



A Police Officer Walked Up Behind A Black Man, Slammed Him To The Ground, And Broke His Wrist After Mistaking Him For A Suspect, A Lawsuit Says

Antonio Smith is suing the city and police department in Valdosta, Georgia, for using excessive force against him in an incident that was captured on body cameras.



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Screenshots of body camera video showing Valdosta officers detaining Antonio Arnelo Smith on Feb. 8.

Courtesy Nathaniel Haugabrook

A Black man has filed a federal lawsuit alleging that police officers in Georgia used excessive force when an officer broke his wrist after mistaking him for a suspect.

Antonio Arnelo Smith, 46, filed the lawsuit on Friday against the city of Valdosta, Georgia, and its police department seeking

compensation and punitive damages for the February incident on the grounds that his constitutional rights were violated by unlawful detention, use of excessive force, and false arrest and imprisonment, among other counts.

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Smith alleges Valdosta Police Sgt. Billy Wheeler's actions were "unnecessary and illegal" when he placed Smith in a "bear hug" and detained him when there "was no reason to believe Mr. Smith had committed or was about to commit a crime, was armed or presented any kind of danger or threat to anyone."

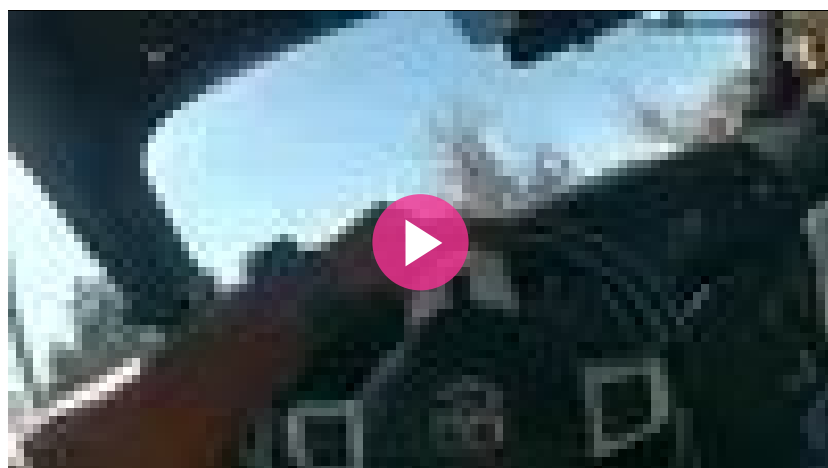
The lawsuit also names the three patrol officers involved in detaining Smith as defendants, as well as the chief of police, the mayor of Valdosta, and six city council members.

In a statement Monday, the city said it had not yet reviewed the lawsuit and could not comment on the allegations, but released a statement detailing their version of the Feb. 8 encounter, along with body camera footage from one of the officers who slammed Smith to the ground.

"The City of Valdosta is fully committed to transparency," the city said. "The City of Valdosta and the Valdosta Police Department takes any report of any injury to a citizen seriously."

The city said that while no complaint was filed with the police department, the incident was reviewed internally. However, no action was taken against the officers involved after the review was completed, Smith's attorney, Nathaniel Haugabrook, told BuzzFeed News on Wednesday.

Haugabrook also provided BuzzFeed News with additional body camera footage from the first officer who approached Smith to question him about "suspicious activity."



Body camera footage from one of the officers involved in the Feb. 8 incident with Smith.

On Feb. 8, two Valdosta police officers responded to a report of a man outside a Walgreens harassing customers and asking them for money, according to the lawsuit and the city.

One of the two officers encountered a Black man in the Walgreens parking lot and was informed by dispatchers that he had active felony arrest warrants against him. The communication between a dispatcher and the officer was overheard by other officers responding to the scene, police said.

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The officer took the man into custody and advised her fellow responding officer, Dominic Henry, to check the west side of the building with regards to the 911 report of a man panhandling at Walgreens, the lawsuit states. A customer then pointed Henry in the direction of the alleged panhandling suspect.

