

A trooper repeatedly punched a handcuffed man in the face. The Maine State Police promoted him.

by Josh Keefe, The Maine Monitor and Callie Ferguson
9 hours ago



On March 16, 2024, a Maine state trooper repeatedly punched Justin Savage in the face while he lay restrained in the driveway of his Limerick home, leaving him almost unrecognizable. The beating, captured on video, depicts a use of force that policing experts say is rarely justified. The Maine State Police thought differently. Credit: Courtesy of Garrick Hoffman

This story was jointly reported and published as part of a coordinated investigative and explanatory reporting project of The Maine Monitor and the Bangor Daily News' Maine Focus team. This project enhances in-depth local journalism and expands public access to the reporting. [Read more about the partnership.](#)

In March of last year, a Maine State Police trooper pinned a handcuffed man to the ground and repeatedly punched him in the face while arresting him at his home in rural York County.

Video footage of the arrest obtained by The Maine Monitor and the Bangor Daily News shows an incident that began calmly but spiraled out of control after troopers threw the man to the ground, later striking his bloodied face as he was restrained and yelling that he could not breathe. The man, Justin Savage of Limerick, 42, suffered a broken nose and severe bruising.

Striking a restrained person in the head is considered a serious use of force that is difficult to justify and should only be used against a subject when they pose a serious threat to the officers or others, according to policing experts. They questioned how Savage could have presented such a threat while restrained on the ground.

The Maine State Police thought differently.

The agency cleared the officers of any wrongdoing and misrepresented what happened that night, a Monitor/BDN investigation found. The episode offers a rare view into a questionable use of violent force by the state's largest police department and how its leaders handled it publicly and behind the scenes.

In a [press release](#) published two days after the arrest, the agency blamed Savage for breaking a sergeant's ankle and claimed he bit another officer in an attempt to escape custody. That narrative is incomplete and misleading, the video and the officers' own police reports show.

After Savage's girlfriend filed a formal excessive force complaint, agency leadership delegated the matter to the officers' supervisor instead of internal affairs, which is the unit responsible for investigating allegations of serious misconduct. The investigation found the force to be justified, and no officers were disciplined. Only when agency leaders later became concerned about potential litigation did they ask the internal affairs division to do its own investigation, which upheld the original finding.

In the middle of that review, the state police promoted the officer who struck Savage in the face, Jamie Fenderson, from trooper to corporal, his first promotion in 16 years on the job.

The blows, which are captured on a cruiser dashcam, are only visible because of another officer's flashlight. Savage alleged in an interview that the footage shows just one of several moments in which he was hit in the face by Fenderson during the arrest, and said that he has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder ever since.

"It has completely disrupted my entire life," Savage said. "It's put so much stress and trauma and anxiety on us that it's just made everyday life difficult."

More than a year after the incident, prosecutors reached a deal with Savage to drop the criminal charges filed against him after the arrest, which included assault on an officer.

Savage and his girlfriend, Shawna Morse, are now planning to sue the Maine State Police, alleging the beating was "outrageous, unlawful, unjustified and wrongful," according to a copy of the complaint provided to The Monitor/BDN. The complaint also alleges the Maine State Police charged Savage with crimes they knew he didn't commit, discarded evidence and defamed him by publicly lying about what happened. The lawsuit is expected to be filed in federal court this week against the agency, Fenderson and two other officers who responded that night, Trooper Anna Ritland and Sgt. Adam Schmidt.

The Maine State Police declined to answer specific questions about the arrest, citing the coming lawsuit, but said in a statement that an investigation had “determined the use of force in this case was lawful, justified and proper.” Lt. Col. Brian Scott, the agency’s second-highest-ranking official, said in an interview that both he and his boss, Col. William Ross, had seen the video footage.

“We’ve looked at the videos ourselves and understand what’s there,” Scott said. “Our conclusions are still that the amount of force was objectively reasonable under the circumstances.”

‘Stop punching him’

The trouble started when Savage and Morse dropped a neighbor off at his home after a night out and an argument started, according to police reports.

One neighbor told police she saw Savage strike Morse in the street, and then was pushed by Savage when she tried to intervene. Savage then followed the neighbor back to her home and “banged” on the door and rang her doorbell, prompting her to call 911, she wrote in a statement. Savage left before police arrived.

Both Savage and Morse said there was an argument, but deny the encounter ever turned physical. (Savage has previous convictions for assault, criminal trespassing and refusal to submit to arrest, all of which occurred prior to 2009. He was also charged with domestic violence assault in 2021, which was later dismissed. Morse was the alleged victim in that case.)

