

Alleged suicide of Louisiana man in police custody prompts federal investigation

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The death of a 22-year-old Louisiana man who was in police custody at the time has become a new focus of national attention. Victor White III of New Iberia, Louisiana, about 130 miles west of New Orleans, is the third young man to die in a series of “Houdini handcuff” suicides that have occurred across the country over a two-year span.

In all instances, the suspects allegedly took their own lives in the back of a patrol vehicle while handcuffed, with a handgun not found during the police search. Attorney Benjamin Crump, who has become known for representing the families of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, recently joined the case to represent the deceased man’s family.

White and his friend Isaiah Lewis were inside a gas station convenience store on the night of March 2 when two men began fighting outside. After the two men left the front of the store, White and Lewis left as well. Not long after, an Iberia Parish sheriff’s deputy responding to a call about the fight stopped White and Lewis. The police report states that White consented to a pat-down search, whereupon the officer found a “small package” suspected to contain marijuana. He placed White under arrest, handcuffed him, and searched him a second time before placing him in his patrol vehicle. White was then transported to the Iberia Parish Sheriff’s Office for processing.

Once they arrived at the Sheriff’s Office, White became “uncooperative” and refused to get out of the car. This prompted the deputy to call for assistance to remove him. During this short period of time, White allegedly pulled out a pistol and shot himself in the back while handcuffed in the back of the vehicle.

From the outset, the local and state authorities’ handling of the case had all the earmarks of a cover-up. When White’s father was called to identify his son’s

body, no one gave him any information regarding the cause or circumstances of his son’s death. It was not until later, while reading a post on Facebook, that he discovered the police version of events.

“I was outraged, because they didn’t tell me anything,” White told reporters at a conference on Monday. He went on to state emphatically that “my son didn’t kill himself. My son had too much going on in his life at that time to take his own life.” White’s family also accused the authorities of attempting to bury the issue from media scrutiny.

Police initially alleged that White himself had been involved in the fight that took place outside the convenience store that night. The police used the presence of bruises on White’s face at the morgue to attempt to link him to the altercation. After security camera footage showed that White had not been involved at all, however, police changed their story to claim that the bruises were caused from the force of the gunshot.

The Iberia Parish Coroner’s Office waited five months to release an official autopsy. Only the first page, which directly contradicted the official statement made by state police that White had shot himself in the back, was made available to the public. The report stated that the bullet that killed White had entered through his chest on the right side, perforating his lung and heart before exiting through the armpit area. The investigation does not appear to have tested for gunshot residue on White’s hands. The report maintained, however, that White’s death had been a suicide. White’s family members have noted that he was left-handed, casting further doubt that he could have shot himself on the right side with his hands tied behind his back.

In a recent public statement, attorneys representing

White's family have posed questions to the public. Crump cast suspicion on claims that the responding officer could have found "soft packages" containing narcotics on White's person while overlooking a .25 caliber handgun. Monroe attorney Carol Powell-Lexing questioned the possibility that White had been killed by what she called a "throw-down" gun—an untraceable personal weapon used in order to make it highly difficult to link an officer to a shooting.

Since the savage killing of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, there has been an outpouring of public outrage. Within this context, increasing media coverage as well as pressure from the families of the deceased have prompted the federal authorities to conduct investigations into the "Houdini handcuff" suicides.

The first to die over the recent two-year period under such dubious circumstances was Chavis Carter, 21, of Jonesboro, Arkansas. Police stopped Carter in the Memphis suburb on the evening of Sunday, July 29, 2012, and searched him twice. After finding an amount of marijuana on him at an estimated value of \$10, they handcuffed him and placed him in the back of their police cruiser. While handcuffed in the cruiser, Carter allegedly shot himself in the right temple using a hidden gun that police had not found during either of their searches. In a local CBS News report, Carter's mother stated that her son was left-handed.

Jesus Huerta, 17, of North Carolina died November 19, 2013, in a strikingly similar way. A Durham police officer had arrested Huerta on a trespassing charge. After handcuffing and frisking him, he placed the teen in the back of a patrol car. At 2 a.m., police found Huerta dead in the back seat with a .45 caliber handgun on the floor of the vehicle. According to the autopsy report, he died from a close-range gunshot to the mouth. His hands were still cuffed behind him at the time his body was found.

The loudest calls for federal investigations have come from Crump, who began representing White's family after the young man's case gained media attention. Two weeks ago, the WSWS reported that Crump appeared on stage with Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Democratic Congressman William Clay, Martin Luther King III, and Missouri Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson. He is due to appear tonight again on stage with Al Sharpton at a seminar titled "The Black Male

In Today's Society" on the campus of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

US Attorney Stephanie Finley of the Western District of Louisiana confirmed today that a federal investigation of White's case is underway. The US Attorney's Office, the FBI and the criminal section of the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division is currently looking into the matter to determine whether or not a "civil rights violation" occurred and whether or not it was willful.

Capt. Doug Cain of the Louisiana State Police has stated publicly that the investigation "doesn't change how we do our business." Finley has confirmed the captain's statement, claiming the Justice Department's investigation "will supplement, rather than supplant, the investigation by state authorities."



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