Texas executes Ker’Sean Ramey a week after killing his codefendant

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Texas executed Ker’Sean Olajuwa Ramey by lethal injection Wednesday evening at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, one week after putting to death LeJames Norman, the other man convicted in the same 2005 triple murder. Both men were African American. Ramey, 41, was pronounced dead at 6:34 p.m. local time, 14 minutes after a lethal dose of pentobarbital began flowing. The US Supreme Court rejected his final appeal hours earlier, and Republican Governor Greg Abbott refused to issue a 30-day reprieve.

Ramey was condemned by a jury from which prosecutors had removed every prospective black juror, after a trial in which he was represented by a part-time lawyer who worked days as a dentist and had never tried a capital case. Jurors heard almost nothing about his impoverished and abusive childhood. They deliberated about 15 minutes before sentencing him to death.

In his final statement, Ramey praised God and thanked his family and fellow death row prisoners. “To the brothers on Texas death row that grew up with me, that poured into me and showed what it means to be a man, because I came in young, and didn’t understand what manhood was ... to you brothers ... I greatly appreciate you,” he said. As the drug took effect, he sputtered and began snoring. After 10 loud snores and two that were nearly inaudible, all movement ceased, according to the Associated Press.

Norman, 40, was executed September 16. He testified against Ramey at his 2007 trial, where the prosecutor praised his honesty and cooperation. At Norman’s own sentencing, the same prosecutor presented a contradictory account of the crime to make him appear more culpable. The state relied on Norman’s word to convict Ramey, then discarded it to kill Norman.

On August 24, 2005, Ramey, then 20, and Norman, then 19, entered the home of their neighbor Celso Lopez, 38, in Edna, a small town about 100 miles southwest of Houston, believing there was cocaine inside. They found no drugs. Lopez and his roommates, Tiffani Peacock, 18, and Sam Roberts, 24, were fatally shot. According to court records, Norman shot Lopez, which he claimed was an accident, and shot Peacock in the head. Both men shot Roberts as he tried to flee, and prosecutors alleged Ramey fired additional shots into all three victims.

Peacock’s sister, Tabatha Hastings, told *USA Today* she believes in “accountability and justice” but does not view an execution as “something to celebrate.”

Acting on an anonymous tip, police interrogated Ramey while he was being held on unrelated charges. He did not confess, but was arrested for capital murder on December 12, 2005. Norman, who had fled to Mexico, was arrested months later trying to reenter the US.

The trial was moved to neighboring Victoria County. During jury selection, prosecutors struck at least nine black prospective jurors, one of whom was questioned about whether various famous black people were guilty of the crimes they had been charged with. Eleven jurors were white and one was Hispanic.

No fingerprints, DNA, blood or hair connected Ramey to the crime scene or the weapons. The case rested on Norman, a former girlfriend who said she saw Ramey throw two guns into the water at a dam, and jailhouse informants whose plea deals were not disclosed to the defense.

Ramey’s attorney conducted virtually no investigation and called no witnesses during the guilt phase. The jury convicted Ramey in January 2007 after less than two hours. At the penalty phase, the attorney called two witnesses, while prosecutors presented an expert on “future dangerousness” whose testimony courts have since found scientifically unreliable.

The same attorney handled Ramey’s direct appeal and was later suspended from practicing law for neglecting another client’s case. The Texas Court of Criminal

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Appeals (TCCA) affirmed the conviction in 2009, accepting the prosecution's "race-neutral" explanations for its strikes, and denied state habeas relief in 2012. A federal district court denied his habeas petition in 2018, and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected his claims of racial discrimination and ineffective counsel in 2021. The US Supreme Court twice declined to take up his case.

In the final weeks of Ramey's life, his lawyers learned that the Jackson County district attorney's office had withheld potentially crucial documents. The Texas attorney general ordered their release, but the defense never received them. On Monday, the Board of Pardons and Paroles voted against clemency, and the TCCA rejected his final appeal without reviewing its merits.

Ramey grew up in Victoria County in a chaotic, impoverished and violent household and suffered extensive physical and emotional abuse as a child. He had an IQ of 81, around the threshold of intellectual disability, and suffered from cognitive impairments. He had no prior prison record. Prosecutors dismissed his final appeal raising this evidence as "meritless." He spent nearly 20 years—almost half his life—on death row, where, as he said in his last words, he came of age.

Ramey was the sixth person executed in Texas this year and, according to the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, the fifth consecutive black man put to death in the state. Three more executions are scheduled: Jamaal Howard on October 7, John Rubio on November 12 and Reinaldo Dennes on November 19. If carried out, Texas would reach nine executions in 2026, the most since 2019.

Texas has carried out 602 executions since resuming capital punishment in 1982, far more than any other state and more than a third of the national total since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. The state continues to use pentobarbital that critics say is expired or unreliably compounded. When Norman and Rubio sued to block its use, the TCCA, at the urging of Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, stopped a Travis County judge from halting executions.

Ramey was the 28th person executed in the US this year, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Florida has carried out 15, followed by Texas with six, Oklahoma with three, Alabama with two and Arizona and Tennessee with one each. Last year, 47 people were executed, the most since 2009. At least 10 more executions are scheduled for 2026:

September 29: Curtis Beasley, Florida

September 30: Christa Pike, Tennessee

October 7: Jamaal Howard, Texas

October 13: William Thompson, Florida

November 5: Jeffrey Weisheit, Indiana, and Michael Taylor, Alabama

November 12: John Rubio, Texas, and James Pavatt, Oklahoma

November 19: Reinaldo Dennes, Texas

December 3: Gary Wayne Sutton, Tennessee

If her execution goes forward, Christa Pike would be the first woman executed in the state in more than 200 years and the 19th woman executed in the US since 1976.

On January 12, 1995, Pike, then 18, and her boyfriend Tadaryl Shipp, 17, lured Colleen Slemmer, 19, a fellow Knoxville Job Corps student, to an abandoned steam plant near the University of Tennessee, where they beat and slashed her to death. Shipp received a life sentence and is now eligible for parole. Pike was sentenced to death in 1996 and spent nearly 30 years in solitary confinement.

Pike's attorneys have filed a 226-page clemency petition with Republican Governor Bill Lee documenting that Pike's mother's heavy drinking during pregnancy caused frontal lobe damage, and that Pike was sexually abused beginning at age 2 and raped at 11 and 17. Of the eight people sentenced to death in Tennessee's modern era for crimes committed at 18, the other seven—all men—have had their sentences overturned. "The governor now has an opportunity to protect a victim," attorney Kelly Gleason said.

The killing of Ramey a week after his codefendant demonstrates that the machinery of state killing grinds forward regardless of the violations of constitutional rights. Racially exclusionary juries, incompetent counsel, withheld evidence and junk science are not aberrations, but the normal functioning of a system that sends the poor and working class to death row. As executions accelerate nationally, capital punishment serves the ruling class as an instrument of intimidation under conditions of deepening social crisis.

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