



Home invasion led to legal greater penalties

AMANDA CUDA

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Henry Schissler's home in Cheshire is only a half-mile away from the house where Jennifer Hawke-Petit and her two daughters, 11-year-old Michaela and 17-year-old Hayley, were killed a year ago today during a home invasion.

The morning of the crime, Schissler, a sociology professor at Housatonic Community College in Bridgeport, passed by the Petit's neighborhood. He saw police cars parked in the area — a rare occurrence, but one he didn't take much note of at the time.

"It seemed odd to me, but not enough to make me wonder if something had gone wrong," Schissler said.

But something had gone wrong. The night before, Steven Hayes, 45, and Joshua Komisarjevsky, 27, allegedly spotted the Petit women at the local Stop & Shop and followed them home.

The men then allegedly terrorized the family for hours. That included Dr. William Petit, husband to Hawke-Petit and father of the girls, who was beaten with a baseball bat.

Hawke-Petit was eventually strangled and her daughters died of smoke inhalation after Hayes and Komisarjevsky allegedly set their house on fire. William Petit survived.

Schissler, who also teaches sociology and criminal

justice at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, said this brutal crime still resonates in Cheshire, a town of roughly 29,000 people. The town's peace has been shattered, he said, to the point where women don't even feel comfortable shopping alone at the Stop & Shop where the Petit women were spotted.

"A mother and daughter aren't going to walk into that store at night anymore," he said.

Before the murders, Schissler said, people didn't think things like that happened in towns like Cheshire, or to people like the Petits. After the home invasion, "there was that numbing feeling of something terrible having happened in one's own little world," he said.

The murders shocked people from all over the state, including Schissler's Housatonic students. A mere month and a half after the killings, Schissler taught a class about the sociology of crime and punishment. He wanted to use the Cheshire home invasion as a vehicle for discussing the ins and outs of criminal behavior.

Initially, he worried that students might be uncomfortable or offended by a reference to such a recent tragedy. But students welcomed the chance to discuss the crime. "It really disturbed people and distressed people and they wanted to talk about it," Schissler said. "They want to try to understand why something like this happens."

The crime also sparked questions about the effectiveness of Connecticut's justice system. Both Hayes and Komisarjevsky were on parole at the time of the Cheshire home invasion.

They were arrested and charged with capital felony and multiple murder, kidnapping, sexual assault and arson. They could face the death penalty if convicted.



In response to the killings, the state Legislature passed and Gov. M. Jodi Rell signed several laws aimed at preventing another such crime.

In January, Rell signed off on criminal justice reforms that established a new felony offense of "home invasion" and strengthened the state's parole system. In May, she signed into law a bill that doubled and tripled the mandatory penalties for second- and third-time violent offenders.

The latter law also provided an extra \$10 million for more prosecutors, public defenders and other staff and resources. In June, however, Rell ordered \$125 million in cuts to the state budget, which took effect July 1.

That included cuts to the Judicial Department, the Division of Criminal Justice, the Department of Public Safety, the Public Defender Services Commission and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

Cuts to these departments totaled \$15.9 million. On Tuesday, Rep. Michael P. Lawlor, D-East Haven, co-chairman of the Legislature's Judiciary Committee, urged Rell to reinstate funds to these departments in light of a \$22.9 million budget surplus announced earlier in the week. He said the money was essential to help support the laws passed in the wake of the Cheshire case.

Rell had proposed using the surplus money to help fund fuel costs this winter for the state's elderly. Helping seniors heat their homes is fine, Lawlor said, but protecting citizens from violent crime should be a top priority.

"If we have a surplus, why not put all the money back into justice?" said Lawlor, who also teaches criminal justice at the University of New Haven. "If we give back this small amount, we could see enormous

dividends."

In an e-mail response, Rell said she was confident the new laws could be enforced without putting the money back. "Violent criminals who deserve to stay in prison will stay there — and serve longer sentences," she said.

Rell also pointed out that no cuts had been made to the Department of Correction, and that cuts made to many of the departments Lawlor mentioned were relatively small.

Schissler said, as a Cheshire resident, he wants to see an end to incidents like the home invasion. But, as a teacher of sociology and criminal justice, he has mixed feelings about the laws established to prevent these crimes.

Schissler said he fully supports harsher penalties for repeat offenders, and he likes the idea of creating a "home invasion" offense.

"This certainly wasn't the first time there has been a home invasion with an injury or death," he said.

But, Schissler said, the laws only address part of the problem. "They're just about controlling people who are out of control," he said.

It might be more effective to identify juvenile offenders, and try to reform them before they grow into dangerous adult criminals, he said. Missouri, for example, has won praise for creating a juvenile justice system that helps turn young offenders into productive members of society, Schissler said.

He said most violent criminals feel disconnected from society and its values. The best time to change that is when offenders are still young. "These kids need to be connected to the culture," Schissler said. "They need to be connected to hope."



And, despite the tragedy that's befallen them, Schissler said the residents of Cheshire still have hope. They've taken flowers to the site where the Petits' now-demolished home once stood. They've rallied around William Petit following the loss of his family.

They're dealing with the pain by reaching out.

"People feel that hope," Schissler said. "And it's important to be hopeful."