Henry saw Smith walking away from Walgreens and approached him, saying he was investigating "suspicious activity," to which Smith replied that he was waiting for his sister to transfer money to him from Western Union.

During the conversation, Smith denied being engaged in any suspicious activity and said that he was seen on the cameras waiting for his money from Western Union.

When Henry asked Smith for his identification, Smith immediately complied, according to the footage and lawsuit.

During their conversation, Wheeler arrived at the scene, mistakenly believing Smith to be the suspect with the outstanding arrest warrants against him, according to both the city and the lawsuit.

The video shows Wheeler walking behind Smith while he was talking to Henry, grabbing his right arm, pulling it behind his back, and placing him in a "bear hug," the lawsuit states.

According to the city, Wheeler had advised Smith to place his hands behind his back before grabbing him, and that he "began to resist by pulling his arms forward and tensing his body."

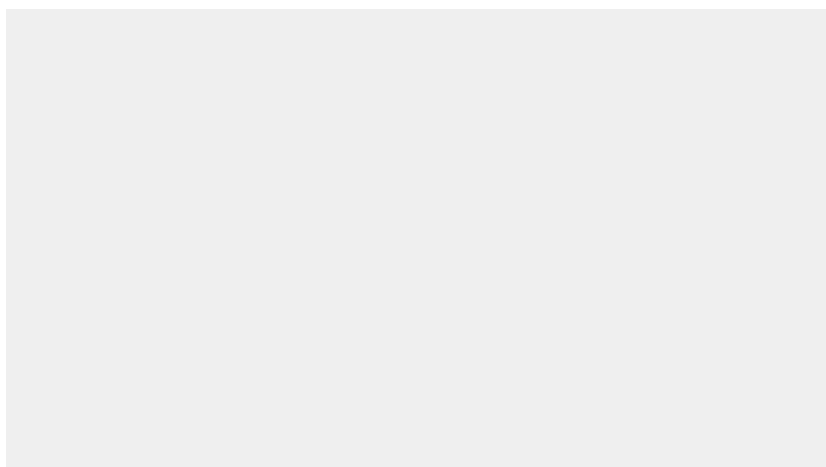
However, the lawsuit alleges that it was only after Wheeler placed Smith in a bear hug that he ordered him to place his hands behind his back and that the bear hug made it impossible for Smith to comply with the demand.

The video then shows Wheeler lifting Smith up and slamming him to the ground as Smith cries out in pain and asks, "What are you doing?"

The city said that Wheeler used a "physical control technique to place the subject on the ground so handcuffs could be applied."

The video shows two other officers responding to the scene and helping Wheeler and Henry handcuff Smith, who can be heard crying and screaming, "You broke my wrist," to which one of the officers says, "Yeah, he might be broke."

The lawsuit said that Smith's left wrist was fractured during the encounter.



Courtesy Nathaniel Haugabrook

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After realizing he was injured, the officers removed the handcuffs, rolled Smith over, and notified the dispatcher to call emergency services.

When Wheeler informed Smith that he had a warrant against him, Henry corrected Wheeler and the two other officers, telling them that it was another man who had the felony warrants against him — not Smith.

Wheeler is heard on the body camera video saying he thought Smith was the one with the warrant, to which Henry responds, "No, 'cause there's two different people. That's what I was trying to figure out if I had missed something, when you told him to put his hands behind his back."

Smith declined medical treatment after an ambulance was called to the scene as he was "scared of what additional ill-treatment awaited him at the hands of the several law enforcement" surrounding him, the lawsuit states.

When Smith went to a hospital later that day, he was told he had sustained "distal radial and ulnar fractures" in his left wrist.

Haugabrook told BuzzFeed News that Smith did not not have the financial resources to seek treatment.

He added that Smith was not focused on getting the officers who detained him fired. The goal of the lawsuit, Haugabrook said, is to "help with this movement around the world to rectify police brutality... and for police reform and accountability."

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