



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on September 8, 2022

## Murder in Memphis Sends Shock Waves — and Warnings — Nationwide

MEMPHIS — Residents of Memphis, Tennessee, are reeling today after a string of murders, one of which has thrown the city into the national spotlight.

Authorities [located](#) the body of [Eliza Fletcher](#), 34, Monday at the rear of an abandoned duplex in south Memphis. She was a wife, mother of two small boys, and pre-kindergarten teacher, abducted the previous Friday, September 2. Surveillance video on the University of Memphis campus caught the crime: A man attacked her while she was jogging in the early morning hours and forced her into his SUV. Footage indicates that shortly before the assault, he had circled and waited by the roadside for her approach.



Make-shift memorial for Eliza Fletcher at the site of her abduction (The New American)

According to police reports, it was the video, evidence gathered at the scene, and cellphone tracking data that identified the suspect, Cleotha “Pookie” Abston-Henderson, 38. Authorities arrested him on Saturday, September 3, but he refused to provide information about his victim. He has since been charged with first-degree murder and especially aggravated kidnapping, among other indictments. Police say they don’t have information regarding any motive, and the district attorney’s office calls it an isolated incident.

Amid its grief over the heinous crime, the city endured another evening of horror on Wednesday, September 7, with three people killed and several others injured when a man went on an almost five-hour shooting rampage across Memphis. Nineteen-year-old [Ezekiel Kelly](#) drove to at least eight locations, firing shots and crashing stolen cars along the way as he broadcast some of his crimes in videos on Facebook. Memphis police tweeted updates throughout the afternoon, asking residents to stay indoors if possible. They captured Kelly late Wednesday, and the suspect is charged with first degree murder, among other offenses.

### Common Theme

A commonality between Kelly and Abston-Henderson is that both men have criminal histories, and both were recently released from prison for violent offenses. Kelly was wanted for first-degree murder on a warrant issued Wednesday, the same day as his cross-city shooting rage, according to the [Daily Memphian](#). He had been released from prison in March, per Tennessee Department of Corrections records, having been previously sentenced to three years. The county criminal justice system lists charges in 2020 against the teen, including criminal attempt of first-degree murder, aggravated assault, reckless endangerment, and employing a firearm with intent to commit a felony.

Abston-Henderson has a longer and even more gruesome record. According to official statements and



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local news reports, at only 14 years of age Abston-Henderson was convicted of rape of a male. He had already been charged with theft at age 11, when he was part of a local gang known as L.M.G., an acronym that interchangeably stands for LeMoyne Gardens (a south Memphis public housing project) and “Love Murdering Gangstas,” per varying sources. Between 1995 and 2000 he was arrested 16 times for serious charges, many violent, until he was tried as an adult at age 16 for kidnapping a Memphis defense attorney at gunpoint.

That crime happened only two weeks after the county Youth Services Bureau released him following detention on a weapons charge. Sentenced to 24 years for the kidnapping, he served the mandatory 85 percent minimum and was released in 2020 from Trousdale Turner Correctional Facility, a state prison in central Tennessee.

Ironically, only one day before Fletcher’s abduction, Abston-Henderson had stolen and used another woman’s bank and credit cards, according to a police report dated September 1. He now faces identity and property theft [charges](#) in relation to those crimes.

## **Punishment or Rehab?**

About the Fletcher murder, Tennessee Lieutenant Governor Randy McNally tweeted, “The monster that committed this crime was not unknown to the criminal justice system. He had done this type of thing before and now he has done it again — and worse. It is simply disgraceful that this individual did not serve his full sentence for his previous crimes.” McNally continued, “If he had, Eliza Fletcher would be alive today. This case not only proves that the recently passed Truth in Sentencing Act was necessary, but that it was long overdue. We must redouble our efforts to ensure those who transgress against citizens are punished — and severely.”

Tennessee’s Truth in Sentencing Act went into effect July 1 and removes some minimum mandatory stipulations, instead requiring certain violent offenders to serve 100 percent of their prison sentences without potential for early release or parole.

Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy, however, favors rehabilitation over longer sentences. He sees that as the best way to reduce recidivism. “Could he have served longer? Sure, of course,” Mulroy shrugged in an interview with Jessica Jaglois of Memphis’ local NBC [affiliate](#), commenting about Abston-Henderson. “I think to a large extent we’ve given up on using prisons to rehabilitate. And the shame of it is, is that if we were to take rehabilitation seriously, we would actually reduce the repeat offender rate over the long term.”

Kemper Durand might disagree. He was the Memphis attorney kidnapped by Abston-Henderson in 2000. He can make no statement now, because he died of unrelated causes in 2013. An [obituary](#) published on the website of his law office, however, gives a unique perspective of both the victim and the abduction:

One night several years ago, Kemper was leaving his office to head for home. As he was about to get in his car, he was accosted by two men, one of whom held a gun at Kemper’s face and demanded his car keys. Kemper handed the keys over, and then at gunpoint, he was forced inside the trunk of his car.

For the next several hours, Kemper was trapped in the cold darkness of his car trunk as the two men drove the car throughout the city. From time to time, the car would stop. The men would open the trunk, pull Kemper out, make him withdraw money from an ATM machine,



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and hand it over.

After several hours of this ordeal, Kemper was standing at gun point alongside yet another ATM machine when he noticed a security guard. Kemper yelled for help. His assailants fled, but were captured and arrested.

