

Executions in Florida and Oklahoma: A death penalty system indifferent to trauma and sentencing disparities

Kate Randall
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The machinery of state-sanctioned killing in the United States continued this week with executions in Florida and Oklahoma, the second and third executions of 2026. The deaths of these men underscore a legal system that remains indifferent to systemic trauma, poverty and profound sentencing disparities in the cases of those condemned to death.

Florida: Sentenced on nonunanimous jury recommendation

On Tuesday, February 10, the state of Florida executed 64-year-old Ronald Palmer Heath by lethal injection at Florida State Prison near Starke. He received a three-drug lethal injection protocol, consisting of a sedative, a paralytic agent and a drug to induce cardiac arrest. Heath's final words were, "I'm sorry. That's all I can say. Thank you." He was pronounced dead at 6:12 p.m.

Heath spent 35 years on death row for the 1989 robbery and murder of Michael Sheridan, a traveling salesman met at a Gainesville bar. While Heath acknowledged his role and expressed deep remorse for the crime, the logic behind his death sentence was the subject of intense criticism.

His younger brother and co-defendant, Kenneth Heath—the undisputed “trigger man” who in fact shot Sheridan—received a life sentence after testifying against Ronald. Despite the younger brother's 2025 plea to the Clemency Board that he and Ronald were “equally culpable,” the state chose to execute the

brother who did not fire the fatal shots.

The state's determination to kill Heath also ignored a harrowing history of institutional abuse. He was tried and sentenced as an adult at age 16 for the 1977 second-degree murder of Michael Green and was subjected to horrific violence within the Florida adult prison system. He reported multiple instances of gang rape and sexual assault at gunpoint, which were so violent they necessitated a three-month hospitalization and surgery.

The jury that eventually recommended his death sentence for the Sheridan murder never heard evidence of this “polyvictimization” and how it impaired his brain development and judgment.

In addition, Heath's sentence was the product of a nonunanimous jury recommendation of 10-2. Florida remains an outlier in this practice, allowing state-sanctioned death without a consensus of 12 jurors. Before 2016, the state of Florida allowed judges to override jury recommendations of death sentences by a simple majority of at least 7-5.

A *Tampa Bay Times* analysis of more than 450 death penalty cases found that as of early 2016, 80 percent of people on death row had been recommended for death sentences by nonunanimous juries. A 2016 US Supreme Court ruling in *Hurst v. Florida* struck down nonunanimous jury findings as a violation of the Sixth Amendment, which protects criminal defendants' rights.

While unanimous jury recommendations became mandated in Florida following *Hurst*, pre-2016 sentences, including Heath's, were not vacated retroactively.

In 2023, a state law signed by Governor Ron DeSantis again lowered the threshold to an 8-4

majority. Alabama is the only other state practicing the death penalty to allow nonunanimous jury recommendations of death (by a 10-2 vote).

Heath's final appeals, which challenged Florida's secretive lethal injection protocols and the failure to consider his juvenile brain development, were summarily rejected by both the Florida and US Supreme Courts.

Oklahoma: A history of poverty, abuse and PTSD

Two days later, on Thursday, February 12, Oklahoma carried out its first execution of the year, killing 45-year-old Kendrick Antonio Simpson. Strapped to a gurney at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, Simpson told his family, "I love y'all. Thank y'all for being here to support me," before being pronounced dead at 10:19 a.m..

Simpson was convicted for the 2006 drive-by shooting of Anthony Jones and Glen Palmer following a nightclub altercation. His case is a textbook example of how the death penalty disproportionately targets the mentally ill and victims of systemic poverty.

A native of New Orleans who fled to Oklahoma as a Hurricane Katrina refugee, Simpson's childhood was marked by abandonment, a mother addicted to cocaine, and sexual abuse beginning at age 11. He also suffered from severe PTSD after surviving a separate drive-by shooting that left him with wounds to his skull and abdomen.

During his two decades behind bars, Simpson underwent a remarkable rehabilitation, becoming a published poet and earning his GED. Despite this, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted 3-2 against recommending clemency. Governor Kevin Stitt, who has granted clemency only twice in his tenure, allowed the execution to proceed despite a pending legislative effort, SB 601, which seeks a moratorium on executions.

Simpson's final appeal, which argued that the jury never heard of his documented PTSD, was rejected by the US Supreme Court without comment on the eve of his death.

In 2025, the US saw a 15-year high of 47 executions.

Florida led the nation with a record 19 executions in 2025; followed by Alabama, South Carolina and Texas, with 5 each; Tennessee, 3; Arizona, Indiana, Mississippi and Oklahoma, 2 each; and Louisiana and Missouri, 1 each.

Texas carried out the first US execution of 2026 on January 28, killing Charles Victor Thompson, 55. Upcoming executions include Melvin Trotter on February 24 and Billy Leon Kearse on March 3, both in Florida.



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