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Hundreds of deaths in state prisons go unexplained

A City & State investigation found a lack of reporting on people who have died while in custody, as well as for those who were compassionately released, going back decades.



The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision on March 2, 2021 in Albany, N.Y. LORI VAN BUREN/ALBANY TIMES UNION VIA GETTY IMAGES

By KELLY GRACE PRICE | JANUARY 10, 2025

A man while [serving 25 years in state prison](#) on a conviction of sexual conduct with a child was the target of a botched attack. While incarcerated, someone had tried to [pay an undercover officer he believed to be a correction officer to maim him](#). But then he turned up dead on June 7, 2010, shortly after being “medically released.”

The death of George Liniakos at age 67 was not investigated or reported to the press, the public or outside agencies. His official cause of death is still marked as “not reported” by the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, according to documents obtained by City & State under public information laws.

The state [Commission of Correction](#) and state Attorney General’s office are required to investigate all deaths of people held in custody. But for those who are medically or compassionately released when their death is imminent, neither reporting of their deaths nor external investigation is mandated by state laws or agency rules.

A City & State investigation of state prison records showed there were 269 causes of death that were not reported, unexplained or redacted going back to 2000. Advocates have claimed for years that state prison and jail officials have used this lack of reporting to [hide the deaths of people](#) in custody and not hold jails and prisons accountable.

“(The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) has been killing people and hiding bodies for decades using medical releases. The only reason we know about Robert Brooks is the body cameras, but how many others have there been?” asked Kevin McCall, a social justice activist who has called for reforms in response to the death of Brooks, who, [video footage shows](#), died after being punched multiple times in the groin and choked while being restrained by fourteen state prison guards at the Marcy Correctional Facility in Oneida County on Dec 9.

“Body cams have only been in (the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) for a couple years,” added McCall. “The devil is in the details. This is a crime in itself not just regarding Brooks but there are others hidden by the lack of thorough reporting and oversight investigations.”

Unexplained and unreported deaths

According to data obtained last month by City & State after a Freedom of Information Law request submitted two years ago, there were [148 people who died](#) after being medically released between Jan. 1, 2000 and Jan. 31, 2023 from state prisons. The data detailing names of people medically paroled did not always include explanations for the causes of deaths or their locations. Only 78 of the 148 names on the list had a cause of death denoted; 34 causes of deaths were indicated as “not reported;” 24 people had their cause of death redacted by the department and nine deaths were marked as “unknown/under investigation.”

Additionally, the causes of death for other people who were incarcerated and “compassionately” released because they were soon expected to die, were demarcated as “unknown/under investigation,” even when their deaths occurred decades ago. This is the case of the 2003 death of 48-year-old Loretta Joseph. Joseph’s records after being compassionately released no longer exist in the department “inmate lookup” [database](#) that contains records of all persons in custody dating back to the 1970s. Likewise the cause of death for Calvin Robinson who died in 2006 at the age of 26 and who was compassionately released is marked “unknown/under investigation.”

In 36 other examples, the cause of death for people medically paroled was “not reported” as was the case with 20-year-old Christopher Ripley who died on May 28, 2013. His family alleges that he was denied medical treatment while incarcerated while suffering from cancer before his release. “He was begging for medical attention and all they would do is give him antacid while they were starving him,” Jennifer Martinez, Christopher’s mother, told City & State in a telephone interview. “They agreed to a medical release so he didn’t have to die behind bars but that meant no scrutiny of the care he had been given, no outside investigation.”

spokesperson said Ripley did not have any “grievance appeals to Central Office on file regarding any matter, including medical.” He also has no pending cases or complaints filed with the Office of Special Investigations.

Omitting details

In an additional 21 other cases, the department redacted the causes of deaths completely.

A department spokesperson told City & State that causes of deaths that were marked unknown or under investigation were often a matter of jurisdiction, where the department was not required to follow up.

“Any death of an escapee or an absconder is excluded since they were not under [the department’s] custody at the time of death. This includes those who are released or paroled; therefore, the department does not have the jurisdiction to enforce or coerce the examiner to provide information of a releasee’s death,” the spokesperson said in email to City & State. “If data is not reported to (the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision) by the Medical Examiner’s Office, (i.e., autopsy results, unreported deaths, etc.) the department would not have reports or data of said death. This is why reports may be marked as “Unknown/Under Investigation.”

Even so, it’s not just deaths of people medically released from custody or considered absconders that are still marked as “unknown” in the department’s records. There were [199 people](#) who died while still in custody from 2000-2023 whose cause of death was also marked “unknown,” according to data obtained under public information laws and provided to City & State.

One of those persons, Charles Braun, was a Livingston City resident who died in Mohawk Prison in July 2018 from complications of blunt force head injuries. According to a [state Commission of Correction report](#), a medical review board “opined” Braun died by suicide. The board is charged with [investigating](#) the medical causes and circumstances surrounding the death of any incarcerated individual of a state correctional facility. There was no other outside investigation into the events leading up to Braun’s death, as policy set in 2021 now requires. The state Attorney General that year [was empowered](#) to investigate the potential criminal aspects of deaths of individuals who died while in custody under the supervision of correction staff.

Seeking answers

Questions remain about the circumstances of people who died in the years leading up to 2021, according to advocates. Braun's entire state Commission of Correction Medical Board [report](#) describing his death is entirely redacted, save for one short paragraph that indicates that the board neither reviewed the video from Braun's unit or interviewed the officers on the scene to verify what happened. The commission alone accepted the findings relayed to them by department investigators.

The use of medical parole does unite some families at the end of their loved ones' lives. Caleb Cobb was 21 when he died on April 29, 2010. He had been released from Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville where he had been incarcerated on a charge of attempted burglary in the second degree for illegally entering a restaurant after hours and admitting to stealing a pat of butter.

At the time of his release, he was let go with a cancer diagnosis and was among the people let go from department custody just before dying whose cause of death was redacted from public records. "He had childhood cancer and had his leg amputated below the knee. We didn't know the cancer returned when they threw him in the prison system," Caleb's father, Richard, who now lives in Texas, told City & State while fighting off tears during a telephone interview.

"We were given very little information. We got a call asking us to support Caleb's medical parole and he was (released) just before Christmas in 2009," the father said. "He had a good few months with his sister and the family before he died. Caleb to the end was as he always had been about his circumstances: adaptable and optimistic."

State Sen. Julia Salazar, who chairs the Crime and Correction Committee demanded reform when asked about the department's "lack of transparency," and insisted that it "cannot stand."

"In this vein, listing the condition of an incarcerated person as 'undetermined' is unacceptable," told City & State in an emailed statement. "Those incarcerated in New York state prisons are someone's family member, friend, fellow community member – and those on the outside endure extreme stress and duress when the condition of an incarcerated loved one is withheld. I will continue to advocate for accountability from (the department), working with our partners who advocate for the rights of people behind bars who have consistently sought these critical reform needs."

Relatives and loved-ones of people who died in custody or just after medical release say they remain hopeful that the loopholes allowing people to die without scrutiny into the circumstances of their deaths can be closed.

"I lost my best friend to a broken system," Caitlin Ripley, Christopher Ripley's sister, told City & State. "He suffered at the hands of (the department) and this cycle of mistreatment and abuse needs to stop." [C](#)

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