

New York City judge orders 13-year-old held awaiting trial for murder of Barnard College student

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On Sunday, a family court judge in New York City ordered a 13-year-old African-American youth charged in the December 11, 2019 murder of Barnard College student Tessa Majors to be held in jail until March 13. The young teen was one of three boys suspected by police to be involved in the killing.

Majors was stabbed and killed during an apparent robbery in Morningside Park in Harlem. It was reported that after being attacked, Majors crawled up several flights of stairs to the edge of the park near a Columbia University security booth. A campus security guard called an ambulance. Barnard College is the historically all-women college of Columbia University.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) identified three African-American teenage suspects after police reviewed security camera footage and traced them back to their homes. The next day, the police arrested one youth, the 13-year-old now in custody, after he fled police officers. Another teen was arrested and released on the same day after being questioned with a lawyer present. The police searched the youths' homes and confiscated several knives belonging to the youth, none of which matched the murder weapon.

The single youth has been charged with second-degree murder after admitting that he was with the group that stabbed Majors but denies stabbing her. The Legal Aid Society has protested the fact that the interview that produced the admission was held while the youth was accompanied by his uncle, his legal guardian, but not by a lawyer.

On December 16 the third suspect, a 14-year-old boy, whom police had believed was the one responsible for Majors' death, was expected to go to a police station with a lawyer but did not. The NYPD then organized a search throughout Harlem that included intrusion into stores

along 125th Street, the main commercial district of the neighborhood. NYPD helicopters were deployed to scan the area. On the December 21, the police released a photo of the boy. After a two week "man-hunt" the NYPD found and arrested the youth but released him after a few days.

Because of the age and race of the suspects and victim—Majors was white—local news outlets were quick to issue warnings about violating the rights of the youth, including the presumption of innocence, drawing a parallel to the fraudulent conviction of black and Hispanic youth in the infamous Central Park jogger case in 1989.

In the spring of 1989, nearly two dozen teenagers were rounded up from the Manhattan neighborhood of the Upper West Side after a woman was raped and left unconscious in Central Park. Police ultimately pressured five youth into making false confessions after hours of isolated interrogation without lawyers present.

When the NYPD ignored DNA evidence that proved their innocence, five of the boys were railroaded to jail with the vilification of the press, including the present occupant of the White House, real estate magnate Donald Trump. At the time, Trump published a full-page ad in the *Daily News* with the headlines "Bring Back the Death Penalty," and "Bring Back Our Police." All five youth were sentenced to between seven and 14 years in prison.

The lead prosecutor in the frame-up of the five youth, Elizabeth Lederer, was, up until June, a law lecturer at Columbia. Lederer resigned at the end of the last academic year after the Netflix miniseries *When They See Us* revisited the case and powerfully exposed the role of police and the state prosecution. The exposure of the appalling and illegal conduct of the NYPD and city prosecutors, particularly Lederer, sparked protest among Columbia students.

The mainstream press and the NYPD are cautious about repeating legal violations from the Central Park Five case and openly vilifying African-American youth. They know that they can't simply railroad the suspected youth, as they did in 1989, in the Majors case because of the potential for an explosion of social anger built up around the issues of extreme inequality, not just in Harlem but in the entire city.

Nevertheless, Democratic politicians have called for a law-and-order response to the murder. At a vigil held on the following Monday, Congressman Adriano Espaillat called for more "safety measures" in the area. One attendee shouted in response, "That's our after-school programs," referring to the closure of schools, community centers and youth programs over the past decades by city politicians that have impacted Harlem's youth.

Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio has vowed to increase policing of the neighborhood and stated, "It's unbelievable that could happen here next to one of our great college campuses—it's an unacceptable reality."

In an attempt to use the incident to ramp up the policing of marijuana possession and to vilify the youth involved, the Sergeants Benevolent Association president, Ed Mullins, made statements on local radio that Majors had been trying to buy marijuana in the park the night she was killed. "Here we have a student murdered by a 13-year-old, we have a common denominator: marijuana," Mullins said.

The tragedy in Morningside Park, however, has profound social causes. It is the outcome of New York City's conversion into an ever-expanding haven for the super-rich and upper middle class at the expense of the working class.

Morningside Park is a physical division between the affluent neighborhood of Morningside Heights, dominated by Columbia University and Barnard, and Harlem, the historically black and Hispanic working-class neighborhood that, in recent years, has experienced an influx of real estate investment that facilitates extreme gentrification.

Columbia University is New York City's largest landlord, owing at least 209 street address properties. The University has an endowment of \$10.87 billion. On the other side of the social divide, Harlem and East Harlem's working class is one of the poorest in the city, with poverty rates of 23 percent and 31 percent respectively, well above the city's overall 17 percent.

The influx of sections of the upper middle class into Harlem has made inequality an increasingly visible reality

for tens of thousands of workers and youth. There are now hundreds of million and multimillion-dollar homes for sale in the neighborhood, from new luxury apartments to single-use five-story mansions that stand in sharp contrast to dozens of deteriorating buildings owned by the New York City Housing Authority.

According to the NYPD, Morningside Park has seen an uptick in robberies in the last few years and counted the highest number of robberies among all city parks during 2019, excluding Central Park, even though it is one of the smallest. Many of these incidents have involved groups of teenagers, as young as 12, attacking and robbing individuals. Over the summer, about half a dozen minors, all similar in age to the suspects in Majors' murder, were arrested in connection with robberies.

In 2011, the campus newspaper, the *Columbia Spectator*, published a report detailing the income disparity between Columbia University's Morningside Heights neighborhood and Hamilton Heights just north of it, which is part of Harlem. The report cited that the median income of the wealthiest 20 percent of residents was 34 times greater than the poorest 20 percent, averaging \$207,053 and \$6,073 annually respectively. The article notes "the simultaneous increase in the salaries of educational administration and stagnation in the salaries of the working class as the main reasons for the inequalities."

According to information from Census Bureau for 2016, Harlem has seen a similar trend of inequality. The wealthiest 5 percent of residents has an average income of \$195,900, five times the amount of the median income of \$46,900. The bottom 40 percent of households earn less than \$33,000, only slightly above the already incredibly low poverty federal line of \$23,000 for a family of four.

The five young people, including Tessa Majors, caught up in the tragedy on December 11 reflect, in a distorted way, the inability of the capitalist system—and particularly the insatiable real estate interests—to provide for the basic social needs of young people in New York City and beyond.



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