

America imprisons its children for life. And nobody talks about it. The story of Carly Gregg

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On March 19, 2024, in a house in Brandon, Mississippi, a 14-year-old girl named Carly Madison Gregg shot and killed her mother before attempting to murder her stepfather. Six months later, in September, barely 15 years old, she was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. In early September 2025, her lawyers filed an appeal with the Mississippi Supreme Court. They argued that the sentence was unconstitutional for a minor. Since then, there has been silence. No news article has explicitly defended this minor. No educational program has been offered to her. The wheels of justice have turned, and Carly Gregg will now spend the rest of her life incarcerated in the juvenile unit of the Mississippi Central Correctional Center in Pearl (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Ashley_Smylie) .

This situation raises a dizzying question: What kind of society is it that condemns its children to die in prison, without offering them a second chance?

A family tragedy revealing an ignored distress

Certainly, what Carly Gregg did was horrific. The facts are undeniably violent. Her mother, Ashley Smylie, a 40-year-old math teacher who was highly respected locally, had just been informed by a friend that her daughter was using marijuana. Upon returning home, she searched the teenager's room for e-cigarettes. For Carly, this was a devastating blow. According to the testimony of psychiatrist Andrew Clark during the trial, this discovery represented "a crisis situation" for a young girl who placed undue importance on what her mother said.

What **happened next was captured on a security camera in the house.** Carly went to her parents' bedroom, retrieved a .357 Magnum revolver hidden under the mattress, concealed it behind her back, returned to her own room, and shot her mother three times. The footage then shows the teenager returning to the kitchen, playing with her dogs, and texting. She even invited a friend over to see the body, asking her, "Are you sensitive to the sight of dead bodies?" Then she texted her mother's phone to lure her stepfather, Heath Smylie, to the house: "When will you be home, honey?" When he arrived, she fired at him but only grazed his shoulder. Heath managed to wrest the gun from her and called for help. Carly was arrested less than a kilometer from her home.

A psychiatric defense dismissed by the prosecution

The
trial
took
place

Carly Gregg filmed during her highly publicized trial in the United States

amid intense media scrutiny. Carly Gregg's defense argued insanity, relying on the testimony of her psychiatrist, Andrew Clark. According to him, the teenager suffered from clinical depression, adjustment disorder, and heard voices that were "worsening" before the tragedy. Clark diagnosed her with bipolar II disorder, estimating that Carly spent approximately 60% of her time in a depressive state. The expert also mentioned the potential effect of a recent change in antidepressant medication, specifically the discontinuation of sertraline a few days before the events. The defense argued that Carly's memory had become "blank" after she took her dog out in the garden that day.

Mental illness has long roots in Carly's family history, including bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia. In early 2024, Carly had recently stopped taking antipsychotic medication and had started taking Lexapro—a drug known to worsen bipolar symptoms in some patients.

But **the prosecution presented its own psychiatric experts who refuted this theory**. They described Carly's actions as "diabolical," emphasizing that she had tried to conceal her crime. Furthermore, she had lured her stepfather into an ambush, which compounded her offense. For the prosecution, this behavior proved that Carly understood "the nature, quality, and reprehensibility" of the crime according to Mississippi legal standards. The prosecutor insisted to the jury that the teenager knew exactly what she was doing.

The jury deliberated for only two hours before finding her guilty of first-degree murder, attempted murder, and tampering with evidence. The sentencing phase took less than an hour: life imprisonment without parole for the first two charges, plus ten years for the third. The lawyers argue that the judge's instructions misled the jurors about the available legal options and that, in the absence of a specific jury recommendation for life imprisonment, Carly should have received a sentence of 20 to 40 years.

A system that punishes childhood rather than healing it

The individual case of Carly Gregg paints a disturbing picture of the treatment of minors in the American justice system. Currently, 412 people are serving life sentences without parole for crimes committed when they were minors in the United States. Fewer than 100 new life sentences for minors have been handed down in new cases tried since 2012. Louisiana and Georgia alone account for more than half of these cases. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia have banned life sentences without parole for minors, and in nine additional states, no one is currently serving such a sentence.

