

Study examines police tactic risks

Researchers find prone restraint to be dangerous

Tom Kisken
Ventura County Star
USA TODAY NETWORK

“I can’t breathe.”

In moments when police pin a confrontational, sometimes violent suspect to the ground and apply pressure with a knee, those simple words are often misunderstood, said Dr. Alon Steinberg, a cardiologist and medical researcher.

In a new study, Steinberg led a team that found 229 cases over 10 years across the nation in which people died after being apprehended in a tactic known as prone restraint, used on George Floyd five years ago in Minneapolis.

Like Floyd, who died after being pinned to the ground for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, the people being restrained often say they can’t breathe. In Steinberg’s study, more than 1 out of 5 victims uttered the words.

But the plea is sometimes taken by police as affirmation. They might think people who can’t breathe can’t talk. They’re wrong, Steinberg said. The breath it takes to utter the words is far less than what is needed to sustain life.

“That’s a cry for help,” he said. “If a subject said, ‘I can’t breathe.’ You have to take it seriously and do everything you can.”

Steinberg, on staff at Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura, California, has testified for years as an expert witness in lawsuits filed against law enforcement officers regarding prone restraint.

He said the tactic may be unavoidable in situations involving people who are attacking officers, but it can be tragic when used for too long or when too much pressure is applied with a knee or an arm.

“People can die in that position,” he said. “They need all their breathing capacity and circulation to survive.”

Prone restraint has long triggered



A study found people put in a prone position often try to communicate as they lose the ability to breathe. “I can’t breathe” has been said by several people put in the position by police. STEPHEN MATUREN/GETTY IMAGES FILE

controversy that exploded with Floyd’s death. Steinberg said his study was, in part, a reaction to earlier research that contended the tactic is safe and has been used to defend law enforcement.

The new study was published in May in the Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine. Steinberg wrote it along with UCLA student Dhilan Patel and Ventura internal medicine specialist Dr. Amanda Frugoli.

Using the Lexis Nexis online search system, they tracked down legal records from lawsuits showing about 23 deaths a year linked to prone restraint from 2010 to 2019. There are likely more cases, Steinberg said. An Associated Press investigation showed 740 prone restraint deaths over a decade.

The risks come because the people pressed to the ground may be unable to expand their rib cage and their diaphragms to breathe adequately. They can die from loss of ventilation and a decrease in circulation.

The struggle and agitation, along with substance abuse, can contribute to acids building up in the blood. Called

metabolic acidosis, the condition increases ventilation and circulation needs at a time when the prone position and pressure decreases the body’s abilities to respond. It can be a catastrophic combination, Steinberg said.

“Most people who are put in a prone position don’t die,” he said. “There’s enough people who do that makes it a problem.”

The study said many of the deaths can happen quickly, often when subjects are kept prone for 5 minutes or shorter. Use of a taser was common and can increase the risks, Steinberg said. Officers often applied their body weight to the prone person.

Nearly all of the restraint cases involved men or boys. In cases where race was reported, more than 1 of 3 involved Black people.

“Racial disparities in deaths involving (law enforcement officers) has long been noted in the USA and is deeply concerning,” authors wrote in the study.

Several law enforcement agencies in Ventura County have the same policy, which states it is “impractical” to re-

strict the practice of prone restraint when dealing with people who are fighting officers. But it also says officers are not authorized to do anything that might bring “unreasonable” impairment to breathing or respiratory capacity after a suspect is brought under control.

Ventura Police Cmdr. Ryan Weeks said the tactic is used in dealing with high-risk arrests because it protects officers.

“The higher the threat, the more precautions we take,” he said. “Prone handcuffing gives the officer the biggest advantage and the biggest margin of safety.”

Officers are trained to monitor the person being restrained for potential injuries. They try to avoid using pressure when the subject is prone, though the officer’s knee may touch the person’s shoulder, Weeks said.

“We believe prone handcuffing is 100% safe,” he said.

Dale Galipo is an attorney who specializes in cases involving alleged police misconduct. He said prone restraint was seen as potentially dangerous decades ago, but then was used more often and with less precautions after controversial research suggested it was safe.

“The pendulum has now swung back with current studies and articles saying this is a big problem and a big risk,” Galipo said. He urged law enforcement agencies to put people in a sitting position as soon as they’re handcuffed and not to kneel on their backs.

Steinberg said problems sometimes emerge in the heat of an encounter with an agitated or violent suspect.

“The cases I’ve been involved with are people who just don’t remember all of their training,” he said.

He said the point of study is to document that the tactic is potentially dangerous and has caused deaths. He called on police to use prone restraint as little as possible and in the shortest durations.

“We can probably minimize prone restraint and save lives,” he said.

DOJ probes trans student-athlete policies

Department looking into possible Title IX violation under 2013 California law

Paris Barraza
Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

PALM SPRINGS, CA – The Justice Department announced that it will investigate whether a California law is violating Title IX after a transgender high school athlete won track events to qualify for the state track and field championships.

