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Video Footage of Death of Black Man in South Carolina Jail Stirs Outrage

The death of Jamal Sutherland after officers tried to remove him from his cell using pepper spray and Tasers raised calls for changes in the treatment in custody of the mentally ill.

By Richard Fausset

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The death of a Black man after police used pepper spray and Tasers on him in a South Carolina jail has stirred outrage as well as widespread calls for changes to the treatment of people in custody suffering from mental illness.

Video footage released late on Thursday shows sheriff's deputies in Charleston County extracting the man, Jamal Sutherland, from his jail cell on Jan. 5, first using pepper spray on him, and then Tasers while he screams out in pain. He was declared dead soon after, and the graphic video spurred denunciations on Friday of the officers' response.

Elements of the videos — including a moment when Mr. Sutherland, who has an officer's knee on his back, says “I can't breathe” — echo other recent instances of violent encounters between law enforcement and African-Americans that have sparked sustained racial justice and police reform movements that continue to resonate throughout the United States.

“Jamal Sutherland was handled like an animal by correctional officers who had no regard for his altered mental state,” a coalition of South Carolina activist groups said in a statement on Friday. The statement said the video of his killing revealed the inhumane conditions of the detention center where he was being held, “which undoubtedly aggravated Jamal's state of mental distress.”



Jamal Sutherland's family, including his mother, Amy Sutherland, held a news conference outside the Al Cannon Detention Center in North Charleston, S.C.

The two Charleston County Sheriff's deputies who engaged with Mr. Sutherland, Sgt. Lindsay Fickett and Deputy Brian Houle, have been placed on administrative leave, and the local prosecutor, Scarlett A. Wilson, said this week that she was reviewing the results of an investigation conducted by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division.

Ms. Wilson, the Ninth Circuit solicitor, said she expected to decide whether criminal charges are warranted in the case before the end of June.

On Friday, civic leaders appealed for calm in and around Charleston, where angry protests, including rioting and looting, occurred in late May after a Minneapolis police officer killed an African-American man, George Floyd, while he was in custody.

"We recognize that emotions are high and concerns are justifiably warranted but it is important that we choose to address this, as a community at large, calmly and together," Teddie Pryor, the Charleston County Commission chairman, said in a statement.

Mr. Sutherland had been taken to a mental health facility, Palmetto Lowcountry Behavioral Health, but was arrested there on Jan. 4, the day before he died, after a fight broke out. Workers at the mental health center told responding officers that Mr. Sutherland had assaulted a staff member. He and another patient were arrested on the charge of third-degree assault and battery, according to the Charleston Post and Courier newspaper.

Mr. Sutherland was taken to a Charleston County jail facility, the Al Cannon Detention Center. Video of Mr. Sutherland on the day of his arrest shows him in obvious distress, screaming "Let go of me" at officers and speaking of conspiracies, including references to the Illuminati, groups — real and fictitious — dating back centuries and said to have special knowledge.

The next morning, Sergeant Fickett and Deputy Houle went to Mr. Sutherland's cell intending to take him to court for a bond hearing. The surveillance and body camera footage of their efforts was released by the Charleston County sheriff, Kristin Graziano, who said she had waited to release it until she received the blessing of Mr. Sutherland's family.

The video shows deputies repeatedly asking Mr. Sutherland, who is yelling in his cell, to come to the door and cooperate. At one point a deputy notes that medical personnel are standing by as the extraction process begins.

The deputies release pepper spray in Mr. Sutherland's cell twice, each time closing the door, and urging him to come out. Then they open the door and begin shouting at him to get down, turn on his stomach and begin sliding toward the door.

Although a camera angle does not give a clear view of the cell, Mr. Sutherland appears to be moving slowly on the ground toward the door, but not turned on his stomach. "That's as far as I'm turning," he says at one point.

A deputy tries to handcuff him, and at this point, the video shows Mr. Sutherland yelling and thrashing as the deputies struggle to subdue him. Hit with a Taser, his body begins to writhe on the ground as he is shocked by electric charges. A deputy's knee is on his back. "I can't breathe," Mr. Sutherland says.

Deputies eventually manage to cuff his hands behind his back and put him in a chair, at which point he appears to have lost consciousness.

Deputy Houle later says that Mr. Sutherland had been hit with the Taser six to eight times.

Ms. Wilson, the prosecutor, said in a statement that a pathologist, Dr. J.C. Upshaw Downs, reviewed the extrication process and found that it did not reveal any "unusual or excessive interactions or areas of direct concern."

Dr. Downs, Ms. Wilson said, ruled the manner of Mr. Sutherland's death as "undetermined," stating that he died "as a result of excited state with pharmacotherapeutic effect during subdual process."

Ms. Wilson did not further explain Dr. Downs's comments. Joe Crawford, a paralegal with the Charleston County coroner, said Thursday that Mr. Sutherland's autopsy report was not considered a public record and would not be disclosed.

"The evidence surrounding Mr. Sutherland's death has raised serious concerns and begged many questions," Ms. Wilson said. "I have retained experts who may be able to shed more light on Mr. Sutherland's death and the circumstances surrounding it, to include potential culpability of those in law enforcement."

State Senator Marlon E. Kimpson, a Democrat who represents Charleston County, said it appeared the deputies were not sufficiently trained in dealing with mentally ill detainees.

"It appeared to be to be a breach of protocol — and if not, we need to change the protocol," he said.

Gov. Henry McMaster, a Republican, called Mr. Sutherland's death "a tragedy" in a statement.

"The video of this incident reveals issues which need to be addressed in training, procedures and policies around law enforcement's encounters with those experiencing mental illness," he said.

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