

Michelle Carter's Actions: Heinous, But Not Criminal

Every action and decision we make has naturally corresponding consequences. In our social media-driven world, it has become much easier to shy away from the ripple effects caused by our own actions, especially when we are able to hide behind the comfort of a keyboard.

Where once we each had more of an obligation to own up to our choices in a face-to-face environment, we are now protected from real confrontation by our computer screens, free to vigorously offend without ever worrying about how our statements may impact others.

But as this type of socializing becomes more commonplace, there has been a stronger push for the prosecution of those who offend others. In the last several years, anti-bullying campaigns have gone beyond merely encouraging others not to mistreat their peers and have moved toward advocating for the criminal prosecution of individuals guilty of harsh words in order to “teach them a lesson.”

While there is nothing particularly noble about insulting, humiliating, or verbally harassing another person, doing so does not mean you should fear spending time behind bars. When there is a lack of human kindness in our interactions with others, it is most surely a vice, but as Lysander Spooner famously wrote, “vices are not crimes.”

[Editor's Note: CNN [reports](#) that Carter received a 15-month sentence on Thursday.]

You Always Have a Choice

While we are each subject to emotions that often overpower our ability to think logically when we are met with harsh and

hurtful words, refusing to become a victim is always a choice we have as individuals. We will never be able to control the actions of others but we can dictate how we let those actions impact our own life.

Recently, this moral conundrum has manifested itself in a court case where one individual's texts have been deemed responsible for causing the death of another.

Massachusetts resident Michelle Carter was recently found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and now faces up to twenty years in prison. Several years ago while still a teenager, Carter struck up a virtual relationship with Conrad Roy III which consisted primarily of text messaging back and forth.

Roy had been suffering from depression and in the beginning of their relationship Carter urged him to seek treatment. However, as their relationship progressed, Carter began to encourage Roy as he expressed his desire to end his own life. When Roy called Carter as he sat in his car in an enclosed garage with the exhaust running, Carter did little to lend support to her desperate friend. Instead, when he called her and told her he was scared, she instructed him to get back in the car and finish what he had started.

After Carter found out he had followed her advice and was found dead, she texted another friend distressed fearing that she was responsible for his death. It was this last phone call and the text that followed that ultimately led to Carter's conviction.

To be sure, anyone reading the texts sent by Carter would have a difficult time defending her actions. For an individual to purposefully and knowingly meddle with someone who is clearly in a fragile state of mind is not only wrong, but evil.

That being said, to hold Carter accountable in criminal court for an act that is ultimately in the hands of the deceased is not only unfair, it takes away the importance placed on

personal responsibility. However, to not acknowledge that Carter's actions were hideous, to say the least, would also be neglecting personal responsibility, which is why this case has created such a controversy even among the most ideologically consistent.

Everything Affects Everything

One thing that is absolutely certain is that there is a new trend of wanting to blame other people for our own individual actions. But while personal responsibility is of the utmost importance, it is also important to understand that what we do impacts other people on a grander scale than we may realize.

Earlier this year, the Netflix original series, *13 Reasons Why*, caused a huge controversy among viewers who either loved the show or despised it. Its dark premise highlights a small town struggling to recover from the suicide of 17 year old Hannah Baker. Left without any note or explanation, Hannah's parents are lost as to why their daughter would make such an irreversible decision. However, what the parents of these troubled teens do not know is that Hannah left behind thirteen cassette tapes, each one identifying a different student as one of the reasons why she ultimately decided to take her life.

Discovering these tapes would take an emotional toll on any human being, regardless of age. But for the teenagers who are told via cassette that they must either listen to their worst moments being narrated by their former classmate or risk their actions being exposed by a "trusted individual" who acts as the guardian of the tapes, the entire experience is enough to emotionally ruin them.

The acts committed against Hannah range from vicious rumors to the more heinous and serious accusation of rape. But as the viewers see throughout the show, each student is enduring their own set of trials that is unbeknownst to Hannah or

anyone else for that matter. Yet, without this understanding, the young Hannah assumes she is alone in her experience which ultimately contributes to the very permanent decision to take her own life. However, Hannah's primary motive in leaving the tapes behind is to attempt to make her peers understand that their words and their actions matter.

As individuals, it is impossible to be solely responsible for another person's decisions unless we have held a gun to their head. Understanding this is much easier said than done, especially when it comes to something as serious as suicide. As human beings stricken by grief and loss, we are quick to blame ourselves or others in these situations in our quest to make sense of the debilitating sorrow we are experiencing.

But the unfortunate truth of the matter is that without force, we cannot control the actions of others, no matter how badly we may want to. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that in the absence of physical force, Carter's actions were despicable, but she is not a murderer.

There would appear to be no clear-cut answer as to how to solve cases of this nature but perhaps that is because many are quick to run to the justice system and demand these matters be dealt with in criminal court when there is a much simpler solution.

A Better Solution

When something terrible happens, it is natural to have an unwavering desire to seek justice. But what happens when there is no real offender? In the Carter case, it was much easier for the deceased family to cast the blame on Carter, rather than spending time angry at the son they lost. However, by seeking justice from a criminal court, there is no adequate remedy that can be obtained by the Roy's family.

Sentencing Carter to spend the next twenty years of her life behind bars would not serve any benefit to anyone. Knowing

what we know now about our justice system, it is clear that our correctional facilities do not rehabilitate their inhabitants. Instead, Carter will spend years behind bars at the taxpayer's expense as she is exposed to harsher criminals than she was prior to her incarceration. Aside from the small satisfaction that might be received by Roy's family, having Carter locked up will not bring their back their son.

Considering the severity of Carter's actions and the fact that she did not physically participate in Roy's death, it seems as though the best solution in this situation would be for the family to seek out damages using tort law in a civil court. Had this been the route sought by the family, Carter's actions would still have been made known to the world, perhaps giving Roy's parents some semblance of justice.

While no amount of money could possibly account for the loss of a precious human life, had Carter been held liable in a civil court, she would be required to pay legal fees and damages to the family. Instead, the financial burden of the trial and her pending incarceration will fall to the taxpayer who had nothing to do with this private matter. Additionally,

Carter's lack of intervention when it came to stopping Roy from ending his own life should not have been ruled as suitable grounds for incarcerating a young woman for the rest of her life. Regardless of whether or not Carter is caged and left to the whims of the system, there are natural consequences that cannot be avoided.

For the rest of her life, Carter will have to live with wondering whether or not her actions were responsible for the death of her friend. For the rest of her life, a quick Google search of her name will yield a plethora of damning articles that will soil her name and impact her career.

Prison is not synonymous with justice, in fact more often, the opposite is true. Carter's own attorneys claim that she is also suffering from depression and other mental ailments. By casting her out of society, she may never get the treatment and help she is clearly in need of.

There is no rational justification that would somehow make Carter's actions appear decent or appropriate, but that does not mean they are criminal in nature. Roy's family will be forever altered as they deal with the consequences of their son's decision. Likewise, Carter's life will be changed forever as she is left with the painful knowledge that her words had a negative impact on Roy and his family. However, no amount of jail time or government interference can negate this fact, the natural consequences of our actions exist independent of state authority.

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