In a May 28 news release, the Justice Department said it had sent legal notices to state officials, saying it is opening an investigation to determine whether Title IX is being violated by California’s School Success and Opportunity Act. The announcement came just a day after President Donald Trump warned he would cut federal funding to the state for allowing transgender athletes to compete in women’s sports.

The state law requires that students be allowed to participate in sex-segregated school programs such as sports teams and competitions consistent with their gender identity, regardless of their gender listed on their records. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in educational programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, according to the Education Department.

The letters were sent to California Attorney General Rob Bonta, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond and the California Interscholastic Federation, the Justice Department said. In a clarification issued May 28, the department said the Jurupa

Unified School District is a “target of this investigation” and was sent a letter of notice about the Title IX probe.

Jurupa Unified School District did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the Palm Springs Desert Sun, part of the USA TODAY Network. The California Department of Education cannot comment on a pending investigation, said public information officer Scott Roark.

“We remain committed to defending and upholding California laws and all additional laws which ensure the rights of students, including transgender students, to be free from discrimination and harassment,” the state attorney general’s press office said in a statement to the Desert Sun. “We will continue to closely monitor the Trump Administration’s actions in this space.”

According to the Justice Department, the investigation will also determine whether California and its “senior legal, educational, and athletic organizations, and the school district” are “engaging in a pattern or practice of discrimination on the basis of sex.”

Earlier this year, the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights announced it would investigate the California Interscholastic Federation about transgender student athletes participating in women’s and girls’ sports.

Trump said in a May 27 post on Truth Social that he planned to speak with California Gov. Gavin Newsom, whom he accused of “continuing to ILLEGALLY allow ‘MEN TO PLAY IN WOMEN’S SPORTS.’”

The post referred to the California Interscholastic Federation Southern Section Masters Meet, where a transgender athlete won the girls’ triple jump and long jump competitions, advancing to

the state finals, set for May 30 and 31.

Trump added that “large scale Federal Funding will be held back, maybe permanently” if an executive order he signed on Feb. 5 seeking to bar transgender student-athletes from playing women’s sports is not followed. He did not specify which funding streams he would target.

“In the meantime, I am ordering local authorities, if necessary, not to allow the transitioned person to compete in the State Finals,” Trump said in the post. “This is a totally ridiculous situation!!!”

USA TODAY reported in February that the executive order directs the Education Department to pursue “enforcement actions” under Title IX. But some legal experts question whether the Trump administration’s interpretation of the law would hold sway in court.

The Justice Department said in a news release that it has filed a statement of interest in support of a lawsuit challenging AB 1266, which was passed in 2013.

“The letters of legal notice were sent at the time the Justice Department filed a statement of interest in federal court in support of a lawsuit filed by and on behalf of girls’ athletes to advance the appropriate interpretation of Title IX to ensure equal educational opportunities and prevent discrimination based on sex in federally funded schools and athletic programs,” the news release states.

Changes to state championships

The California Interscholastic Federation announced on May 27 that it’s implementing a pilot entry process for the upcoming 2025 CIF State Track and Field Championships.

“Under this pilot entry process, any biological female student-athlete who would have earned the next qualifying mark for one of their Section’s automatic qualifying entries in the CIF State meet, and did not achieve the CIF State at-large mark in the finals at their Section meet, was extended an opportunity to participate in the 2025 CIF State Track and Field Championships,” according to the announcement shared on social media.

While the California Interscholastic Federation did not directly respond to a request for comment regarding the investigation from the Justice Department, the Desert Sun was provided with a follow-up statement about the pilot entry process.

According to the news release, “a biological female student athlete who would have earned the next qualifying mark will also be advanced to the finals” in the high jump, triple jump, and long jump qualifying events at the 2025 CIF State Track and Field Championships, if necessary.

“Additionally, if necessary, in the high jump, triple jump and long jump events at the 2025 CIF State Track and Field Championships, a biological female student-athlete who would have earned a specific placement on the podium will also be awarded the medal for that place and the results will be reflected in the recording of the event.

“The CIF values all of our student-athletes and we will continue to uphold our mission of providing students with the opportunity to belong, connect, and compete while complying with California law and Education Code,” the news release added.

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cost estimates each settled on a figure exceeding \$1.8 million, prompting the Coralville City Council to reject the bids during their Tuesday, May 27 meeting to reassess the plan.

In a memo to the council, contractors noted that their 2025 project calendars are mostly filled, and the Coralville project would require a quick turnaround to start work in the summer.

Coralville Parks and Recreation Director Sherri Proud said the city may decide to split the single project into two, separating the baseball field and the “grading and civil improvements project.” Contractors said a two-part project would allow for more accurate bids, which “would reduce markup by a contractor who’s not able to do one or the other focus of work.”

Proud said Tuesday’s decision was the first in her 20-plus years that the city denied project bids.

Coralville is expected to seek bids for the project again later in the summer or fall of 2025, giving contractors time to prepare for a Sept. 1, 2026, completion date.