

# A portrait of Birmingham, Alabama neighborhood where one-year-old was killed

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On October 12, one-year-old Kelci Divine Lewis was found unresponsive in her crib in a house in the East Lake neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama. In an act of immense savagery, authorities have charged her eight-year-old brother, who they claim beat Kelci when she would not stop crying, with murder. The children allegedly had been left on their own. The mother of the children, Kattera Lewis, has been charged with manslaughter.

Birmingham Police have characterized the eight-year-old as “vicious,” “reckless” and “evil.”

East Lake has a reputation for poverty, violence and drug abuse. While urban renewal groups express hope for one of Birmingham’s oldest neighborhoods, it remains deeply scarred: Two blocks of Oporto Madrid Boulevard, one of East Lake’s busiest streets, are taken up by vacant, derelict buildings.

Susan Cloud and her husband Reid moved out of East Lake in 2008. Reid had lived in East Lake as a child, and prior to the housing crisis of 2008, the rent in the neighborhood was affordable for their small family. Other young families were also moving into the neighborhood, and Cloud found talk about rejuvenating East Lake attractive. It was not long, however, before the disturbing realities of the neighborhood impressed themselves upon her.

“I think no one can fathom the poverty of that area unless you live there. Most people think about poverty as needing food stamps or getting behind on bills,” Cloud told the WWS. “There was a family two doors down from me with two little girls, and they couldn’t afford curtains for their windows. They never had water or power in their house.” That family, she said, depended upon their neighbors, none of whom were in much better financial positions, for drinking water.

Former East Lake resident Myron Monroe recounted multiple incidents of theft, threatening acts and outright violence. He once witnessed one man shooting a hunting rifle as he pursued another man on Oporto Madrid Boulevard. Monroe decided to move out of East Lake shortly thereafter. “You work too hard for what you get for somebody to take it away from you,” he said.

Drug use blossoms among such conditions. Cloud and Monroe both reported having witnessed drug transactions in

East Lake. Expect a Miracle Ministry houses about 40 recovering addicts in apartments and transitional housing in East Lake.

Expect a Miracle’s director, Dwight Hutchinson, spoke about how crack cocaine gained a foothold in the neighborhood around 1985. He said that the local kids were “intrigued by the newness” of the drug. In an impoverished neighborhood where little had changed in two decades, novelty and escape were bound to intrigue many.

The influx of cheap drugs also presented intriguing economic opportunities. “Suddenly, you can just stand on the corner with this little bit of crack, and you’d make more money than you could ever imagine,” Hutchinson said. By 1987, he reported, the drug became a scourge in East Lake.

Today, crack no longer menaces East Lake as it once did. It has been deposed by opiates, which Hutchinson said turns into heroin use for many addicts. “It’s cheaper. People go, ‘Why spend \$20 on a pill, when I can spend \$10 for heroin, and it’s so much stronger?’” Hutchinson’s statements are borne out by the statistics: Heroin use in Birmingham jumped by 140 percent in 2014. That same year, at least 123 Birmingham residents died from heroin overdose.

Hutchinson hesitated to correlate drug use with poverty, feeling that such a correlation detracts attention from the fact that addiction is a disease with a genetic component. However, he referred again to the crack epidemic, and how it suddenly made more sense for youth facing difficult employment prospects to drop out of school and deal drugs. The next generation, he said, was born into a neighborhood where addiction and drug dealing were featured prominently. “You become conformed to the box you’re in,” he said, “and in East Lake, a part of what is in that box is using drugs and then dropping out of school and selling drugs.”

Cloud disagreed. “What else is there to do?” she said. “Most of the people I saw had no cars, and there’s nowhere to work nearby. How do you get out of that? Why wouldn’t you use drugs, if that was all you had to look forward to?”

Giving only her first name, Jackie, a current East Lake resident, confirmed Cloud’s comment about transportation in East Lake. With no car, Jackie is forced to rely upon Birmingham’s notoriously inefficient public transit system.

