

# A week of executions in America: Inmates put to death in Louisiana, Arizona, Oklahoma and Florida

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Four death row inmates were executed at the hands of state authorities this week, one each in Louisiana, Arizona, Oklahoma and Florida. While these men's death warrants were signed before Donald Trump took office January 20, the state executioners and the US judiciary were certainly emboldened to see these executions through to completion by the new administration's rampage against democratic rights and use of fascistic terror against immigrants, protesters against genocide in Gaza, mass layoffs of federal workers and the threats to dismantle entire government departments.

One of the first executive orders signed by Trump on Inauguration Day called on the US attorney general to "take all appropriate action to seek the overruling of Supreme Court precedents that limit the authority of State and Federal governments to impose capital punishment." Promotion of the death penalty is a critical component of Trump's bid to establish a presidential dictatorship. He has pledged to make the resumption of federal executions and an expansion of the death penalty a top priority of his second term.

## Louisiana

The *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the first of this week's executions, of Jessie Hoffman Jr., which took place Tuesday at Angola state prison in Louisiana. The state ended a 15-year pause in state killings with the execution of Hoffman, who became the fifth person in the US put to death by nitrogen hypoxia. In a 5-4 ruling, the US Supreme Court declined to halt his execution. Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson dissented, wanting to grant a stay of execution, and Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote a separate dissenting opinion, citing religious grounds.

Hoffman was 18 years and 88 days old, closely missing being disqualified for execution as a juvenile at the time of the crime. He suffered a violently abusive childhood and spent his nearly three decades of incarceration trying to turn his life around, becoming a Buddhist and mentoring other prisoners.

Louisiana authorities have only released a redacted version of its nitrogen gas execution protocol to the public. Little was revealed Tuesday about Hoffman's execution, except statements by prison authorities who characterized the procedure as "flawless." In the four previous nitrogen gas executions, which all took place in Alabama, prisoners were seen to writhe, shake and gasp as the gas was pumped into a sealed mask covering the victim's face.

Louisiana state law outlaws euthanizing cats and dogs with nitrogen gas

unless they are first rendered unconscious, as a large group of dogs killed in this manner "had eyes wide open and dilated, saliva round the mouth, signs of vomiting and diarrhea, that they had been frightened and scared, and had suffered," according to a long-time Louisiana veterinarian.

The gas began flowing into Hoffman's mask at 6:21 p.m., according to the Associated Press (AP). He lay strapped to a gurney with a heavy blanket covering all but his head and forearms. The procedure kills by forcing the condemned inmate to breath pure nitrogen gas, depriving the individual of oxygen forcing the shutdown of all bodily functions.

The gas was pumped in for about 19 minutes, including five minutes after he flatlined on monitors. Witnesses reported that Hoffman shook for a few minutes, followed by shallow breathing. He was pronounced dead at 6:50 p.m.

Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill commented after the execution that her office would begin reviewing death penalty cases to determine how many executions might take place in the state this year. "We're going to start working our way through motions and begin to clear the underbrush and move these cases forward."

There are currently 62 people on death row in Louisiana. The state has executed 29 men since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

## Arizona

The second person to be executed was Aaron Brian Gunches in Arizona on Wednesday, March 19. Gunches, 53, was convicted and sentenced to die for the kidnapping and murder of his girlfriend's ex-husband, Ted Price. Gunches was the first person executed in Arizona since 2022. He represented himself before the Arizona Supreme Court in 2022, despite not being an attorney. He initially asked the court to issue an execution warrant but later withdrew the request. The execution was scheduled anyway. In February of this year he told the state clemency board that he was not seeking a reprieve.

Gunches was initially scheduled to be put to death in April 2023, but Governor Katie Hobbs called it off and ordered a review of the state's death penalty procedures after several so-called "botched" lethal injections. In the May 2022 lethal injection of Clarence Dixon, the prison execution team failed for 25 grueling minutes to set an intravenous line in Dixon's arms before performing an unauthorized "cutdown," using a vein in his groin to insert the IV, a notoriously painful procedure made worse when attempted by untrained personnel.