The Monitor/BDN reviewed cruiser video and body-worn audio from the arrest that was evidence in Savage’s criminal case, as well as police reports, to understand what occurred after the Maine State Police arrived. (Maine State Police did not wear body cameras at the time.)

The officers’ reports mischaracterize Savage’s early interactions with police. They describe Savage approaching the officers “in a fighting stance” and “pushing” and “thrashing” throughout the encounter. But the footage shows Savage to be calm and compliant when the officers arrive. He eventually becomes agitated, loud, and repeatedly calls the officers homophobic slurs, but he does not appear to physically resist in the manner police allege.

Dashcam footage begins as Ritland is pulling up to Savage and Morse’s home in Limerick. Savage met her in the driveway, followed her directions and offered to take a breathalyzer test. But the interaction grew tense and argumentative after Fenderson and Schmidt arrived. Within a few minutes, the troopers handcuffed Savage and placed him under arrest for disorderly conduct. The moment Ritland declared Savage under arrest, Schmidt threw him to the ground. During the takedown, Schmidt broke his ankle.



Justin Savage and his girlfriend, Shawna Morse, stand in the driveway of their Limerick home where Maine State Police troopers arrested them in March 2024. Credit: Courtesy of Garrick Hoffman

After he was taken to the ground, Ritland and Fenderson walked Savage to the front passenger seat of Ritland's police cruiser. Fenderson wrote in a report that he struck Savage with a closed fist to the face, which gave officers time to buckle him in. The two officers then applied a mask that covered Savage's mouth, nose and eyes, as well as leg restraints, video from inside the cruiser shows.

While restrained in the cruiser, Savage began to yell that he couldn't breathe; his lawsuit claims he had an "asthmatic medical emergency." Still in handcuffs, he managed to unbuckle his seat belt and pull on the door latch. Fenderson opened the door and let him fall out of the cruiser, and then pinned him to the ground as Ritland held his legs.

According to Fenderson's police report, Savage then kicked him in the face and bit his hand. Fenderson wrote that he then "struck [Savage] in the face at least three times with my injured right hand."

The video is dark during that part of the arrest, but Savage denied kicking and biting Fenderson in an interview. In his lawsuit, Savage alleges Fenderson lied about the bite to justify the assault and discarded the glove he was wearing at the time, which should have been kept as evidence.

Savage continued to yell that he couldn't breathe, and Morse shouted at the officers that he had asthma. She then reached into the fray and tried to pull the mask off her boyfriend's face, at which point Fenderson pulled her to the ground. Ritland then got off Savage's legs and handcuffed and restrained Morse, according to Ritland's report.

By this point, emergency responders and other state troopers had arrived at the scene. Footage of this moment is quite dark. But as the emergency responders move around, a flashlight passes over Savage, illuminating his head just as Fenderson punches him twice in the face. The trooper does not mention this moment in his report.

“Please, his hands are cuffed,” Morse can be heard begging in the footage. “Stop punching him.”

Ritland instructed her to look away.

“Turn your head,” she said.

Savage was taken to the hospital, where a doctor diagnosed him with a fractured nose and a facial contusion. He was then booked at York County Jail. In a mugshot that was widely circulated by media outlets after the arrest, the left side of his face is swollen, with deep purple bruising around his eye and lip.

Request for a ‘thorough investigation’

The Monitor/BDN showed video footage of the arrest to four policing experts. They had concerns about what they saw and questioned why the blows were necessary, since Savage appeared to be fully restrained.

“If he’s handcuffed behind the back, and he literally is not spitting at him, and you have the ability to turn that person over and pin them, then there is no reason for you to sit and punch somebody in the face,” said David Thomas, a former police officer and a professor of forensic studies at Florida Gulf Coast University. “It is excessive.”

Dennis Kenney, a former police officer and now a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said that head strikes are discouraged.

“The only time head strikes are permissible is when you are in extreme self-defense,” Kenney said. “Rolling around and being a pain in the butt doesn’t qualify.”