Both men were tried and found guilty. At the sentencing hearing for one of the two men, a well-known lawyer appeared in the courtroom. It was Kemper. He told the judge he wanted to testify. Kemper took the stand, and testified that the man who was about to be sentenced was not the man who accosted him at gun point on that fateful evening. Yes, the man had been there and could certainly be considered an accomplice, but as Kemper saw it, the man was at the wrong place with the wrong person at the wrong time. Kemper then further described how during those hours he spent in the trunk of his car, he heard the two men talking. The man who was now about to be sentenced had pleaded with his friend to “stop the car, let this man out, give him his keys, and go!”

Forever the effective criminal defense lawyer, Kemper portrayed the man before the judge as an unwilling accomplice. He asked that the judge give him the most lenient sentence possible. The judge agreed.

It was a rare case in which the victim became the advocate for one of his assailants.

The defendant for whom Kemper Durand [testified](#) was Marquette Cobbins. At the time, the *Memphis Flyer* reported that Cobbins received the lightest possible sentence and was eligible for parole after 18 months.

Durand was obviously not a vindictive man. However, he also demanded justice and pleaded for Abston-Henderson’s would-be future prey in a victim impact statement quoted by the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Noting Abston-Henderson’s lengthy criminal history, Durand believed he felt “absolutely no remorse” for his wrongdoing. He cited the young man’s year-long delay in signing his guilty plea in the case, despite his open admission of guilt. Durand called the refusal “jailhouse braggadocio.”

“My feelings about being the victim of this crime, and the feelings of those around me, are that I was extremely lucky that I was able to escape from the custody of Cleotha Abston,” testified Durand. “It is quite likely that I would have been killed had I not escaped.”

## Soft on Crime

Victim voices like Durand’s are likely to fall on deaf ears in the Memphis district attorney’s office, however. According to former D.A. [Amy Weirich](#), who lost her reelection bid to Mulroy in August, her opponent was a George Soros-backed candidate. Radio personality Todd Starnes [tweeted](#), “Catastrophic losses for the Republican Party in Memphis. A George Soros District Attorney got elected.” He received replies comparing the situation to that in cities like New York and Chicago, where billionaire [Soros](#) has heavily invested in leftist district attorney campaigns in an effort to re-shape the nation’s criminal justice [system](#). Others agreed, and blamed election fraud as well.

Ongoing analysis of FBI statistics by [24/7 Wall St](#) ranks Memphis as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. “At 1,901 incidents for every 100,000 people, the violent crime rate in Memphis is well above the national violent crime rate of 379 offenses per 100,000 people.” The city’s murder rate is “many times higher” than the nation’s.



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Eliza Fletcher's murder is high-profile because the Memphis native hails from an affluent family. Her grandfather, [Joe Orgill](#), was a philanthropist and business magnate, and her 2014 [wedding](#) to Richard Fletcher was dubbed the social event of the year by *Memphis Magazine*.

Other recent high-profile murders include the gunning down of Greater Memphis Chamber president and CEO Phil [Trenary](#). He was shot in the back of the head while walking from a fundraiser race in which he had just participated. Though the murder occurred in 2018, the trial of the two men accused of the crime will not take place until December of this year. One of the [suspects](#) was 16 years old at the time of the murder, and a 16-year-old female was with the suspects.

Another prominent business executive and philanthropist, [Glenn Cofield](#), was shot and killed in 2019. He was also leaving a charity event when the murder occurred, and was also shot in the head. Investigators say the crime happened during an attempted robbery, but it remains unsolved.

The 2021 murder of a 22-year-old Rhodes College student, Andrew Rainer, also sent shock waves through Memphis. He was killed during a home invasion by Rainess Holmes, who has a criminal record going back to 2005. According to the Tennessee Department of Corrections, he had been most recently [released](#) in March 2020 before killing Rainer.

## Defending Police

As crime rates skyrocket, staffing shortages are crippling law enforcement. In an [interview](#) with the local Memphis NBC affiliate, Markel Hutchins, CEO of MovementForward, called police shortages the "most challenging issue" facing Memphis and the nation today. "More law enforcement professionals have left the profession in the last twelve months than any other time in a consecutive 12-month period," he warned. He blames the "vocal minority" that seek to "demonize law enforcement" and "drive wedges between police and communities."

"No one wants to be a police officer now because of all of the animosity, all of the anger, all of the resentment," Hutchins noted. "The notion of de-funding the police is the arch-enemy of communities of color and of any community. We cannot defund our way to safer streets nor to reduction in officer-involved tragedies."

Such is the future, however, envisioned by leftist campaigns to [defund the police](#) and go [soft on crime](#). As a 20-plus-year resident of Memphis, this correspondent can personally speak against the insanity of such crusades. The impact of Eliza Fletcher's murder alone will be felt for years to come. Imagine the effect it will have on school enrollment in the city — the kidnapping having taken place in a relatively "safe" area of town on a commuter college campus. What impacts will be felt in tourism — a major economic driver in the home of Beale Street, the blues, Elvis Presley, and Graceland? What will it mean to business travel and investment? Memphians who grew up here and love what the city once was now see their children and grandchildren fleeing to safer places.

One of the priorities of George Soros' [Open Society Foundations](#) is to cut the number of prison inmates in half by loosing criminals onto the streets. Another major goal is to cripple local police. Unfortunately, Memphis is a prime example of what happens when that vision of lawlessness and disorder becomes reality.



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