

David Pittman executed: Florida leads US in state murder in 2025

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Florida carried out its 12th state-sanctioned murder so far this year with the lethal injection of 63-year-old David Joseph Pittman on September 17. The state now leads the nation in executions in 2025. Pittman maintained his innocence and his legal team pointed to his intellectual disability in an effort to halt the execution.

Florida under Trump ally Governor Ron DeSantis has now set a new single-year record for the state, driving a national increase in capital punishment over the past decade. The 12 executions in the first nine months of 2025 surpassed any previous year for Florida since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. This surge contrasts with DeSantis signing only one death warrant in 2024 and six in 2023.

Pittman was pronounced dead at 6:12 p.m. local time at Florida State Prison, near Starke. His last words were a defiant rejection of the state's verdict: "I know you all came to watch an innocent man be murdered by the State of Florida. I am innocent. I didn't kill anybody. That's it." As the lethal drugs were injected, Pittman took a few deep breaths before falling still. His death was met with satisfaction by officials like Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd, who declared Pittman "evil then" and "never changed," having "wiped out an entire family."

Opponents of the death penalty, including Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (FADP), gathered outside the prison to protest the state murder, saying, "None of us are going to wake up tomorrow and be safer because David Pittman is dead," as they tolled a bell, proclaiming, "Not in my name."

Pittman was convicted in 1991 for the May 15, 1990, triple murder of his estranged wife's family in Mulberry, Florida. Prosecutors argued that Pittman, enraged by his wife's divorce filing and having previously threatened her family, went to the home of Clarence Knowles, 60, Barbara Knowles, 50, and their 20-year-old daughter, Bonnie Knowles. According to prosecutors, Pittman cut

the telephone lines before entering, then fatally stabbed Bonnie seven times, cutting her throat, before murdering her parents. After the murders, he set the house on fire and stole Bonnie's car, later torching it as well. A jailhouse snitch testified that Pittman confessed to the murders and described the violent acts, including Bonnie's rejection of his sexual advances. A jury recommended the death penalty by a nonunanimous 9-3 vote.

Executing the intellectually disabled

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of Pittman's execution is his documented intellectual disability. His attorneys argued that executing him would violate the US Constitution's Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, including the execution of intellectually disabled individuals.

Evidence presented by his defense pointed to a lifelong history of cognitive impairments: IQ scores of 70 and 71 before age 18, placement in special education classes, documented brain damage consistent with congenital impairment, and a diagnosis of organic personality syndrome, a condition characterized by significant and lasting changes in a person's personality and behavior due to an underlying brain injury or medical condition affecting the brain. Pittman's background also revealed a childhood scarred by physical and sexual abuse, inflicted by an abusive mother, which his lawyers argued contributed to his brain damage and mental state.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, Florida courts repeatedly blocked Pittman from presenting proof of his disability, citing "shifting and inconsistent interpretations of retroactivity" in imposing a sentence of death. A 2020

Florida Supreme Court ruling (*Walls v. State*), which reversed an earlier decision, effectively prevented such claims from being applied retroactively, leaving individuals like Pittman vulnerable. A judge in Pittman's warrant proceedings acknowledged "a real risk Florida was killing a man tonight who was lawfully ineligible for execution," but allowed it to proceed. A Florida Supreme Court Justice concurred. The US Supreme Court denied a stay of execution on September 16.

The US Supreme Court has ruled execution of the intellectually disabled unconstitutional but left it up to the states to determine the criteria. Of the 31 death row inmates executed so far this year, at least 11 of them had some type of documented mental impairment.

- **Intellectual disability**

James Ford (Florida, executed 2/13/2025)

Richard Tabler (Texas, 2/13/2025)

Benjamin Ritchie (Indiana, 5/20/2025)

Edward Zakrzewski (Florida, 7/31/2025)

- **Severe mental illness**

Oscar Smith (Tennessee, executed 5/22/2025)

Thomas Gudinas (Florida, 6/24/2025)

- **Brain damage**

Glen Rogers (Florida, executed 5/15/2025)

Wendell Grissom (Oklahoma, 3/20/2025) brain damage from traumatic birth

- **US imperialist war-related**

Jeffrey Hutchinson (Florida, executed 5/1/2025) Gulf War syndrome

Anthony Wainwright (Florida, 6/10/2025) cognitive problems from exposure to Agent Orange before birth

Richard Jordan (Florida, 6/25/2025) Vietnam veteran with PTSD

Florida's drive to execute

Governor DeSantis has asserted that some crimes are "so horrific the only appropriate punishment is the death penalty" and that executions provide "closure" for victims' families, a statement contradicted by many of these families who have found no such relief. This tough-on-crime posturing comes amidst declining public support for the death penalty nationwide, making Florida an increasingly isolated outlier in its enthusiastic embrace of state-sanctioned killing. DeSantis has brushed aside appeals from Christian leaders and Catholic bishops in

Florida to halt the executions.

Florida also leads the nation in death row exonerations, with 30 individuals freed since 1973, prompting Maria DeLiberato, a capital defense lawyer and the executive director of FADP, to state: "We get it wrong more than any other state," making it all but certain that innocent individuals have been sent to their deaths.

The national increase in executions, now at a decade high, is not an isolated phenomenon but a chilling reflection of the "Trump effect" on the US criminal justice system. President Trump has consistently urged prosecutors to aggressively seek the death penalty, with his attorney general, Pam Bondi, promising to expand federal capital cases. Trump has also vowed to execute individuals for murder in Washington D.C., where he has deployed National Guard groups to fight a non-existent "crime wave."

Florida's escalation of executions is mirrored by a legislative assault on due process and human rights. In 2023, the state passed a law making the sexual assault of a child under 12 a capital crime, brazenly challenging a 2009 US Supreme Court decision that had struck down similar legislation. Florida also discarded the requirement for unanimous jury recommendations in death penalty cases, lowering the threshold to an 8-4 majority vote, contrary to Supreme Court precedent. This legislative move makes Florida one of only two states that allow nonunanimous juries to impose death sentences.

In January 2025, Florida enacted the so-called Trump Act, expanding the death penalty to all "unauthorized aliens" convicted of capital offenses, a move that directly flouts Supreme Court precedents against mandatory death sentences. By June, legislation was passed to broaden capital offenses to include child sex trafficking and to permit any supposedly constitutional method of execution, further illustrating the state's drive to expand its death machine.

With 11 more executions scheduled across eight states before the end of 2025, the US is on track to execute at least 42 inmates, a figure not seen since 2012.



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