

Loaded and Loaded

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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If you turn on cable, chances are you will find a reality TV show focusing on exorbitantly wealthy families. The shows will typically feature the equally exorbitantly boorish behavior of the children in these families. The kids usually get away with this behavior because the families are so rich...and because it makes for great ratings.

The concept has even been given a name – Affluenza. It was coined by Jessie O’Neill, the granddaughter of a previous president of General Motors, in her 1997 book, “The Golden Ghetto: The Psychology of Affluence.” Affluenza is generally known as a condition where children of wealthy families have a sense of entitlement, abuse drugs or alcohol, and even break the law. However, because of their parents’ money and influence, these children often do not have to face the consequences of their actions.

The term Affluenza had just been a fancy word for spoiled brat, but one Texas teenager actually used it as a defense in a manslaughter trial.

In June, a 16-year-old boy killed four pedestrians in North Texas while driving drunk. At the boy’s trial in juvenile court, psychologist Gary Miller testified for the defense and explained that the teenager grew up in a house where his parents constantly argued and eventually divorced. To compensate, they catered to their son’s every whim, resulting in him suffering from Affluenza.

According to authorities, the defendant and some friends were captured on surveillance video stealing two cases of beer from a store. Trial testimony revealed that the boy, along with seven passengers in his Ford F-350, was speeding and had a blood-alcohol level three times the legal limit before he struck and killed the four pedestrians. Despite the fact that the boy admitted to the crime, his attorneys argued that he needed rehabilitation instead of prison. They explained that his parents shared culpability because of their lack of discipline.

To the shock of many followers of the trial, including family members of the victims, last week District Judge Jean Boyd sentenced the boy to 10 years of probation and not the possible 20 year prison sentence. In making her decision, Judge Boyd claimed that the programs available in the Texas juvenile justice system were inadequate to properly treat the teenager.

Sounding like an episode of a reality TV show, Judge Boyd ordered probation on the condition that the boy attend a \$450,000-a-year rehabilitation center near Newport Beach, California. Of course, the defendant’s parents will be paying for his stay.

To no one’s surprise, there has been a huge outcry over the sentence. Many in the medical field are quick to point out that Affluenza is not a recognized condition or diagnosis, and therefore, should not be used as a criminal defense. Others fear the sentence sets a legal precedent, one that validates that money can buy freedom.

This appears to be another example of life imitating art, however, this time it’s too strong a dose of reality.

While this article is certainly not filled with Christmas cheer, I do wish everyone the happiest of holidays.

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