

## Letter to the Editor: 2 tragic deaths illustrate this differing treatment

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In recent months, we have witnessed two tragic shootings involving persons playing around with what they considered to be unloaded firearms.

In one case, I watched as a child barely 16 was brought before a judge shackled and handcuffed. The issue that day was to decide if he should be tried as an adult or juvenile. The decision was to try him as an adult, despite the juvenile court officer's recommendation that he could and should receive what he needed through juvenile court.

What did he do wrong? According to parents and friends, he accidentally shot and killed his best friend while playing with a firearm. The child is black and most of the focus was on his prior life, past transgressions, all the way back to grade school, and whether or not what he did was an accident.

In the second case, a father shot his daughter while playing around with an "unloaded" firearm. Like the first example, the father expressed great remorse for the terrible act. The father was presented to the public as a dad who loved his daughter and how this was a terrible accident. In this case, the father is white and an adult. Public opinion is clearly on his side.

I don't think that either the white father or the black teenager is guilty. But the handling of both events reveals what people are simply unwilling to admit to in this community. Color and age play a huge role in determining how justice is served.

Best I can tell, the father was released and the public has expressed great sympathy to him for the accidental shooting of his daughter. In the case of the boy, he was placed in juvenile detention and neither media, the public, nor law enforcement showed the same kind of sympathy, despite the pleading of both parents that it was a terrible accident.

Both persons were playing with firearms. Both showed great remorse. One person is a middle-aged white father who has not been in trouble and is caught in a tragic, unthinkable event. The second person is a black child, age 16, who ran away in fear after a tragic and unthinkable event. These two cases reveal how we think and feel and act regarding color and age in this community and across this land.

In a recent guest column [["Critics Misleading People Over Juveniles,"](#) June 25], Polk County Attorney John Sarcone defended his office's treatment of juveniles by insisting that there is no discrimination in the handling of juvenile crime. He speaks of a boy from Southeast Polk who was a star football player and who, two years ago, drove 120 miles an hour and killed two of his friends. Sarcone mentions this case as an example of one who benefited from a restorative justice response.

The boy is white. Not only was he not moved to adult court, he received a consent decree in juvenile court. Why wasn't the black kid also afforded a restorative justice approach to remain in juvenile court with a consent decree? Best I can tell, it was not an option despite the presence of pastors and both sets of parents willing to do whatever to keep this kid out of the criminal justice system.

What Mr. Sarcone fails to admit is that our system — law enforcement, media and public opinion — simply allows a double standard that we have accepted as normal. We can do better; we must do better. A place to begin is to be less defensive and admit that white culture still has a visibility problem regarding race and age that without fair examination leads to unequal treatment.

— the Rev. William D. Cotton,

retired United Methodist minister, Des Moines