

Father jailed on felony murder charge after leaving son all day in hot SUV

Father didn't realize child was in car seat until drive home from work, authorities say

By [Associated Press](#) Fri, Jun 20, 2014 @ 5:38 pm

MARIETTA, Ga. | A Georgia man faces charges of felony murder and child cruelty after police say he left his 22-month-old son in a hot SUV for more than seven hours on Wednesday.

Justin Ross Harris, 33, is expected to remain in jail for at least the next month after a judge denied bond during a Thursday night court hearing. Cobb County District Attorney Vic Reynolds, whose office is handling the case, said a felony murder charge is appropriate when a person dies but the investigation is "far, far from over."

The boy, whose name has not been released, is the second child to die in a hot vehicle this year in Georgia and the 13th in the U.S. according to KidsAndCars.org, a national child safety nonprofit that tracks the instances.

"It's just a terrible, God-awful situation," Reynolds told WSB Radio. "I can't imagine, I can't fathom what any parent would be going through at this stage. It's the type of case that affects the community."

Prosecutors may opt for the harshest charges available and then scale back in potential felony murder cases, said Jessica Gabel, an associate professor of law at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

"They're definitely going to look at how healthy was the child, the family's previous history, whether dad was usually somebody who was very responsible," she said. "And the defense, if this reaches a trial, will be collecting their evidence that he was a good parent, a fit parent."

Harris was silent and showed no outward emotions during Thursday's brief court hearing, WSB-TV reported. He pleaded not guilty, WXIA-TV reported.

Neighbors and others who met Harris and his wife told local news media that they were loving parents.

The Harris family's landlord, Joe Saini, described Harris and his wife as "very, very nice" people who were in love with their baby, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

"Everything was going right for this couple," Saini said. "They wanted to buy a house so they could have some space for their child to run around the backyard."

Ingrid Maier, a neighbor of the Harris family, told The Marietta Daily Journal the community would do whatever it could to bring comfort to the family.

"I'm just so saddened by this whole thing," she said. "That's a sweet couple and I really feel for the husband."

Details of how the boy remained in the car for nearly a full work day remained unclear Friday. Police said Harris told investigators he was supposed to drive his son to daycare, but drove straight to work and didn't realize the boy was strapped into his car seat until the ride home Wednesday afternoon.

Temperatures in the metro Atlanta area that day reached the low 90s. Harris pulled his family's SUV into a nearby shopping center and began trying to revive the child, police have said.

On average, 38 children die after being left in hot vehicles each year in the U.S. The common thread is a change in routine, said Janette Fennell, the founder and president of Kids And Cars, a nonprofit that tracks and tries to prevent injuries or death to children associated with vehicles.

"The biggest mistake you can make as a parent is thinking this can't happen to you," Fennell said.

<http://members.jacksonville.com/news/georgia/2014-06-20/story/father-jailed-felony-murder-charge-after-leaving-son-all-day-hot-suv>