NEWS

"We never know the love of a parent till we become parents ourselves."
HENRY WARD BEECHER MINISTER

Report says police who killed New Haven man were 'justified'

BY REETI MALHOTRA
STAFF REPORTER

Tenants Connecticut's inspector general cleared the police officers who shot and killed Jebrell Conley in September 2024, writing that the officers' use of deadly force was "legally justified" in a report published Tuesday.

On Sept. 19, 2024, State Police Sergeant Colin Richter, New Haven Police Sergeant Francisco Sanchez and Officer Michael Valente fired multiple rounds at Conley after he shot a firearm from inside his vehicle at West Haven's Splash Car Wash, the 37-page report says. At the car wash, the officers were attempting to arrest Conley, who was indicted for alleged federal robbery and firearm charges two days prior and had an outstanding warrant for his arrest.

"I conclude that the use of deadly physical force by Sergeant Sanchez, Sergeant Richter and Officer Valente was objectively reasonable in response to the use of deadly physical force used by Jebrell Conley in this incident," Inspector General Eliot Prescott wrote in the report. "Accordingly, I find that their actions were legally justified."

Officers allege Conley posed deadly threat

In a sworn written statement provided on Oct. 11, 2024, Valente wrote that members of various task forces were conducting "crime suppression" throughout New Haven on the day Conley was killed. Crime suppression, Valente wrote, includes serving active arrest warrants and enforcing narcotics and firearm violations.

According to the inspector general's report, officers identified Conley in a Hyundai Tucson at around 5 p.m. that day and decided to attempt to take him into custody at the West Haven car wash.

Law enforcement had identified Conley, then 36, as a member of the Grape Street Crips gang, a New Haven imitation of the Los Angeles Crips group. In 2015, Conley was arrested for possessing cocaine, a felony charge. The next year, he was convicted of possessing the drug with intent to distribute and sentenced to five years in prison, according to a 2016 press release from the Connecticut U.S. Attorney's office.

In late 2024, Connecticut's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms unit, or ATF, notified task force officers that Conley "supposedly always" carried a gun outside his home, according to the inspector general's report. The ATF attributed Conley's behavior to a law enforcement investigation into his alleged involvement in a Hamden shooting and robbery in early July. The incident prompted Conley's Sept. 17 arrest warrant, per the report.

According to a sworn written statement provided by Richter on Oct. 17, at least six unmarked police vehicles containing 10 to 13 police officers from the crime suppression unit were following Conley from New Haven to Splash Car Wash on Sept. 19.

After spotting Conley exiting his vehicle, officers decided it was "the optimal time to serve the warrant and apprehend him," Richter wrote.

Sanchez was one of the officers who tried to approach and arrest Conley at the car wash, according to an Oct. 11 sworn written statement. Conley got back in the driver's seat and tried to flee the scene by reversing his car, but struck a police vehicle behind him.

According to Richter, officers began to shout commands, including "let me see your hands" and "don't you fucking move," when he saw Conley grab a "cross-body bag" from the center console. Richter believed that the bag, which was pointed at him, contained a weapon.

Valente wrote that he deployed a window breaker to shatter the passenger's side front window, which would allow him to tase Conley and prevent him from firing his gun. Valente then "heard a gunshot coming from the Hyundai."

Richter, Sanchez and Valente all began to fire rounds at Conley upon hearing the gunshot, according to their respective statements.

"When I began to shoot, I lost my sense of hearing," Valente wrote. "I don't remember exactly how many times I shot, but I estimate it was between 6-10 rounds. I could not hear if any other Police personnel fired their weapons, or whether Conley continued to fire his weapon."

Valente wrote that he stopped shooting when he saw "Conley's arms were down by his body and his body was slumped in the vehicle."

Conley then fell from his vehicle and was lying on the pavement outside of his car covered in blood, Richter's body-worn camera footage shows. Richter then handcuffed Conley.

Valente, in his statement, wrote that officers began chest compressions and administered oxygen to Conley, who was "unresponsive and not breathing" on the ground. Body-worn camera footage taken by Valente, Sanchez and other officers at the scene cuts off when officers begin to provide Conley with medical aid due to its graphic nature, the report says.

