

15-year-old in Mississippi sentenced to life in prison without parole for killing her mother

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On September 21, a jury in Rankin, Mississippi, sentenced 15-year-old Carly Gregg to life in prison without parole for fatally shooting her mother and wounding her step-father last March.

The jury found the teenager guilty on all charges against her, which were first-degree murder, attempted murder and tampering with evidence, rejecting the defense's plea of insanity. The case went to trial after the defense rejected a plea deal with a 40-year prison sentence.

Gregg was only 14 at the time of the event but was tried as an adult under Mississippi law, which automatically tries children 13 and older as adults for certain crimes, including acts committed with a deadly weapon.

The United States has the shameful distinction of being the only country which sentences children to life without parole, a practice that is condemned by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Children as cruel and unusual punishment. While there have been limited reforms curtailing heavy sentencing against minors in the last 20 years, including ending the death penalty against children in 2005, juvenile life without parole remains legal and is practiced in 25 states.

Moreover, the United States' routine practice of trying children as adults, especially following bipartisan tough-on-crime laws in the 1990s, signifies a social retrogression. The first juvenile court was established in the US in 1899 under the recognition that children were socially and developmentally different from adults and would benefit from rehabilitation efforts. Modern neuroscience and behavioral studies of youth offenders support these ideas.

In the case of Carly Gregg, the youth had a documented history of mental health issues, including

depression, which she was receiving treatment for in the months prior to the shooting. Dr. Andrew Clark, who testified on behalf of the defense, stated that Gregg "was having mood issues, eating disorder issues, cutting herself, hearing voices and sleeping difficulty all leading up to January of 2024." A week prior to the shooting, she was put on a new antidepressant medication, Lexapro, which Clark said aggravated her symptoms.

Gregg's step-father, Heath Smylie, who was shot by Gregg in the shoulder, testified that the girl was in a state of severe distress when she shot him, and he believed she did not recognize him. "She was screaming out of her mind scared," he said, "It was like she had seen a demon or something, and my first thought was, there was an intruder somewhere, and she thought she was after somebody else." He maintains that he is not afraid of his step-daughter, and speaks to her on the phone regularly.

The apparent proximate motive of the shooting was Gregg's mother, Ashley Smylie, confiscating a number of items from Gregg's bedroom, including marijuana paraphernalia. A friend of Gregg's was concerned about her drug use and sent her mother a text message earlier in the day.

Gregg's step-father testified that the mother and daughter had a loving relationship, and there appears to have been no prior history of violence on Gregg's part.

Whatever the immediate causes of the horrific incident, one has to search deeper than the superficial and plainly stupid narrative put forward by the prosecution. Speaking after the trial, district attorney Bubba Bramlett stated, "Carly Gregg is evil. That's not easy to say, but the truth of the matter is sometimes evil comes in young packages, small packages—and this is one of those cases."

During the trial, prosecutor Kathryn White Newman cited the “secret life” of the teenager as alleged evidence of her dangerous character, including her use of burner phones, vape pens, her self-harm and cheating in school. The majority of American youth would fall under suspicion for homicidal inclinations by these criteria.

The daily frequency of shootings in the United States testifies to the fact that these horrors are not fundamentally rooted in individuals but have social causes, including the abysmal state of mental health care in the United States, as well as the epidemic of depression and anxiety among children.

The 2024 report by Mental Health America found that 20 percent of American youth ages 12-17 had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, over half of whom (56 percent) did not receive any treatment. Over 3.4 million youth, 13 percent, are experiencing serious suicidal thoughts.

Nearly 9 percent of youth reported a substance use disorder in the past year, with some of the cited reasons for use being: the desire to feel “calm or relaxed” (73 percent); “to sleep better” (44 percent); and to “stop worrying about a problem or to forget bad memories” (43 percent).

In Mississippi, youth access to mental health care is criminally inadequate. Speaking to a state task force, State Superintendent of Education Lance Evans reported that the student-to-counselor ratio in the state is 400 to 1. Wendy Bailey, the Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Health, said that there are only 519 school therapists in the entire state, half the number of operating public K-12 schools, and only 15 licensed child and adolescent psychiatrists with a primary practice in Mississippi.

Beyond the issue of mental health are the fundamental social and political features of American capitalist society, which is marked through and through by state violence, both directed against the working class at home and abroad through endless war.

Commenting on the recent mass school shooting in Georgia, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, “Violence is the number one activity of the US government abroad and one of the main activities of state and local governments at home. More than 1,000 people a year are killed by police. And on top of that, Colt Gray and others of his generation have seen nearly

1.5 million Americans killed by a preventable virus in a pandemic which the ruling class refused to fight because it would hurt their profits.”

While feigning concern for the victims of mass shootings, these same capitalist politicians embrace the mass murder of thousands of children in Gaza by US-supplied bombs.

In addition to being the only country that sentences children to die in prison, the US is one of the only countries that maintains the barbaric practice of capital punishment. Last week alone, the US executed five death row prisoners, a rate unprecedented since 2003, including Marcellus Williams who was wrongly convicted of murder.

The extreme sentencing against Gregg stands in sharp contrast to another recent case in Rankin, Mississippi. When six local police officers, self-named the “Goon Squad,” pleaded guilty to felony charges related to their years-long campaign of terror against the local population, including torture, sexual assault and violence that led to multiple deaths, they were given sentences ranging from 10 to 40 years.

Gregg’s attorneys have filed a motion for a new trial.



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