

Two deaths in a week exposes systemic brutality of Knox County, Tennessee's sheriff's department

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30 January 2025

David Batts, a 46-year-old employee of Knoxville Area Transit (KAT), died this month after an encounter with Knox County Sheriff's Office (KCSO) jail staff. His death is a tragic example of police brutality and the particular dangers posed by county sheriff's departments in the United States.

On January 7, 2025, Batts was involved in an incident at a KAT parking lot where he drove a bus into another vehicle. He appeared dazed and unable to answer questions in body camera footage from the Knoxville Police Department (KPD).

Although he was not charged with the wreck, police reported finding a white powder on him and he was taken to the University of Tennessee Medical Center (UTMC) for a mental evaluation. Less than two hours later, KPD was called back to UTMC after two nurses reported that Batts had groped them. He was then taken into custody.

KPD footage shows Batts disoriented but uninjured at this point. He was transported to the Roger D. Wilson Detention Facility, the main intake and processing center for Knox County operated by the Knox County Sheriff's Office (KCSO), arriving just before 2 p.m., where he continued to exhibit confusion and an inability to follow simple orders.

Within minutes, Batts was pepper-sprayed, tased four times, and punched by KCSO officers as they tried to get him to change into a jail uniform. Videos of the incident show Batts struggling to comply with orders, having difficulty keeping his hands above his head or behind his back.

Despite his obvious disorientation, the officers immediately resorted to force. The next day, on January 8, Batts was taken back to the hospital with a badly

bruised face and died later that evening at 11:25 p.m.

The family of David Batts is represented by civil rights attorney Ben Crump, whose involvement highlights the widespread concern about Batts' treatment and which, the family hopes, will bring "an extra layer of scrutiny and publicity" to the circumstances of his death, according to local media.

The KCSO has already hindered the family's attempts to obtain information on the circumstances of Batts' death. When they asked to view the video footage of the incident, they were informed that it was a public record and that they would need to request it from the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Tom Spangler defended his staff at a press conference. Spangler did not show the videos and dismissed questions about their content. Instead, he focused on expressing outrage over claims that jailers had beaten Batts to death. "Am I upset? You're damn right I am," Spangler stated, decrying what he described as unfounded accusations circulating about the incident.

Knox County District Attorney Charme Allen reviewed the body camera footage and the medical examiner's preliminary findings. She concluded that the officers' actions were justified, stating they responded "with appropriate force under the circumstances." Allen determined that the primary cause of death was meningitis, an often fatal infection, and that Batts had fentanyl in his system.

The DA attributed Batts' "assaultive or resistive" behavior to meningitis, clearly providing cover for the KCSO by willfully overlooking how the illness may have contributed to Batts' behavior.

Batts' death in KCSO's custody occurred only a

week after a Knox County SWAT raid in which deputies killed 17-year-old Daevon Montez Saint-Germain. KCSO has come under sharp criticism after it was revealed that the search warrant leading to the raid was based on Instagram posts and rap lyrics.

Critics have questioned the strength of the warrant, highlighting the lack of physical surveillance or substantial corroboration, as well as the controversial use of rap lyrics to infer criminal intent. The raid yielded marijuana, ecstasy, firearms, and cellphones, but key items listed in the warrant, such as THC cartridges, narcotics ledgers, and surveillance equipment, were not found.

The shooting itself has raised transparency concerns, as SWAT team members were not equipped with body cameras, leaving the deputies' version of events unverified. The Knox County Sheriff's Office claims Saint-Germain brandished a gun, prompting deputies to open fire, but no independent video evidence exists to confirm this account.

Batts' and Saint-Germain's deaths occur within the context of a record number of police killings in 2024. The recent murder of Robert Brooks, a handcuffed inmate at the Marcy Correctional Facility in New York, by correction officers, illustrates the now familiar pattern of excessive force used against individuals in police custody.

Bodycam footage showed the horrific beating which resulted in Brook's death from asphyxiation. The officers and a prison nurse involved were fired, but no charges have been brought.

The Correctional Association of New York has documented reports of widespread brutality inside the Marcy Correctional Facility. In another incident at the facility, an inmate reported being sodomized with a metal object by an officer during a riot.

Data further underscores the disproportionate violence perpetrated by county sheriff's departments compared to urban police departments. A CBS News investigation revealed that county sheriffs are three times more lethal than city police, with a rate of 27.3 killings per 100,000 arrests in 2022, compared to 9.7 for city police.

This disparity is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where oversight is often minimal. The Department of Justice (DOJ) has rarely intervened in cases involving sheriff's departments, filing only seven

"pattern or practice" cases against such agencies since 1994.

Even when misconduct is evident, accountability remains elusive, with officers charged in less than 1 percent of police killings, according to Mapping Police Violence.

The circumstances surrounding David Batts' death, along with other examples of law enforcement's brutality and misconduct, indicate a systemic problem that goes beyond individual bad actors. The lack of accountability for law enforcement officers fosters a culture of impunity, where excessive force becomes routine.

It is crucial to recognize that police violence is a class issue. Victims of police violence generally live in areas with higher rates of poverty, lower median household income, and higher rates of public assistance use.

This underscores that police violence is a product of the capitalist system directed against the working class. The end of police violence will not be the result of reform, but the abolition of the police and the overturning of the capitalist system.



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