The New Haven Fire Department and an American Medical Response ambulance responded to the scene and transported Conley to the Yale New Haven Hospital. There, he was pronounced dead on arrival, the inspector general's report says.

Autopsy report and evidence gathered from the scene

According to the report, detectives retrieved a bag from the front passenger area of the vehicle after the shooting. They found that the bag had a hole consistent with a bullet's trajectory. Frame-by-frame analysis of body-worn camera footage suggested Conley had fired a round out of the front driver's side window as he removed his handgun from the bag, the report says.

When Conley fell out of the car, his handgun fell out as well. Sanchez picked up the handgun, observing a "partially ejected fired cartridge casing stuck in the ejection port of the firearm," per the report. An improperly ejected semi-automatic weapon is jammed, and cannot be fired, until the shell casing is cleared, the report added.

The state police Firearms Tracking Unit determined the weapon to be a Glock 27.40 caliber pistol with a high-capacity magazine containing 22 rounds. According to the report, the weapon was purchased in 2011 in Waterbury. Its owner reported the gun as stolen in 2012, the report said.

Further forensic examination of the officers' firearms concluded that they fired a total of 32 rounds at Conley. Richter fired 13 rounds, Valente fired 8 rounds and Sanchez fired 11 rounds.

An autopsy conducted by the state's Chief Medical Examiner's office on Sept. 20, 2024, concluded that Conley suffered a total of 12 gunshot wounds to his head, neck, torso, arms and buttocks. His cause of death was determined to be gunshot wounds to his torso and upper extremities, fired by Valente and Richter.



ADRIAN KULEZA
Three officers shot and killed Jebrell Conley at a car wash on Sept. 19, 2024, after Conley shot a firearm while the officers were attempting to carry out a felony arrest warrant.

Legal conclusions and community reactions

A Connecticut statute justifies the use of deadly physical force when an officer believes it necessary to defend themselves or a third party from the use of deadly physical force, or when an officer determines that there are no available reasonable alternatives to their use of deadly physical force.

"There is no dispute in this case that, by discharging their firearms at Jebrell Conley, Sergeant Richter, Sergeant Sanchez and Officer Valente each used deadly physical force against him," Prescott, the inspector general, wrote in his report. "I conclude that each of the three officers honestly and subjectively believed that during the incident Jebrell Conley had used and would continue to use deadly physical force against themselves and/or their fellow officers."

Prescott also wrote that none of the officers knew that Conley's firearm was jammed and no longer capable of firing additional rounds.

While Prescott concluded that the necessity for deadly force "arose from the violent conduct of Conley," he wrote that he had "reached no conclusion about the ultimate wisdom of attempting to serve the warrant when Conley was located at the car wash."

"It's disturbing seeing photos because it looked more like an execution than just protecting someone's life," Barbara Fair, a local criminal justice activist, said in an interview with the News after the report was released. "He supposedly fired a shot. I can see them firing back to protect themselves, but all of the bullets that I saw, it was more like an execution."

Prescott recommended that the law enforcement agencies involved in the shooting review the three officers' decision-making in the case and consider policies for choosing how to serve felony warrants to suspects who are likely to be armed.

There are 14 pending use-of-force and in-custody death investigations in Connecticut.

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Why do liquor stores in New Haven close so early?

BY ELEANOR LAW
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

In the minutes before 10 p.m. on Friday or Saturday night, Yale students can often be spotted rushing to the door of Temple Wine & Liquor in downtown New Haven.

By law, Connecticut liquor stores must close their doors at 10 p.m. sharp, and store manager Anthony Simmons does not want to risk a fine by selling a bottle of liquor a minute past that.

"People try to rush in when they only have like a few seconds left," Simmons said. "But anything after 10 o'clock would be against the state."

The restrictions on liquor store hours have long been a part of Connecticut law and, historians say, are rooted in the state's Puritan past. These religious restrictions are known as "blue laws."

From 1854 to 1872, Connecticut completely banned the sale of alcohol, but enforcement was largely nonexistent. From 1919 to 1933, alcohol was prohibited again under the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In 1933, the Liquor Control Commission was created by the state to regulate the sale of alcohol after the repeal of prohibition under the 21st Amendment, and the Liquor Control Act was passed.

