

Bodycam footage and lawsuits detail police killings of Texas men suffering mental health crises

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Texas police killed two men while responding to mental health calls in the fall of 2022, with the details only recently emerging due to lawsuits and the release of police body cam footage.

On November 29, 2022, **Kenneth Knotts**, was killed by police while hospitalized for a mental health evaluation and in police custody. A month earlier, in October, **Justin Harrod** was killed by Llano County sheriff's deputies after his wife called the police because he was having a mental health crisis.

Another man, 37-year-old **Laison Crenshaw**, died in police custody after voluntarily checking in for mental health care in an Austin hospital under suspicious circumstances on February 21 of this year.

Knotts' family filed a civil rights lawsuit against the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center Police Department about six months ago after a grand jury refused to indict any of the officers responsible for Knott's death. "The guy was in mental distress, clearly he was irrational, but you don't have to kill them to solve what is absolutely a medical problem," Goeff Henley, an attorney representing Knotts's family, explained.

The damning body camera video in question, viewable here, was not made available to the public until Henley obtained it through a third-party subpoena issued to the City of Dallas, which released it on April 9. Henley said he fought for a month to obtain the body camera footage.

Knotts, a 41-year-old father of four, had been taken into custody for a mental health evaluation after acting erratically. Knotts was arrested by police in Hutchins, a suburb of Dallas. Following his arrest, police took him to the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. Knotts escaped the hospital before being re-apprehended by university police. Upon his return hospital staff denied Knotts's repeated requests for juice and water as he was deemed uncooperative.

While alone Knotts got off his bed and drank water out of a faucet, only to be restrained by three police officers, who pressed on his limbs and back. Knotts complained that his handcuffs were too tight. The cops then appeared to either tighten the cuffs or put on another pair.

Knotts continued to complain of thirst, and then shouted, "Don't kill me, don't smother me." Finally, he yelled, "I can't breathe," before falling silent. As Henley explained, "by the time someone says, 'Check his pulse he doesn't have a pulse,' he'd already been dead for quite some time."

Henley explained that "Prone restraint is all about control" and that "I firmly believe that the officers knew what they were doing." Police kept Knotts in the prone position instead of putting him in a recovery position or on his side, which Henley explained would have not impacted his ability to breathe. "When you are prone and handcuffed, you are utterly defenseless and in severe risk of your life because you just cannot breathe."

Nearly a year later, in October 2023, the autopsy report was amended to state that the cause of Knotts's death was homicide. Initially, the report concluded that the cause of his death could not be determined. However, after reviewing body camera footage, the Dallas County Medical Examiner's office ruled Knotts "died of sudden cardiac arrest associated with physical restraint and semi-prone position," i.e., that the police were responsible for the death.

Harrod, a 40-year-old father of four, was killed by police while suffering a mental health episode. Harrod's widow filed a civil rights lawsuit on April 11 against the Llano County sheriff's department, saying that deputies "unnecessarily escalated the situation" and that police "executed him." She is seeking a declaratory judgment that the actions of the deputies violated Harrod's Fourteenth Amendment rights to due process and equal protection under the law.

As is detailed in the lawsuit, Harrod's wife called police in response to Harrod threatening to kill himself after retrieving a firearm and hearing what she believed to be a gunshot. Harrod, who had returned from dancing and drinking with friends, was having difficulties with his mental health on the one year anniversary of his father's death.

The lawsuit says that Harrod was approached by police on his property asleep with a firearm. Police proceeded to taunt Harrod and yell at him for 18 minutes, issuing contradictory orders to him such as to "get away from the gun" and to not to

move. One of the deputies told him “Don’t make me shoot you.” Harrod was confused and asked, “Why would you shoot me?” One deputy tazed Harrod, followed a second later by two deputies shooting him in the head and forearm while he was still on the ground. Deputies did not render proper medical aid to Harrod before he started to repeat, “I’m dying.”

Crenshaw, who was also a father, was reported to be otherwise healthy when he was voluntarily hospitalized at Dell Seton Medical Hospital, which is operated by Ascension Seton. He was released into University of Texas Police Department’s custody on February 22 following an incident where he was reported to have become “combative” with security personnel and hospital staff, getting into a physical altercation with a security guard. Crenshaw did not attempt to assault officers, however, according to the death report. He was revived after stopping breathing but never regained consciousness.

Crenshaw was found to be brain dead by medical personnel and taken off life support, being pronounced dead on February 27. The arresting officer was placed on administrative duties but was not named. Pictures taken by the family showed him comatose in a bed following the incident with a blackened left eye and scrapes on the left side of his face. The Travis County district attorney is currently investigating the incident.

Knott’s dying words have draw comparisons to the police killings of Eric Garner and George Floyd.

In July 2014, Garner, living in New York City, was killed after a cop used a prohibited chokehold while arresting him. Garner had been apprehended on suspicion of illegally selling cigarettes. While being pinned down by multiple police officers, Garner yelled, “I can’t breathe” 11 times before losing consciousness. He remained motionless on the sidewalk for seven minutes before an ambulance arrived. He was pronounced dead at a local hospital about an hour later. His death sparked significant protests in New York and across the United States demanding an end to police violence.

George Floyd was killed by a cop in Minneapolis who knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes in May 2020. Floyd’s dying words were, “I can’t breathe.” Following his murder, a massive wave protests broke out in cities across the country and internationally, drawing together millions of youth and workers of every race, ethnicity and nationality to demand justice for Floyd and an end to the continuing wave of police killings.

As of this writing, according to Mapping Police Violence, 326 people have been killed this year, well on track to meet and possibly exceed previous years. Of these, 132 were “white,” the largest single group, followed by “black” people at 65.

In 2022, at least 1,176 people were killed by police, with an average of 3.2 people per day. As we noted then, “[W]hile African Americans continued to be killed by the police at a rate disproportionate to their share of the population, accounting for nearly a quarter of killings in 2022, as in previous years, victims were of every race and ethnicity, with those classified as white accounting for the largest number of deaths.”

The Democratic Party and the sections of the corporate media and upper-middle-class pseudo-left in its orbit have characterized police killings in racial terms. Some in the corporate media have pointed towards the fact that like Knott, Floyd and Garner were black while the police were white. This fails to explain, however, why police killed Harrod and 4,300 other “white, non-Hispanic” individuals between 2015 and today, as recorded by the *Washington Post*.

Furthermore, these killings expose the claims that if only minorities are in positions of power, police killings will subside. Knott’s murder occurred in Dallas, which has had Eric Johnson as mayor since 2019. Johnson is African American and until 2023 was a “law and order” Democrat, before switching to the Republican Party.

As the WSWS explained:

The record level of police violence in 2022 makes clear that the police, as Friedrich Engels explained, are “special bodies of armed men,” established and maintained to defend the capitalist system and the inequality which it creates. In their defense of private property the police target the working class, in particular the most vulnerable—the poor, the homeless and the mentally ill. The most backward fascist and racist elements are deliberately cultivated within their ranks to suppress any sign of opposition from workers.

Putting an end to police killings is not a matter of reform but of ending the system which has produced historic levels of inequality and violence, and reorganizing society to meet the needs of the working class rather than a privileged few at the top.



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