

Executions this week in Texas and Oklahoma as Missouri presses forward with plan to execute innocent man

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Two men were put to death in the US this week—one each in Texas and Oklahoma. Both executions expose the brutal and arbitrary character of this punishment across the states that still practice the death penalty, as well as the abusive childhoods and horrific life experiences of many of those who find themselves on death row. Meanwhile in Missouri, authorities plan an execution in a case where DNA and lack of other evidence proves the condemned man is innocent of the murder for which he was convicted.

Ramiro Gonzales was executed Wednesday in Texas. He was sentenced to death in 2006 for the kidnapping, rape and murder of 18-year-old Bridget Townsend in 2001. Gonzales, now 41, was also 18 at the time of the crime. The murder went unsolved for more than a year, until Gonzalez confessed to the killing after he was sentenced to life in prison for the abduction and rape of another woman.

The Texas Board of Parole and Pardons voted 7-0 on June 24 to deny Gonzales' clemency petition and Governor Greg Abbott allowed the execution to proceed. The Republican governor has overseen the execution of 73 people since he took office in 2015 and granted clemency only once.

The US Supreme did not take up Gonzales' final appeal for clemency or a stay until after his execution, allowing it to proceed. Later Wednesday they declined to take up the case.

Gonzales was put to death at the state penitentiary in Huntsville. In his final statement, reported by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the condemned man repeatedly apologized to Townsend's family. "I can't put into words the pain I have caused y'all, the hurt, what I took away that I cannot give back. I hope this apology is enough. I lived the rest of this life for you guys to the best of my ability for restitution, restoration taking responsibility."

He was pronounced dead at 6:50 p.m. following the injection of a single lethal dose of the barbiturate pentobarbital.

Gonzales was sentenced to death according to a contentious aspect of the Texas capital punishment system,

which requires capital juries to consider a defendant's "future dangerousness" to society. The jury must determine, beyond a reasonable doubt, that a defendant is likely to be violent in the future and presents "a continuing threat to society." Texas is the only state with this statute. Attorneys for Gonzales argued before the Board of Parole and Pardons that their client not only did not pose a danger, but "in fact actively contributes to prison society in exceptional ways."

At trial, the jury agreed with expert witness Dr. Edward Gripon, a psychiatrist, who testified that Gonzales could likely commit a similar crime in the future if he remained alive because he suffered from an incurable and violence-inducing mental disorder. Two decades later, Gripon wrote in a report that there was no solid research to back up the theory that there is a high likelihood that those who commit sexual assaults will violently reoffend.

Gripon said he no longer stood by this theory, which has been proven unfounded, and that after meeting with Gonzales in 2021 he no longer believed he posed a threat of violently offending again. He said he found Gonzales to be "a significantly different person both mentally and emotionally," which he said represented "a very positive change."

While on death row, Gonzales acted as a peer mentor and coordinator in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Faith Based Program, where participants live in special housing and take religion classes. He earned the equivalent of a bachelor's degree from a theological seminary.

Gonzales' clemency petition to the Texas board highlighted his religious involvement in prison as well as information about his childhood abuse and mental health problems. The Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) writes that he "was given up for adoption, sexually abused as a child, and began using drugs at age 15 to cope with the death of his aunt. By the time Mr. Gonzales dropped out of school at age 16, he was still in eighth grade."

"Ramiro knew he took something from this world he could

never give back,” his attorneys wrote in a statement shortly after the execution. “He lived with that shame every day, and it shaped the person he worked so hard to become. If this country’s legal system was intended to encourage rehabilitation, he would be an exemplar.”

But the criminal justice system in America, especially in relation to the death penalty, does not encourage rehabilitation. Nor does it consider the backgrounds of poverty and abuse of individuals who find themselves on the wrong side of the law. Rather, as shown in Gonzales’ case, authorities promote the anti-scientific view that some members of society are “born evil,” must face retribution, and in some cases receive the ultimate penalty.

Texas has executed 588 of the 1,575 prisoners put to death since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, far more than in any other state.

Richard Rojem was executed by the state of Oklahoma on Thursday. Rojem, 66, had been in prison since 1985, making him the longest serving inmate on Oklahoma’s death row. He was convicted of kidnapping, raping and killing his seven-year-old former stepdaughter, Layla Cummings. The young girl’s mutilated body was found in a field in rural Washita County.

Rojem was injected with a three-drug lethal cocktail at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. When asked for his last words, he said only, “I don’t. I’ve said my goodbyes.” According to Associated Press, he was declared unconscious about 5 minutes after the first drug, the sedative midazolam, began flowing. He stopped breathing at about 10:10 a.m.

Rojem was convicted previously of raping two teenage girls in Michigan. Prosecutors said he was angry at his young victim because she told her mother that he had sexually abused her, leading to his divorce and return to prison for violating his parole.

At Rojem’s clemency hearing, his attorneys argued that DNA evidence taken from the girl’s fingernails did not link him to the crime. But prosecutors said a fingerprint on a cup outside the girl’s home and a condom wrapper found at the crime scene linked Rojem to the murder.

Testifying via video from prison, Rojem said he wasn’t responsible for the victim’s death. “I wasn’t a good human being for the first part of my life, and I don’t deny that,” Rojem said. “But I went to prison. I learned my lesson and I left all that behind.” The Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted 5-0 not to recommend to Governor John Stitt that his life be spared.

A Washita County jury convicted Rojem in 1985 after only 45 minutes of deliberations, but his death sentence was twice overturned on appeal due to trial errors. A jury in Custer County handed him his third and final death sentence

in 2007. He ran out of appeals in 2017.

Court records on Rojem’s personal history state that he was from a family with “generational dysfunction,” with alcoholic parents and caretakers. He was born prematurely with an orthopedic deformity and spent the first three years of his life in a full body cast.

His biological father was killed in a bar fight when Rojem was three years old. *USA Today* reports that, according to the court filings, he was then raised by his 17-year-old mother, living in a “chaotic and overcrowded household” of 13 people in a 1,500-square-foot house.

The documents say he witnessed domestic abuse between his mother and stepfather and was sexually abused by an older stepbrother. The records show he was genetically predisposed to developing psychological disorders, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Oklahoma has executed 125 people since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, second only to Texas. According to DPIC, the state has executed more inmates per capita than any other state during this time. It has carried out 13 executions since October 2021, following a nearly six-year hiatus after a series of ghastly executions in 2014 and 2015.

Missouri has executed 99 people since 1976, third behind Texas and Oklahoma. One of the 13 people on the state’s death row is Marcellus Williams. This month, the Missouri Supreme Court set a September 24, 2024 execution date for Williams, despite a motion filed by the St. Louis County prosecuting attorney to vacate his conviction because newly presented DNA evidence proved he did not commit the murder.

Prosecuting Attorney Wesley Bell stated that the DNA evidence, “when paired with the relative paucity of other, credible evidence supporting guilt, as well as additional considerations of ineffective assistance of counsel and racial discrimination in jury selection, casts inexorable doubt on Mr. Williams’ conviction and sentence.”

Williams received a last-minute reprieve just hours before his scheduled execution on August 22, 2017. Then-Governor Eric Greitens stayed the execution and convened a board of inquiry to investigate his case. But on June 29, 2023, current governor Mike Parson dissolved this board and the attorney general sought a new execution date. Williams sued the governor, but the Missouri Supreme Court dismissed the lawsuit and scheduled a new date to put him to death.



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