

Executions in Florida and Missouri as 4 days of state-sanctioned killings begin

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The machinery of the state killing apparatus in the US continues its relentless march this week, fueled by the accelerating fascistic agenda of the Trump administration. As the nation races towards a record high number of executions for the year, today, October 14, the state of Florida executed Samuel Smithers, and Missouri executed Lance Shockley.

Also scheduled for execution this week are Charles Ray Crawford in Mississippi on October 15, and Richard Djerf in Arizona on October 17.

Texas death row inmate Rob Roberson was scheduled to be put to death on October 16 but was granted a stay by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, which remanded the case to district court for further review. Roberson was convicted for the 2002 death of his two-year-old daughter Nikki based on now-discredited medical testimony diagnosing Shaken Baby Syndrome.

Roberson's attorneys recently discovered judicial misconduct in his case as well. The presiding judge in his 2003 trial failed to disclose a conflict of interest: he had previously authorized Nikki's maternal grandparents to remove her from life support, a decision legally reserved for Roberson, her sole managing conservator.

The execution surge of 2025 reveals the callous indifference of the ruling class to due process and human life itself. So far this year, 35 individuals have died by court-ordered execution across 10 states. The US is on track to carry out 43 state-sanctioned killings this year, the highest number in more than a decade.

Trump's drive to expand death penalty

This explosion in state-sanctioned violence is linked to the political priorities established by President Donald Trump at the start of his second term.

On January 20, 2025, Inauguration Day, Trump signed an executive order calling for a dramatic expansion of capital punishment. This order, directly stemming from the ultra-conservative blueprint Project 2025, frames the death penalty as an "essential tool" for punishment and deterrence, despite research showing that capital punishment is not a deterrent. Capital punishment is the highest rejection of the judicial concept of rehabilitation; there is no aim to rehabilitate, simply to exact

vengeance.

Trump's order specifically directs the US attorney general to pursue federal jurisdiction and seek the death penalty for capital crimes involving the murder of a law enforcement officer and any capital crime committed by an undocumented immigrant. This rhetoric aligns with Trump's vilification of immigrants, using language reminiscent of the Nazis.

Attorney-General Pam Bondi has taken a leading role in advancing this agenda. Bondi has pledged to seek capital punishment "all over the country, again." She issued a memo encouraging Justice Department employees to pursue federal capital charges in various situations, including drug trafficking and the murder of police.

The January executive order called for the attorney general to seek the overruling of US Supreme Court precedents that limit the state and federal governments' authority to impose capital punishment. Bondi specifically called the decision by the outgoing Biden administration to commute the sentences of 37 federal death row prisoners "abhorrent."

In an effort to align themselves with the president's priorities, state attorneys general and governors are seeking to increase the utilization of their death chambers.

Republican legislators nationwide have introduced a flurry of bills intended to modify and expand capital punishment. At least 23 bills expanding death penalty eligibility have been introduced across 14 states this year, a significant increase from previous years. These bills, primarily pushed by Republicans, seek to expand the death penalty to crimes such as the death of police officers, sex offenses against children, abortion (attempting to make it a capital crime) and crimes committed by immigrants.

Florida

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has demonstrated his zeal for state killing, promoting new laws to expand the death penalty, such as allowing it in cases of people who sexually assault children. One such bill, inspired by Trump's January executive order, was signed into law by DeSantis. Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier led 15 state attorney generals in sending a letter to Bondi urging federal support in challenging Supreme Court

precedent to uphold death sentences for “child rape.”

Florida has distinguished itself as the nation’s most prolific execution state this year. Samuel Lee Smithers, 72, was executed by lethal injection on Tuesday, October 14, at the Florida State Prison near Starke. He was pronounced dead at 6:15 p.m. CDT. His execution marked Florida’s 14th execution of 2025, further extending the state record for executions in a single year. Florida has executed more people than any other state this year, followed by Texas with five.

Smithers was convicted in 1999 for the 1996 first-degree murders of Christy Cowan and Denise Roach. He met the women at a Tampa motel in May 1996 to pay them for sex. Authorities later found the women’s bodies in one of the property’s rural ponds. Both had been severely beaten, strangled and left to die.

Smithers’ attorneys appealed, arguing that his age should make him ineligible for execution under the Constitution’s prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, barred by the Eighth Amendment. The Florida Supreme Court denied this appeal, ruling that the elderly are not categorically exempt.

Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty wrote a statement that read in part:

Tonight, We the People of the State of Florida executed 72-year-old Samuel “Sammy” Lee Smithers for the 1996 murders of Denise Roach and Christie Cowan. Sammy was the oldest person executed in the modern era of Florida’s death penalty.

We killed a man with a profound history of head trauma and brain damage who was substantially impaired at the time of the crime. We killed an elderly man whose continued cognitive decline over his 30 years on death row was medically documented. We killed a man who posed absolutely no threat to anyone. ...

Christie Cowan’s father visited his daughter’s grave and then stood before the judge, pleading for the life of the man who had killed his daughter. He said that he did not want his child’s name used to justify another killing. His words, born of unimaginable pain, offered the moral clarity that the prosecutor, the judge, and our elected officials have not yet found: that violence in response to violence is not the answer, and it never will be.

Missouri

Also executed on October 14 was Lance Shockley, 48, in Missouri. Shockley died by lethal injection at the Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Bonne Terre. He was pronounced dead at 6:13 p.m. CDT. The US Supreme Court denied his final appeals earlier that day.

Shockley was convicted in 2009 for the murder of Missouri State Highway Patrol Sgt. Carl Graham Jr. in 2005. Shockley consistently maintained his innocence.

In the punishment phase of Shockley’s trial, the jury could not come to a unanimous decision on whether he should be executed. Consequently, a Carter County circuit judge unilaterally sentenced him to death. Missouri, along with Indiana, are the only two states that grant judges the authority to make this unilateral decision to impose the death penalty.

Overseeing his first capital case, Republican Governor Mike Kehoe denied clemency for Shockley on Monday. In response, protesters organized a march and held vigils in St. Louis, Kansas City, Columbia and Bonne Terre, marching under the banner, “Let Lance Live, Gov. Kehoe!” Polling weighted to represent Missouri’s registered voter demographics showed significant support for clemency across the state, including 79 percent of Democrats.

The push by Trump and his state allies to expand capital punishment comes as public support for the death penalty sits at a five-decade low. Fifty-three percent of Americans favor capital punishment for murder, a steep drop from 80 percent 30 years ago, reflecting widespread distrust in the judicial system. Evidence of declining support is also clear in courtrooms, where juries are increasingly rejecting the punishment.

Since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, more than 200 people sentenced to death have been exonerated, according to Death Penalty Information, raising the fear among juries and the public that innocent people are being put to death.

The most common reasons for exoneration of prisoners include official misconduct, mistaken eyewitness testimony, perjury, and false or discredited forensic evidence (such as bite-mark analysis or faulty hair analysis).

The Supreme Court has, in recent years, shown little sympathy toward death row prisoners and has largely stopped hearing death penalty cases, effectively paving the way for states to proceed with executions. This relinquishment of authority by the Supreme Court encourages states to pursue aggressive expansion efforts, driven by the belief that the current conservative majority on the Court will ultimately uphold such laws, even if they run contrary to established precedent. The relentless pursuit of executions further demonstrates the state’s disdain for due process and its use of capital punishment as a terrorizing bludgeon against the population.



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