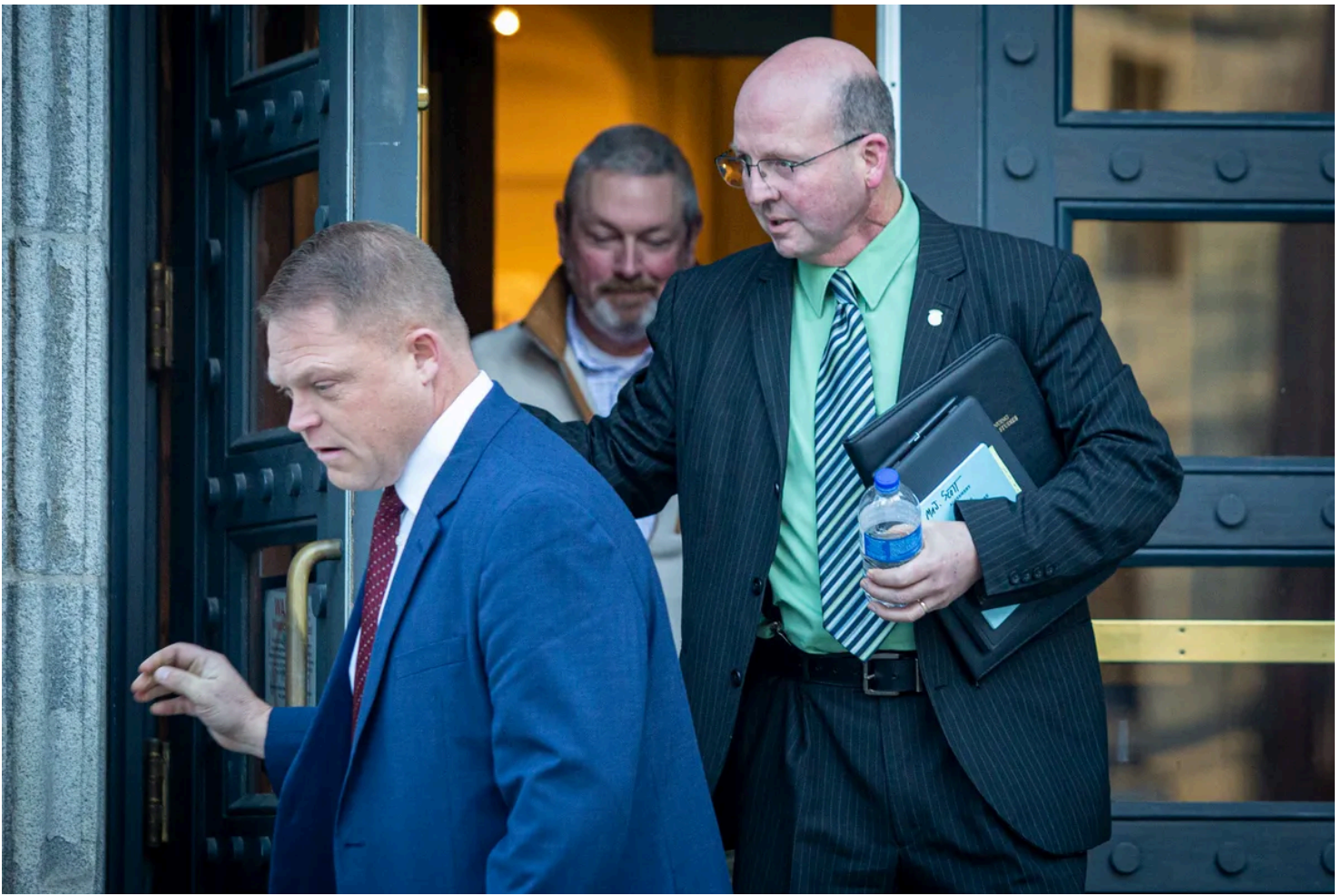
Kenney also criticized Fenderson and Schmidt for escalating the situation when they arrived. He said there was “no need to put [Savage] on the ground, particularly as forcefully as they did.”

“This is kind of a case study on how not to handle situations like this,” Kenney said. “They kind of screwed it up from beginning to end.”

On May 3, 2024, Savage’s girlfriend Morse filed a complaint with the state, writing that Fenderson, Schmidt and Ritland engaged in a “brutal assault” on Savage and that their actions “constitute a clear violation of police protocol and a gross abuse of power.” She requested a “thorough investigation.”

Maine State Police **policy** states that if an officer uses force greater than handcuffing, the officer must fill out a use of force report. That report must be approved by a supervisor and then by the troop commander.

Officers have a responsibility to report potential misconduct to the Office of Professional Standards, which can then open an investigation. None of the officers who reviewed the use of force reports related to Savage’s arrest did so, according to Lt. Col. Scott.