She recently stood in 30 degree weather waiting until almost 10am for a bus that was scheduled for 8:23am. She said she is fortunate to work at the Family Dollar store, just a few blocks away from her home. If she had to work farther away, she would rarely make it to work on time.

Many residents feel that city officials are more or less indifferent to the neighborhood. In 2013, a woman was killed and eight others were injured when a natural gas line exploded in a housing project in East Lake. Mercutio Southall, a community activist, reported to Birmingham news sources that the project's residents had made numerous reports of strong natural gas odors to both the Housing Authority and to the gas company prior to the explosion. Southall contended that it simply did not concern the Housing Authority or the utility enough to investigate.

Cloud mentioned numerous instances where she called the police to report gunshots in her neighborhood. "You would call the cops and they'd either not show up at all, or you would have to keep calling back." On one occasion, the dispatcher asked Cloud if she was "a white lady," expressing disbelief that she had seen someone brandishing a gun at the end of her street. The day after that incident, she went personally to the police department to question how her calls had been handled. They informed her that the entire neighborhood could only afford one or two patrol cars at one time.

Even Monroe, who made it clear that he supports the police, expressed ambivalence about some of their methods. He recalled the day that he went to a friend's apartment to take him grocery shopping. As they exited his friend's apartment, police shouted at them to get down on the ground. At least nine squad cars surrounded the complex. Police in SWAT gear held weapons on residents lying prone on the ground.

"I didn't need to get caught up in all that mess. I had places to go, groceries to buy, a job to get to. They had their guns out. What if one of them had gone off? Just because one guy was doing a drug deal in one of the apartments," he said of the incident.

Drug deals, shootings and robberies are not the only crimes that threaten East Lake residents. In 2005, Al Carson Rockett, Jr. began buying up homes throughout East Lake and other older Birmingham neighborhoods. He bought a total of 85 properties, some from residents in financial straits, and sold entire swaths of East Lake residences as investment properties.

Rockett fraudulently claimed that the houses had been renovated and were Section 8 ready. People who would not otherwise have qualified for a home loan, much less investment properties, bought these homes, sometimes sight unseen, through predatory loans Rockett had obtained through the Alabama Central Title Company.

Many homeowners soon discovered that they could not afford to make the costly repairs the homes needed to qualify as Section 8 rentals. Some homes attracted renters, but as the owners could not maintain them, the renters fell away; unable

to make the mortgages on their properties, the homes were foreclosed upon. Rockett was tried for fraud and sentenced to 15 months in jail. He was also ordered to pay \$1.1 million to different banks. His victims, though, among whom were teachers, retirees and janitors, were left without recompense. At least one declared bankruptcy.

Rockett's properties do not account for all the foreclosures in East Lake, which has consistently placed among the top for mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures in Birmingham. Yet despite living in a neighborhood blighted by so many vacant homes, Kattera Lewis was forced to wait for affordable housing. When her daughter died, Lewis was sharing a three-bedroom, 1,000 square foot house with another woman and her five children and waiting for the Section 8 waiting list to open up. By some reports, the wait for Section 8 housing in Birmingham is almost two years.

Cloud pointed to a lack of opportunity and futurity in the East Lake community. "When you feel like nobody cares about you, it's easy not to care what you do. You don't see how your actions will change things one way or another." Even those with a strong sense of purpose struggle against great odds. She mentioned a former coworker who had to get up before 5am to take a bus to a low-paying job. "She was trying to take care of her two grandkids and do it right," Cloud remembered. "She couldn't be at home with them as much as she wanted to be, between working and having to use the bus schedule. When you live like that, any little thing can throw you off. She did it, but it wore her down."

These testimonies—of joblessness, lack of options and harsh financial circumstances—point to the fact that Kelci Lewis' killing did not occur in a senseless vacuum. They give the lie to the incredulity expressed by the police and the District Attorney's office in the case. Susan Cloud said that living in East Lake seemed like being "outskirts of society," a no-man's land where residents were unimportant or even invisible. The Birmingham Police Department's dehumanization of this 8-year-old boy—who had no doubt already suffered unspeakable torment—gives a bitter validity to Cloud's assessment.

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