Weekday hours were gradually extended throughout the twentieth century. On May 20, 2012, liquor stores were granted permission to sell alcohol during limited hours on Sundays. The current weekday and weekend hours were set on July 1, 2015.

Among other states, Maine and Massachusetts have loosened their restrictions on alcohol sales over the years, but Connecticut remains one of the strictest in New England when it comes to alcohol. Liquor stores in Connecticut are forbidden from making sales past 10 p.m., and they must close by 6 p.m. on Sundays.

Laws vary across the region, according to 360 Training, an online educational service that offers food and alcohol worker certification courses. In Maine, liquor stores can remain open from 5 a.m until 1 a.m. all week. In Massachusetts, liquor stores can remain open until 11 p.m. all week, including on Sundays. In New York, they can remain open until midnight on Monday through Saturday, and until 9 p.m. on Sundays. Neighboring Rhode Island has the same regulations as Connecticut.

Connecticut's restrictions on alcohol sales may soon feel more outdated. On Oct. 1, Connecticut will officially lift another centuries-old blue law banning hunting on Sundays.

This marks another step in the gradual repeal of Connecticut's blue laws. The state's earliest blue laws strictly regulated behavior on the Sabbath, banning work, travel, and drinking on Sundays to fit with Puritan values. Most have since been repealed, but liquor restrictions still remain.

For Simmons, who manages Temple Wine & Liquor, the effects of the laws are not straightforward. Simmons said that extended hours could help his business on weekends, but could cost him money during the week when demand is lower.

"Maybe Fridays and Saturdays, weekends, we could potentially make more money," Simmons said. "Sometimes we might be losing money by staying open later."

Simmons believes that these laws protect small businesses. Unlike some other states, Connecticut doesn't permit the sale of wine or liquor in grocery stores, which ensures that liquor stores maintain business. Blue laws may be frustrating for customers late at night, but they keep corporate competition away.

"We still have the market," Simmons said. "So I think the law on that one does help us out a lot."

The persistence of these restrictions has its roots in New Haven's history. When English Puritans Theophilus Eaton and Reverend John Davenport — the namesake of Davenport College — founded the colony in 1638, they set some of the strictest moral codes in New England.

"The Puritans in New Haven were so incredibly religiously strict," Emma Norden, a librarian at the New Haven Museum, told the News. "They were a lot more strict than people in Connecticut Colony and people in Massachusetts Bay."

Among the museum's archives are copies of "The Temperance Journal" and other records of historical laws from the 1800s and earlier, which explain how seriously Connecticut's early leaders took religion and morality.

"There's still so much religion in New Haven," Norden said. "There's still so many churches that are active in a huge way."

Connecticut's conservative approach to liquor is not unique, Michael Morand, New Haven's official city historian, said. Many states across the United States still restrict alcohol sales.

"Liquor tends to be more of a thing that people tend to put restrictions on than other things," Morand said.

However, in a state that has legalized cannabis and is known for its progressive nature, these residual liquor laws stand out, Morand acknowledged.

"Liquor has been the place that the sort-of Puritan sensibility stayed the longest," he said.

Why do these rules persist? Morand thinks a mix of tradition and pragmatism have kept them around so long.

Courts have historically upheld a Sunday "day of rest" as a public good, even as it has disconnected it from its religious history. Additionally, liquor store owners themselves haven't always pushed for a change.

"Nobody wants the whole place to be 'on' twenty-four-seven," Morand said.

As Connecticut repeals its long-held Sunday hunting ban, the liquor restrictions remain a reminder of how the state's Puritan past shapes its present. For some store managers, like Simmons, blue laws simultaneously protect and limit business. For many customers, however, they may be a frustrating and outdated formality.

These restrictions — some of the last remnants of the state's historic blue laws — are a "weird one-off," Morand said.

One of Connecticut's nicknames is "The Land of Steady Habits."

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MARTIN PERALTA / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Connecticut's strict rules about alcohol sales are rooted in the state's Puritan past.