

# Jon Burge, 70, Ex-Commander in Chicago Police Torture Cases, Dies



Jon Burge in 2010. He and detectives under his command were accused of extracting confessions from more than 100 people by using torture tactics.

Charles Rex Arbogast/Associated Press

By Sam Roberts

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Jon Burge, the former Chicago police commander whose reported torture of criminal suspects cost the city more than \$100 million in legal fees and reparations and prompted the governor to pardon four death row inmates and halt capital punishment in Illinois, died this week in Hillsborough County, Fla. He was 70.

His death was confirmed on Wednesday by the Zipperer's Funeral Home in Ruskin, near his retirement home in Apollo Beach, south of Tampa. At the family's request, the funeral home did not say precisely when or where he died or give a cause of death. He had been treated for cancer.

A decorated Vietnam veteran who had collected 13 police commendations, Mr. Burge and detectives under his command were accused of extracting confessions from more than 100 people while questioning them in the 1970s and '80s by shocking them with cattle prods, smothering them with plastic typewriter covers and pointing guns in their mouths while pretending to play Russian roulette. Most of the suspects were black; he was white.

Fired from the force in 1993, he was never prosecuted for torture because the statute of limitations had lapsed. He was also acquitted in a 1989 civil rights suit filed by an inmate, Madison Hobley, who said he had been coerced into falsely confessing to the killing of his wife, infant child and five others in an arson investigation.

But Mr. Burge was convicted on federal charges of perjury and obstruction of justice in 2010 for denying, in response to the civil suit, that he had inflicted cruel and unusual punishment on prisoners in his custody.

Sentenced in January 2011 to four and a half years' imprisonment, he was released in October 2014.

His victims served much longer terms.

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OBITUARIES Jon Burge, 70, Ex-Commander in Chicago Police Torture Cases, Dies

The conviction of Jackie Wilson, who with his brother was accused of killing two Chicago police officers in 1982, was overturned only in June; a judge ruled that the police had coerced his confession. (His brother, Andrew, had won a new trial but was convicted again and died in prison in 2007.) Jackie Wilson spent more than 36 years in prison before [his release](#) at the age of 57.

The City of Chicago agreed to pay a total of nearly \$5.5 million in 2016 to 57 torture victims who, as a result of the testimony wrested from them by Mr. Burge and his "Midnight Crew" of South Side detectives, had served more than two decades behind bars.

The \$5.5 million added to an estimated \$100 million in other settlements, court-ordered judgments and legal fees stemming from the police torture cases.

The reparations settlement also required the city's public school system to teach eighth and 10th graders about the torture case. Mayor

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Burge. The governor commuted the death sentences of 167 other inmates and declared a moratorium on capital punishment in Illinois. The state abolished the death penalty in 2011.

Just how much progress Chicago has made in restoring public confidence in its police department was being tested again as word came of Mr. Burge's death.

Testimony began this week in [the murder trial](#) of Jason Van Dyke, a white Chicago officer accused in the death in 2014 of Laquan McDonald, a black teenager armed with a knife who was shot 16 times as he appeared to be walking away from the police.



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Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune, via Associated Press

The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, who was attending the officer's trial, said Mr. Burge's legacy is "tied in with forced confessions and wrongful convictions."

"As a person, may his soul rest in peace," Mr. Jackson said of Mr. Burge. "As a policeman, he did a lot of harm to a lot of people and left on this city a mark. It stains us for a long time."

In a statement posted on Facebook, the police union demurred. "The Fraternal Order of Police does not believe the full story about the Burge case has ever been told, particularly the case that led to his sole conviction," the statement said.

Jon Graham Burge was born on Dec. 20, 1947, in South Deering, an industrial neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. His father, Floyd, worked for the telephone company. His mother, Ethel, was a fashion writer for The Chicago Daily News.

Jon Burge joined the Reserve Officer Training Corps in high school and, after attending the University of Missouri for one semester, joined the Army Reserves in 1966. He volunteered to serve in Vietnam. In interviews, he said he had been trained as a military police officer in interrogation techniques and earned commendations, including a Bronze Star, for rescuing wounded comrades under fire.

He joined the police department in 1970, when he was 22, 6-foot-2 and about 210 pounds.

Allegations lodged later suggested that he began aggressively interrogating suspects in brutal crimes early on. (A boat he owned was named "Vigilante.")

Though Mr. Burge was acquitted in the 1989 civil suit, in 1990 The Chicago Reader, an alternative weekly newspaper, published a comprehensive investigative report by [John Conroy](#) detailing accusations of police abuse. Mr. Conroy, a senior investigator for the [MacArthur Justice Center](#) at the Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law, also wrote about the case in the book "[Unspeakable Acts, Ordinary People](#)" (2001).

"Find me another city that has paid reparations for systemic police abuse," Mr. Conroy said in an email on Thursday. "You can't do it. Find me another state with a Torture Commission. Greater transparency has resulted from the abuse here."

Follow-up reports in The Chicago Tribune and investigations by Francine J. Sanders and Michael Goldston of the police department's Office of Professional Standards (now the Independent Police Review Authority) led to Mr. Burge's suspension in 1991 and his firing two years later.

In the civil suit testimony that led to his perjury conviction, Mr. Burge was asked whether he had ever used "physical objects to inflict pain, suffering or fear, such as firearms, telephone books, typewriter covers, radiators, or machines that deliver an electric shock."

Mr. Burge replied, "I have never used any techniques set forth above as a means of improper coercion of suspects while in detention or during interrogation."

Convicted of lying, [he was sentenced](#) by United States District Judge Joan Lefkowitz, who cited his "unwillingness to acknowledge the truth in the face of all the evidence."

Facing the judge, Mr. Burge said, "While I try to keep a proud face, in reality I am a broken man."

After he was released from prison in 2014 and ordered to complete his term [under home confinement](#), he gave an interview to Martin Preib, now a spokesman for the police union, in which he described lawyers for the pardoned inmates as "vultures."

"I find it hard to believe that the city's political leadership could even contemplate giving 'reparations' to human vermin," he said.

Since he was fired in 1993, Mr. Burge had continued to collect his \$4,000-a-month police pension.

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