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Kids for Cash: Two Judges, Thousands of Children, and a $2.6 Million Kickback Scheme

William Ecenbarger

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When thirteen-year-old Matthew appeared in front of Judge Mark Ciavarella for throwing a piece of steak at his mother's boyfriend, he was sentenced to seven weeks at PA Child Care, a private, for-profit juvenile detention center in northeastern Pennsylvania. Angelia was fourteen when she and a friend scrawled "Vote for Michael Jackson" on five stop signs. Charged with vandalism and defacing public property, Angelia was sent by Ciavarella to PA Child Care without her epilepsy medication and suffered a grand mal seizure her second night. Fifteen-year-old Charlie, arrested for unknowingly purchasing a stolen motorbike, was convicted of a felony and sent to PA Child Care for six weeks.

Matthew, Angelia, and Charlie are just three children among the thousands who appeared in Ciavarella's courtroom between 2003 and 2008 and were sent away—often with no attorney present and after only cursory hearings—to a detention facility in which, it later came to light, Ciavarella had a personal financial stake. As *Kids for Cash* reveals, this miscarriage of justice underscores a multitude of problems with our juvenile justice system, which too often criminalizes standard adolescent behavior, treats adolescents more harshly than if they were adults, and denies them their most fundamental constitutional rights.

William Ecenbarger, a Pulitzer Prize and George Polk Award–winning investigative journalist who covered the case for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, now gives us the first book-length account of this shocking story. In the tradition of true-crime legal thrillers from *The Executioner's Song* to *A Civil Action*, Ecenbarger exposes a deeply corrupt and broken system that ruined the lives of many children and ultimately led to the judge's conviction on charges of racketeering, fraud, tax violations, money laundering, extortion, and bribery. Fastidiously researched and utterly propulsive, *Kids for Cash* takes us deep inside a profoundly flawed legal system, revealing the twisted and haunting realities of America's juvenile justice system.

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