



Pennsylvania Judge Jailed for 28 Years in “Kids-for-Cash” Scheme

After more than 10 years of allegedly sending youths to private prisons in exchange for around \$1 million in kickbacks, former Luzerne County, Pennsylvania Judge Mark Ciavarella (left) was sentenced to 28 years in prison — essentially a life sentence for the 61-year-old convicted criminal.



In February, a jury found Ciavarella guilty on 12 counts of everything from conspiracy and racketeering to money laundering and tax evasion. Another 27 counts, including bribery and extortion, were rejected by jurors.

The federal charges stemmed from Ciavarella’s involvement in a criminal plot to fill up privately owned juvenile-detention facilities. According to prosecutors, he was handing out wildly inappropriate sentences to first-time offenders and even children as young as 10.

Some of the crimes for which children were being jailed by Ciavarella included stealing a jar of nutmeg and countless first-time drug paraphernalia charges. One teenage girl was [sentenced to three months](#) for making fun of a school official on the Internet.

Another teenager sent to a correctional facility by Ciavarella later killed himself, which the family blames on the corrupt former judge. A [video](#) of the mother screaming at Ciavarella after a hearing earlier this year was posted online and seen around the world.

The whole scandal, eventually dubbed “Kids for Cash” in the press, attracted [international condemnation](#) and outrage. “The media attention to this matter has exceeded coverage given to ... almost all capital murders,” noted Ciavarella’s defense attorneys in a memo requesting a “reasonable” sentence.

One of the defense lawyers, William Ruzzo, [told](#) the “Law Blog” of the *Wall Street Journal* that the 28-year term was “much too harsh” — basically assuring that Ciavarella will spend the rest of his life behind bars. “This was a nonviolent offense,” he claimed, noting that the ruling would be appealed. “I’ve had people convicted of murder who received as little as a 6-to-12 year sentence.”

Ciavarella was also ordered to pay \$1.2 million in restitution. And after the scandal made headlines worldwide, the state Supreme Court overturned about 5,000 convictions. Apparently Ciavarella had denied the rights of youngsters in his court to have counsel and enter intelligent pleas.

At his sentencing hearing on Thursday, the former judge initially sounded remorseful. “I blame no one but myself for what has happened,” he told the court. “I had the opportunity to say ‘no’ to taking money that I believed was legal to receive, but knew that I should not take.”

But the apparent remorse soon faded as Ciavarella began to lash out, attacking prosecutors and independent investigators for allegedly helping to create a negative public image of him and his



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 12, 2011

courtroom. Assistant U.S. Attorney Gordon Zubrod responded by telling the court that Ciavarella's refusal to accept responsibility was one of the reasons he deserved a life sentence.

"It seems to me Mr. Ciavarella says 'I was not selling kids retail,'" Zubrod was quoted as saying in a local newspaper. "We agree. We think he was selling them wholesale." The U.S. Attorney for the district said the sentence was fair.

Ciavarella originally pleaded guilty, but eventually decided to take the case to trial after officials rejected the first 87-month-sentence agreement. Another former judge involved in the conspiracy, Michael Conahan, pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing. Two private-prison officials connected to the scandal also pleaded guilty.

Many of the families and youths victimized by the corrupt duo expressed relief after Thursday's sentence was handed down. "This is all I could have hoped for today," Sandy Fonzo, whose son committed suicide after a tough sentence from Ciavarella, told local reporters when the news broke. Many others echoed her remarks.

Ciavarella, who was allowed to remain free until sentencing, was immediately taken into federal custody following the ruling. It is not yet known where he will be serving his sentence or how soon an appeal may be filed.

Photo: Mark Ciavarella leaves the federal courthouse in Scranton, Pa.: AP Images



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