Gunches execution began just after 10:00 a.m. local time at the Arizona

State Prison Complex in Florence. “Sitting up on a gurney, covered with what looked like a white onesie and tucked in with a sheet, Gunches looked straight ahead and had no final words before the execution,” AP reported. He was injected with a single drug, pentobarbital. It took about 17 minutes for him to die; he was pronounced dead at 10:33 a.m.

Although prison officials reported that the execution proceeded without incident, Dale A. Baich, a legal representative for Gunches, told ABC15 following the execution:

The witnesses did not see what happened under the jumpsuit and sheet. We know from scientific studies that rapid administration of a high dose of pentobarbital is excruciatingly painful. Pulmonary edema develops in seconds as the lungs fill with water and one is not able to breathe. There is a sensation of drowning from within and not being able to do anything about it. It is like being waterboarded to death.

The eight deep breaths and chest heaving, the gurgling sounds, and Mr. Gunches trying to catch his breath, are all signs of pulmonary edema. Even though it may have looked peaceful, it was not.

Edward Thomas James was executed Thursday, March 20, at the Florida State Prison near Starke. James, 63, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1993 murder and attempted rape of Elizabeth Dick, 58, and the rape and murder of her 8-year-old granddaughter Toni Neuner. James was drunk and high on cocaine and possibly LSD when he committed the murders.

James pleaded guilty to the murder, child abuse and kidnapping, and pleaded guilty to other charges he said he could not remember. James’ attorneys argued that their client was unfit for execution because he had suffered significant cognitive decline in recent years and could not remember simple words or follow conversations.

A petition to the US Supreme Court filed March 17, 2025, cited what psychologist Yenys Castillo wrote after evaluating James:

He does not remember the homicides or his behavior leading up to them. However, he desired to be punished and even executed throughout the years. It is unclear whether Mr. James truly appreciated the seriousness and finality of being sentenced to die during his initial penalty phase and postconviction proceedings, and these competency concerns persist into the present day.

Arizona has carried out 41 executions since 1992.

## Oklahoma

Wendell Arden Grissom, 56, had been on Oklahoma’s death row since he was charged with the 2005 murder of Amber Matthews and injuring her friend Dreu Kopf during an invasion and robbery of Kopf’s home, which was picked at random. Grissom’s co-defendant Jessie Johns is serving a life sentence without parole.

The state Pardon and Parole Board voted 4-1 to deny clemency for Grissom. Grissom’s attorneys, federal public defenders Kristi Christopher and Thomas Hird, acknowledged Grissom’s guilt but argued before the board that he suffered from brain damage that was never presented to a jury. They said he should not be eligible for the death penalty due to developmental issues, telling the board that his brain abnormalities had been demonstrated by CT and MRI scans.

Grissom’s mother had a prolonged labor at his birth in 1968 in Arkansas, causing him oxygen deprivation during delivery. This had a lasting effect, resulting in stunted growth and communication challenges and behavioral problems in school. He had a significant history of drug and alcohol abuse, which began as a teenager.

Working as a truck driver, Grissom picked up Johns, a homeless hitchhiker, and the two drank whisky the day before the murder and the following day. He admitted guilt and attributed his actions to his struggles with addiction, saying, “What I did stemmed from substance abuse—there’s no denying that.”

Grissom died by lethal injection at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester on Thursday, March 20. The execution began around 10:00 a.m. local time. According to witnesses, he appeared to stop breathing at 10:09 a.m., and the color began to drain from his face. He was pronounced dead at 10:13 a.m.

Oklahoma has executed 128 men since 1990.

## Florida

According to the Death Penalty Information Center, a total of 1,617 people have been put to death in the United States since 1976, including 1,599 men and 18 women. States in the US South have carried out 1,308 of these executions.

African Americans make up a disproportionate 41 percent of people on

death row, and 34 percent of those executed. Foreign nationals have accounted for 34 executions, while 22 individuals have been convicted, sentenced to die and executed for crimes committed as juveniles.



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