Lt. Col. Brian Scott of the Maine State Police, pictured at Maine District Court in Portland in late 2022, reviewed footage of Savage’s arrest after a formal complaint was filed. “Our conclusions are still that the amount of force was objectively reasonable under the circumstances,” he told The Maine Monitor/Bangor Daily News. Credit: Troy R. Bennett / BDN

Agency policy requires the Office of Professional Standards to conduct all investigations into allegations of “serious misconduct.” The policy does not spell out what qualifies as serious misconduct beyond saying it is “including, but not limited to, possible or actual criminal conduct.” Investigations into lesser misconduct can be delegated to troop commanders.

After Morse filed her complaint, Southern Field Troop Commander Lt. Kevin Burton conducted an investigation, Scott said. Burton found the use of force was “justified,” and the complaint was closed, according to the agency.

In July 2024, the agency received public records requests from Morse about the incident and became concerned about potential litigation, Scott said. He then ordered the Office of Professional Standards to conduct a “comprehensive review.” OPS completed its review of Burton’s investigation in September, according to the agency. The office agreed with the troop commander that “the use of force was lawful,” Scott said.

“Videos don’t tell the entire story,” Scott said. “And I wish I could comment more on this and give you specifics. At the end, you might say, ‘Okay, I kind of get it.’ And at the end, you might say, ‘Yeah, still, that doesn’t look good to me, and I don’t think it was justified.’”

Experts questioned that finding.

“Particularly with those strikes to the face, I have a hard time thinking that any agency could look at that and say, ‘Oh yes, that’s within policy,’” said Seth Stoughton, a former police officer and director of the Excellence in Policing and Public Safety Program at the University of South Carolina School of Law. “If this wasn’t a sustained complaint, why not?”

The Maine State Police declined to make any of the officers at the scene, Burton, or Capt. Jeff Love, head of the Office of Professional Standards, available for an interview. The three responding officers did not respond to emails seeking comment. The agency also denied a public records request for the officers’ use of force reports, citing an exemption that keeps investigative techniques confidential. All investigative reports into allegations of officer misconduct are confidential under Maine law. Only discipline records are public.

“Law enforcement responses to domestic violence incidents are dangerous, dynamic and often come with unpredictable challenges,” agency spokesperson Shannon Moss wrote in a statement. “No force would have been used had the suspect been compliant and no one, including the officers, would have been injured.”

Charges dropped

Troopers charged Savage with domestic violence assault, assault on an officer, assault, refusing to submit to arrest and disorderly conduct. Morse was also arrested and charged with refusing to submit to arrest and obstructing government administration.

Nearly three months later, in June 2024, the York County District Attorney’s office indicted Savage on additional charges. It charged him with obstructing government administration, refusing to submit to arrest, assault on an officer for allegedly biting and kicking Fenderson, and two separate assault charges for allegedly assaulting Ritland and Schmidt.

