

June 30, 2005

## Crowds Gather at Boys' Funeral to Mourn and to Vent

By [JEFFREY GETTLEMAN](#)

CAMDEN, N.J., June 29 - Carl Ramos showed up at the funeral on Wednesday night, a T-shirt down to his knees.

Twenty years old, tough and tattooed, he slipped in line behind hundreds of people.

It took him an hour, in the heat and the rain, to get inside the church. But when his turn came to walk down the aisle and face the three little coffins, Mr. Ramos turned back.

"I was, too, too" - he got stuck on the word - "angry."

Many in Camden feel that way.

A week after three boys disappeared from a yard and five days after they were found dead in a car trunk, thousands of mourners poured into downtown Camden to pay their respects to the boys' families. The crowd included mothers in tanktops with babies on their hips, packs of young men with gold-capped teeth, and the acting governor of New Jersey, Richard J. Codey.

"It's tough emotionally; I'll be honest," Mr. Codey said as he emerged from the Tabernacle of Faith church.

Many residents said they were still having problems accepting what happened: that neither the 150 police officers assigned to the search nor the boys' families were able to find the children for two days, even though the car they had climbed into was parked just steps away from where they had last been seen.

"I was looking at those caskets and just thinking, how?" said Bexaida Bermudez, a hairdresser from Philadelphia who left the funeral wiping her eyes.

Some forensic pathologists said that the boys - Anibal Cruz, 11; Daniel Agosto, 6; and Jesstin Pagan, 5 - would have run out of air quickly, probably before the police even began searching. The families looked on their own for three hours before contacting the authorities.

"The police would have had to find them in a couple of hours to save them," said Werner U. Spitz, editor of "Medicolegal Investigation of Death," considered the bible of forensic pathology. "After that, they would be dead or dying."

But other pathologists disagree. Cyril H. Wecht, the coroner of Allegheny County, Pa., and past president of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, said the boys might have survived for as long as 12 hours, well into the search.

"More likely than not, they would have been alive in a three- to six-hour period," Dr. Wecht said. A car trunk is not a vacuum, he said, adding, "There's some minimal oxygen flow back there."

The Cruz family has now hired a lawyer, who is investigating whether the city is at fault for the deaths.

Peter M. Villari, a personal-injury lawyer from Pennsylvania, told a group of reporters, "They want the truth."

Some residents have said that the officers who overlooked the trunk deserve to be fired, something the Camden Police Department said was highly unlikely. According to what the authorities have pieced together, the three boys, neighborhood friends last seen licking Italian ices under a tree, climbed into the trunk of a car owned by Anibal's grandmother while playing on the evening of June 22 and were trapped when the trunk slammed shut behind them. Autopsy reports show the boys suffocated. The police said they searched the interior of the car and looked underneath it, but never opened the trunk.

The Camden County prosecutor, Vincent P. Sarubbi, is investigating the case and promised to issue a detailed report next month explaining what went wrong.

At the funeral, the pastors who spoke tried to impart a message of hope. But many people broke down when Jessica Pagan, Jesstin's mother, stepped up to the podium and read a poem written for her son.

"You've changed my life and it shows today," Ms. Pagan read, fighting her tears. "Inside of me is where you'll stay."

John Holl, in Camden, contributed reporting for this article.