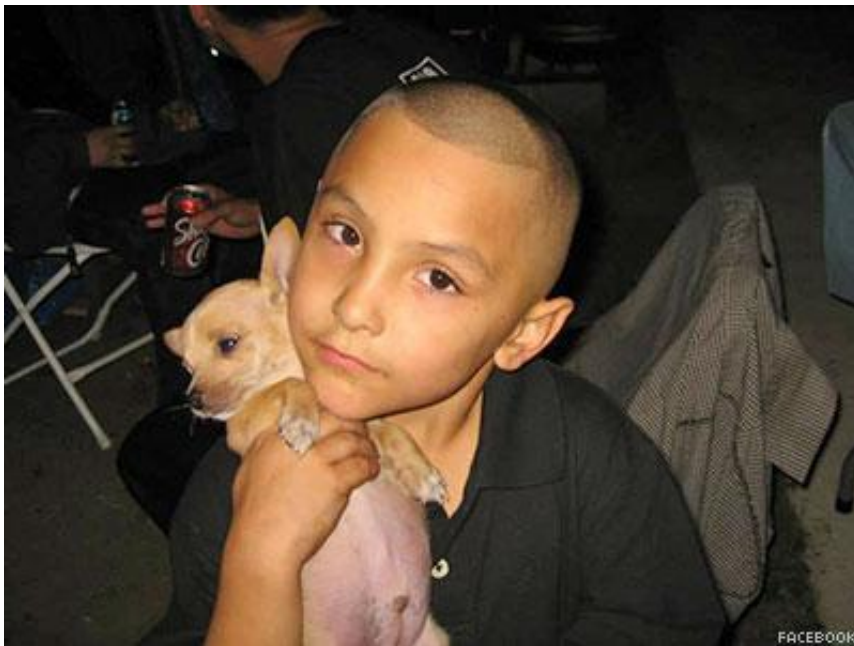


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## Couple Indicted Over Torture Death of 8-Year-Old They Thought Was Gay

By Sunnive Brydum

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A Los Angeles-area woman and her boyfriend have pleaded not guilty to capital murder charges related to the 2013 death of her 8-year-old son, Gabriel Fernandez,

Gabriel Fernandez

who was routinely "abused, beaten, and tortured more severely than many prisoner of war," according to a deputy district attorney who spoke to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Pearl Sinthia Fernandez, 30, and her boyfriend, Isauro Aguierre, 37, of Palmdale, Calif., are accused of torturing the child for eight months, calling him gay, beating him when he played with dolls, striking him with belts and baseball bats, forcing him to eat cat feces and his own vomit, dousing him in pepper spray, and locking him inside a cabinet with a sock stuffed in his mouth and refusing to let him out to use the bathroom, according to court records and testimony from the child's older siblings, the *Times* reports.

On the day Gabriel Fernandez came into state custody, May 22, 2013, his mother made a call to 911 reporting that her son wasn't breathing. When paramedics arrived, they found the child in his bedroom naked, with a cracked skull, several broken ribs, and BB pellets in his lung and groin, according to the *Times*. Fernandez reportedly told paramedics that her son had fallen and hit his head on the dresser. The child died two days later.

When the case first made local headlines last year, it prompted calls for reform to Los Angeles County child welfare programs, as social workers had responded to multiple reports from Gabriel's teacher and grandfather about the abuse the boy suffered. In each instance, child welfare workers determined that Gabriel was not at risk, though the *Times* notes that those workers never lifted the child's clothing to check for bruises or cuts. After social workers responded to a call from his teacher — who found a suicide note the boy had written — they concluded that the child did not have an immediate or specific plan to carry out his own death. The *Times* notes that two employees with the L.A. County Department of Children and Family

Services were fired in the wake of the case. A third employee is appealing the firing motion to a civil service commission.

Fernandez and Aguierre each face an indictment of capital murder with a special circumstance of torture. After numerous delays in scheduling a preliminary hearing, L.A. County prosecutors convened a grand jury to consider the case, which returned the indictment July 28. Prosecutors have not yet decided if they will seek the death penalty for Fernandez or Aguierre.

Watch a report from Los Angeles TV station KTLA when the couple first appeared in court in May 2013 below.

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