Two months ago, Donald Trump called for the law to be changed to allow for the prosecution of more children as adults. Treating children like adults, however, goes against scientific knowledge. We know, thanks to neuroscience and developmental science, that children are different from adults. Their brains are not yet fully developed; they make impulsive decisions; they are susceptible to peer pressure. The United States Supreme Court has determined that they are categorically less culpable than adults. The legal system must always take this into account; children who cause harm remain children and must be treated as such.

Transferring children into the adult system is a sign of societal failure. Placing children in the adult criminal justice system indicates that our society is abandoning them. Even young people who commit the most serious crimes are capable of change. "It's simple. Making children pay like adults is a mistake," explains the Juvenile Law Center.

(<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7358944677904928768/>)

Another damning finding must be considered: In the United States, the percentage of Black children sentenced to life imprisonment without parole has risen from 61% to 76.6% in just a few years. This increase reveals that when judges have greater discretion in handing down these sentences, racial disparities worsen instead of diminishing. Black children are now 5.6 times more likely to be incarcerated than

their white counterparts. In several states, including New Jersey, Connecticut, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Illinois, Black youth are at least ten times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth.

Traumatized children treated like criminals

Nearly all young people sentenced to life imprisonment have experienced profound trauma. A UCLA study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* (<https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/study-examines-juvenile-life-without-parole-population>) reveals that more than 2,900 minors have received life sentences without parole since the late 1940s.

These young people come primarily from unstable backgrounds characterized by violence, neglect, and abuse. Evan Miller, one of the perpetrators of a murder in 2012, had attempted suicide four times before the age of six. Kuntrell Jackson, another minor, grew up in a family environment "steeped in violence," with both his mother and grandmother having shot other people.

Elements relating to Carly Gregg's personal history were cited during her trial. Her biological father, Kevin Gregg, revealed that she had been placed in therapy during her childhood due to "mental health problems." Writings in her diary indicated suicidal thoughts and raised questions about possible schizophrenia or a "psychotic breakdown." This information was not enough to convince the jury. Yet this 14-year-old, in the midst of a crisis, deserved better than a death sentence in prison.

Prison slavery: a double punishment for inmates

Once incarcerated, young people sentenced to life imprisonment do more than simply serve their time: they become a captive and exploited workforce. In seven Southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas—almost all the work done by inmates remains unpaid. Of the 1.2 million people incarcerated in state and federal prisons, nearly 800,000 are prison workers, most of them forced to work.

In Alabama, a 2023 lawsuit filed by current and former inmates denounces the state's prison labor system as a form of "modern slavery." The lawsuit accuses the state of maintaining a "forced labor system" that compels prisoners to work without pay or for meager wages, under threat of penalties ranging from the loss of privileges to solitary confinement and transfer to more violent facilities. For inmates on temporary release programs who work for private companies, the state of Alabama deducts 40% of their gross pay—what the lawsuit calls "labor trafficking fees"—in addition to deductions for transportation and laundry services.

This system originates from the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which, while abolishing slavery, created an explicit exception: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime [...] shall exist within the United States." This clause gave state governments permission to use incarcerated individuals for unpaid labor or at wages far below the minimum wage, with minimal protections.

The lack of educational programs

Carly Gregg is currently being held in the juvenile unit of the Mississippi Central Correctional Center. According to the Mississippi Department of Corrections website, this facility, which opened in 2012, theoretically offers educational programs, vocational training courses, and individual and group psychiatric and psychological counseling. It also provides treatment options for alcohol and drug abuse. But the reality in many juvenile correctional facilities is quite different.

A 2015 study by the Council of State Governments' Center for Justice found that only 13 states provide youth with the same educational services available outside of prison. Specialized education services are either inadequate or nonexistent. Curricula are taught by uncertified teachers. And youth have

limited access to advanced math and science courses.

A 2018 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center revealed that education provided to children in adult prisons in Florida is either virtually nonexistent or severely deficient . In many smaller prisons, all children are placed in solitary confinement to separate them from adults and are denied any educational opportunities. While young people in larger prisons often receive a better education, those placed in solitary confinement—either for disciplinary reasons or to separate them from adults—remain excluded from educational programs.

