in impoverished children in Detroit, were the product of bad choices and negligence. Rather than point to "outside causes," declared Finley, residents should look in the "mirror" at the "self-inflicted wounds."

Not far from this empty moralizing was the preacher's eulogy at the children's funeral. "The village failed those children, starting with me, and extending to you," said Greater Grace Senior Pastor Charles Ellis III. "You are to blame. I'm to blame. We're all to blame. Somebody should've heard something. Somebody should've seen something. Somebody should've said something."

Such statements, however, explain nothing. Presuming that the account provided by prosecutors of

the mother's actions is true, it is clear that a terrible act has been committed. Yet how is one to explain such actions? They cannot be understood outside of their social context—the deep poverty, alienation, and social dislocation and breakdown in Detroit.

According to accounts of acquaintances, Blair suffers from severe mental health problems. She lived with her children under conditions of destitution, in the hollowed out shell of one of the ruined neighborhoods that exist in the city.

Detroit, with 59 percent of its children now living in poverty, is entering its second decade as the largest poor city in the US. Vast tracts of the city have been all but abandoned. Schools are shuttered, neighborhood stores are empty and buildings decaying, streets are left without lighting or maintenance, and thousands of people are unemployed or underemployed, without utilities or even water service.

Under the leadership of the Democratic Party, and with the assistance and collaboration of the United Auto Workers union, Detroit, the "Motor City," has been transformed from a town of auto workers with so-called "middle class" living standards into a center of low-wage and highly exploited labor. Mass layoffs and service cuts have laid waste to working class neighborhoods formerly filled with well-kept homes.

These conditions could not but have had a profound impact on Blair's state of mind. The abuse of children, in particular, has drastically increased in tandem with the deindustrialization of American cities and the epidemic of extreme poverty.

The comments of Damon Campbell, a neighbor and friend of the family, are revealing. Campbell painted a very different picture of Blair than the one portrayed by the media. He spoke with compassion and anger to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her conditions of life.

“She was only getting food stamps and the utility check. She had no cash income coming in,” said Campbell. Tens of thousands of families have been cut off from all cash income by budget cuts imposed by Michigan’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder, a millionaire former hedge-fund manager.

Campbell continued, “Three years ago, they told everyone they had 48 months, but they cut her off [all cash assistance] because she had already been on it past the time period they were looking for.”

Blair reportedly received only a \$150 check monthly for utilities through the Martin Luther King Housing development, a public-private partnership administered by the federal government.

“Personally, I don’t know how she did it,” added Campbell. “It was impossible conditions. Often she didn’t have food. She would come to our house, and if we had 4-5 packs of meat we would give her one or two packs.”

Campbell said she was dealing with four children without the ability to buy even personal items. “She had to buy soap. And with the two girls and one over puberty, she had to take care of her personal needs. There were a lot of little things she had to get” but didn’t have the money for, stated Campbell.

“It’s really hard out here for a lot of people,” he continued. “The poverty is real bad. It is at the bottom. In this area, King homes, maybe 100 to 150 people have a steady income. And we are talking about over 1,000 people.

“Just to give an example. If a person gets their food stamps on the 13th, by the 25th of that month they are basically almost out of food. And we are talking about an individual that spends all of their money on food.”

The US Census puts 41 percent of Detroit residents at or below the federal poverty level. Detroit’s east side, where Blair lived, has tracts of staggering poverty. In the census tract just south of the affluent city of Grosse Pointe Park, 72 percent of families live in poverty. North of the MLK apartments, near Chrysler’s Jefferson North Assembly plant, the poverty rate is even worse, at 83 percent.

Campbell said Blair’s aunt helped her with some of her bills and had taken the children and supported them for a year. But the aunt had been unable to continue. At that point her family lost contact with Blair.

“Anyone who knew her would tell you that her

character was like an over-protective mother,” Campbell said.

Campbell said she was the same way about the child she was taking care of when she was arrested. The child’s mother would call Blair up to babysit. When the child had whooping cough, Campbell said it was Blair, with the help of the doctor, who brought the child back to health.

“To this day if anyone said they thought she would do this, they are not being honest. You never would have thought that,” he concluded.

Campbell told the WSWS Michelle suffered sexual abuse during her childhood and that likely caused her problems. He emphasized Blair needs psychiatric treatment. “There is no way she shouldn’t have had a psychiatric evaluation. But they are shutting clinics down even though things could be going on in people’s minds like her situation. If they had talked to her beforehand they would have known she said she was seeing things and that she hears voices.

“Over a period of years she was sexually abused by several men,” he stated. Campbell thought her actions were connected to this history, compounded by mental illness. He said Blair believed her own children had sexually abused another child. “That is the story she has had from day one,” said Campbell. “Even if she lost her mind or whatever, this is her story.”

“The whole thing makes me sick,” said Campbell. “Something has to be done. I hope she gets the help she needs.”

The tragic deaths of these children are a testament to the depraved state of contemporary capitalism. Only a thoroughly rotten society can allow the systematic impoverishment of millions of people at the hands of a criminal class of scoundrels and profiteers, aided and abetted at every turn by endless numbers of well-to-do politicians, court officials and media know-nothings.

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