

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/use-of-restraint-chair-linked-to-20-recent-jail-deaths/>

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02.17.20

Restraint chair inside the Wayne County Jail in Missouri. (*Photo by Steve Walsh*)

The Marshall Project [found](#) that the use of restraint chairs in county jails around the United States has been linked to 20 deaths in the past six years. That's in addition to a 2014 [report](#) that uncovered more than three dozen restraint chair deaths in county jails since they started using the chairs in the late 1990s.

The restraint chair uses straps and belts to secure a person's arms, legs, and torso in an upright sitting position in the chair. It's supposed to be used to restrain a violent, out-of-control person, but some jail staff use it as a first response to nonphysical resistance. For example, the Justice Department [investigated](#) a Kentucky jail where a man was put in the chair because he complained about being denied a phone call to his family after a family member died.

Experts on jail operations [told](#) The Marshall Project that the chair can keep people who are extremely intoxicated or in a mental health crisis from harming themselves or others. But using the chair for extended periods has led to deaths by overdose and blood clots resulting from extended periods in the same position. In 1997, 29-year-old Michael Valent died from a blood clot in his lungs after being strapped in a restraint chair in a Utah jail for 16 hours, prompting Utah lawmakers to ban the chair, The Marshall Project [reports](#).

Using a restraint chair can also lead to deaths from other causes by causing jail staff to overlook medical problems, Homer Venters, former chief medical officer for New York City's Correctional Health Services, [told](#) The Marshall Project. People who are seen as a safety threat may actually be having a medical crisis, he said, noting that low blood sugar, alcohol withdrawal, and psychotic episodes can make people look dangerous when they're not.

Reporters found at least nine lawsuits since 2013 that describe people being beaten, tasered, or pepper-sprayed while strapped in a jail restraint chair. The Justice Department [reported](#) that five correctional officers at a jail in Catlettsburg, Kentucky, were indicted in 2018 for first degree manslaughter of an incarcerated man found dead in a restraint chair from blunt force trauma to his side which fractured three ribs and caused internal bleeding, resulting in death. Federal investigators also [found](#) that jail staff punished incarcerated people, some of whom had attempted suicide by placing them in a chair with their genitals exposed to passers-by.

Staff at the Wayne County Jail in Missouri often use and abuse the restraint chair, The Marshall Project [reports](#). When Albert Okal became agitated at the jail, staff handcuffed his wrists and ankles to a restraint chair. He described in a recent lawsuit how they force-fed him, covered his head with a blanket, called him the n-word, and refused to let him use the bathroom, leaving him to urinate and defecate on himself, for five days.

In 2014, a man named Stacie Black says he was held in the chair for 28 days following a suicide attempt at the Wayne County Jail. His wife, Amy Black, was strapped into the chair at least a dozen times while in the same jail for probation violations and failures to pay child support. She told The Marshall Project that jail staff would let people have seizures and puke all over themselves while strapped down in the chair. In other jails, reporters [found](#), people have died in the restraint chair from aspirating on their own vomit.

Florida [banned](#) the use of restraint chairs on juveniles more than a decade ago. The Marshall Project reports that the nation's 3,000 county jails usually run with little state or federal oversight, so while some states have banned the chair in certain state facilities, county jails and immigration detention facilities continue to use them.

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