What international bodies are saying

On the international stage, the United States stands out as an exception . Article 37 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by 192 nations, explicitly prohibits the imposition of life imprisonment without parole for crimes committed by minors. "Neither the death penalty nor life imprisonment without the possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below the age of eighteen," the Convention stipulates.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child interpreted this provision by emphasizing that "the possibility of release should be realistic and regularly reviewed." Furthermore, the Committee recommends that all forms of life imprisonment be abolished, given that "the life imprisonment of a child will make it very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve the goals of juvenile justice." The U.S. Commission on Human Rights shares this view, believing that a life sentence for children under 18 makes it impossible to achieve the goals that punishment in the juvenile justice system is supposed to serve, such as the child's rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The United States remains the only country in the world that routinely sentences children to death in prison. This practice is now widely condemned by the international community as a violation of fundamental human rights.

Towards a different model of justice?

The case of Carly Gregg reveals all the contradictions of a justice system that struggles to recognize the fundamental difference between a child and an adult . Can we truly consider that a 14-year-old girl suffering from depression, mood disorders, and auditory hallucinations had the same capacity for judgment and self-control as a fully developed adult? Can we ignore the scientific data demonstrating that the adolescent brain, particularly the regions responsible for impulse control and the evaluation of consequences, are not fully developed?

The United States has demonstrated, with over 1,000 releases of individuals sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes committed as minors, that second chances work. The recidivism rate among these released individuals is remarkably low. In Philadelphia, for example, where 174 juvenile lifers were released, only six (3.5%) were re-arrested, and only two (1%) received new convictions—one for contempt of court, the other for third-degree robbery. By comparison, it is estimated that 30% of individuals convicted of homicide are re-arrested within two years of their release.

The need for committed speech

To date, no press article explicitly defends Carly Gregg. Most simply report the facts or adopt an accusatory tone. The website created by her maternal grandparents and stepfather, *Justice for Carly Gregg* (<https://www.justicefor Carlygregg.com/>) , poses the unsettling question: "This case should haunt us all—not just because of what happened, but because of how easily we allowed a vulnerable child to become a murderer." The website denounces a media trial that condemned Carly long before the jury reached its verdict, in an atmosphere where "a 15-year-old girl, clearly in psychological distress, was portrayed as cold, calculating, and evil."

This is not about excusing the inexcusable. Ashley Smylie's death is an indescribable tragedy. A devoted teacher, a loving mother, was torn from her family in the most violent way. This victim deserves justice, compassion, and recognition of the suffering of her loved ones. But acknowledging this pain does not mean giving up on understanding. Carly Gregg was a child. A sick child. A child who cried out for help in a silent language that too many adults ignored.

But condemning a 14-year-old girl to die in prison without hope of release or access to educational or therapeutic programs is not justice. It is abandonment. It is an admission of a collective failure—that of mental health systems, schools, and the justice system—to protect and care for the most vulnerable children.

Social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and support professionals know that extreme violence in a child is always a symptom of deep suffering, untreated trauma, or a failed system. Their expertise teaches us that even the most terrible acts committed by children can be understood within a broader context—without excusing them—and that these children retain a capacity for change that adults have often lost.

In a civilized society, justice should be accompanied by particular attention to its youngest and most vulnerable members. Carly Gregg deserves a second chance. She deserves proper psychiatric treatment. She deserves access to education. She deserves the opportunity, one day, to prove that she has changed, that she has healed, that she can contribute positively to society. To deny her this opportunity is to condemn ourselves to perpetuating a system that destroys rather than repairs, that punishes rather than transforms.

If we want a more just and humane society, we must begin by rejecting the idea that children—however terrible their actions—are beyond redemption. We must raise our voices to defend their right to redemption. We must demand that our institutions provide care, education, and hope, even to the most lost among us.

The case of Carly Gregg raises questions for all of us about the kind of society we want. A society that abandons its broken children, or one that still believes in the power of healing?

- **This is the website for a fundraising campaign for Carly Gregg's defense and psychiatric care.** (<https://gogetfunding.com/justice-for-carly-gregg-support-her-appeal/>)

Sources

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Note: I was alerted to Carly Gregg's situation by Sandie Skeen, (https://www.linkedin.com/in/sandie-skeen?miniProfileUrn=urn%3Ali%3Afsd_profile%3AACoAADg15coBQ51cmF-moowUraMjqlvnbu_gcR0) an application developer who regularly reads my blog. She provided me with the sources for the press articles (in English – translated into French by AI) that allowed me to write this article.

Photo: Carly Gregg from the “justice for Carly Gregg” website (<https://www.justicefor Carly Gregg.com/carly-s-story>)