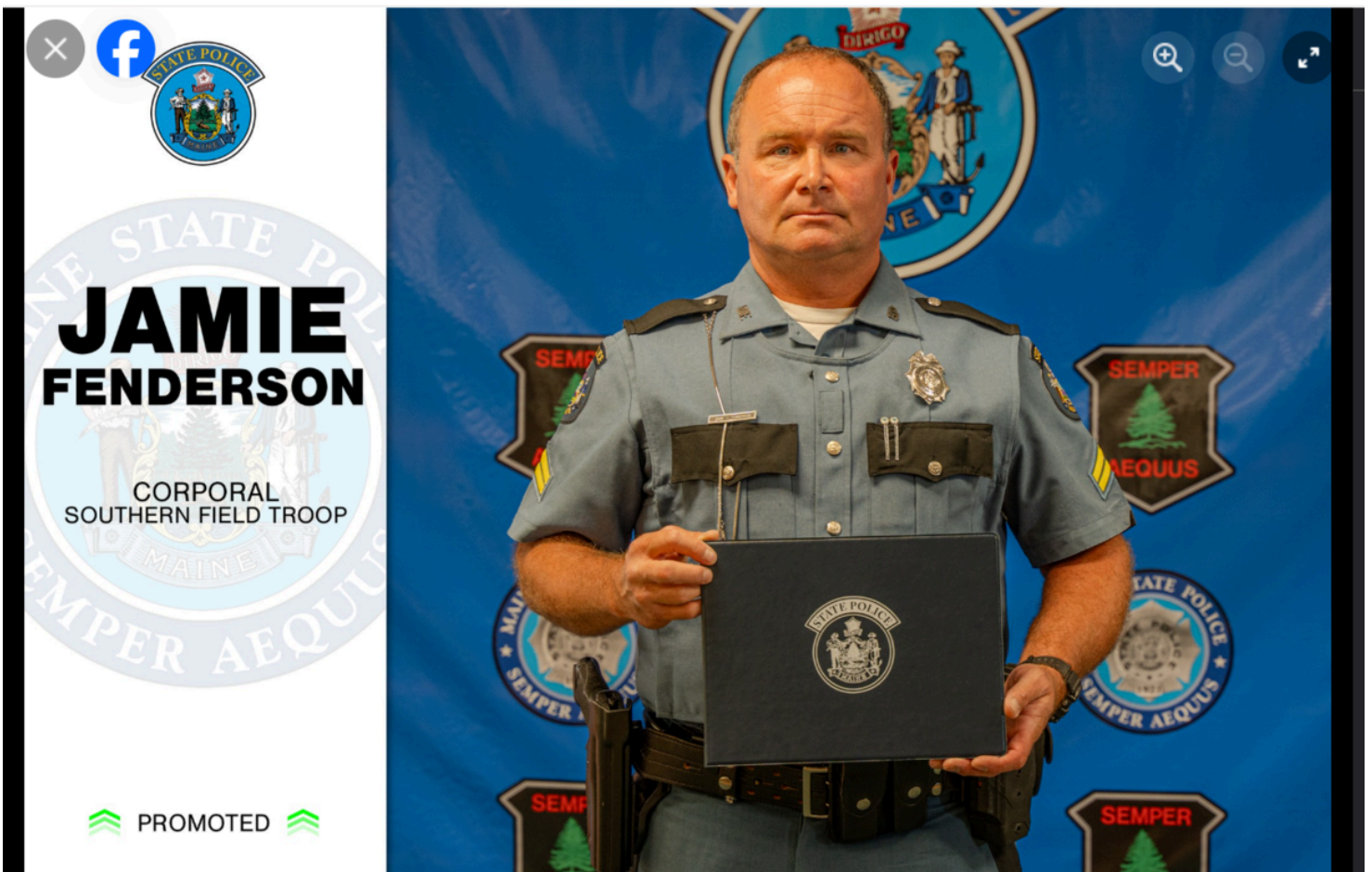
Audio from Schmidt’s recording device captured him telling Ritland during the arrest that Savage shouldn’t be charged with assault on an officer in connection with his injury, saying, “We all just landed on my friggin’ ankle the wrong way.” In his lawsuit, Savage alleges that the officers falsely charged Savage with breaking Schmidt’s ankle despite knowing the sergeant was responsible for the injury.

Schmidt was later awarded the Maine State Police’s annual “Wounds Received” award.

The basis for the assault charge against Ritland isn’t clear. Prosecutors did not provide details in charging documents. Ritland does not mention an assault in her report, but does claim that Savage spit on her. (Savage denied spitting on officers, saying he likely sprayed them while breathing through a bloody nose and mouth.)

The charges against Savage for assaulting his neighbor and Morse were dropped, meaning that the state was not alleging an underlying crime, only crimes related to the police response.

In August 2024, the Maine State Police announced in a Facebook post that Fenderson had been promoted from trooper to corporal.



The Maine State Police promoted Jamie Fenderson in August 2024, before the agency's internal affairs division had completed its review of Savage's excessive force complaint. Credit: Maine State Police; Facebook Screenshot

"A true leader," the post read. "Congratulations, Cpl. Fenderson!"

In February 2025, nearly a year after the arrest, Assistant District Attorney Matthew Richwalder dropped all charges against Morse, citing "prosecutor discretion." Nearly two months later, Richwalder resolved Savage's case as well. In April, Savage and the state reached a deal dropping all remaining charges, provided he does not commit crimes for six months.

Richwalder and his boss, York County District Attorney Kathryn Slattery, declined to comment.

If not for the arrest footage, Savage's civil attorney Jeffrey Bennett believes Savage would be serving time for assaulting a police officer.

"They would have gone forward with the charges," Bennett said. "But they dropped the charges, because once you see the video, you can't prove them."

Josh Keefe is a government accountability reporter for The Maine Monitor, a nonprofit investigative newsroom. He can be reached at josh@themainemonitor.org.

Callie Ferguson is the deputy investigations editor for Maine Focus, the BDN's investigations team. She can be reached at cferguson@bangordailynews.com.