

Kobe Bryant photos lawsuit: Why do cops keep and share images of dead bodies?

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Editor's note: This story contains descriptions that some readers may find disturbing.

Two days after Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter crash last year, a law enforcement officer sat at a restaurant bar near Los Angeles and struck up a conversation with the bartender.

“Hey, have you heard about Kobe?” asked the officer, Joey Cruz.

“Yeah,” the bartender replied. “It’s sad.”

“Well, I have a few pictures” Cruz told him, according to the testimony of the bartender filed this month in federal court. “Want to see them?”

Surveillance footage from the bar shows Cruz sharing his phone with the bartender, who later testified about what he saw on that phone. Cruz had obtained photos from the crash scene.

“It was body parts,” the bartender said of the photos.

Cruz is one of several sheriff’s deputies from Los Angeles County now being sued by the widow of the NBA legend for invasion of privacy over the photos of her dead husband and daughter. But what Cruz did in that bar – keeping and showing gruesome photos – is not uncommon among police and other first responders who have access to them. It has been a widespread problem “ever since they invented the Polaroid camera,” Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said last year.

A big question is why. What is the point of keeping and sharing photos of dead people from accidents and crime scenes if there is no professional purpose for it?

There are a few different reasons, none of them good, according to experts. At the same time, the true scale of this practice remains unknown because the photos generally aren’t circulated outside of a trusted circle. It wasn’t even expressly forbidden in California until

state lawmakers last year reacted to the Bryant photos controversy by making it a misdemeanor crime for first responders to take unauthorized photos of dead people.



“It is well known and recognized in the Southern California law enforcement community that officers and deputies frequently take, view, keep, and share photos of human remains,” said a declaration filed in court this month from Adam Bercovici, a former police officer who served in the Los Angeles Police Department for 30 years. “It also is well known in the Southern California law enforcement community that a number of officers and deputies keep photographic journals of death images taken or acquired by virtue of the access afforded to them by their roles in law enforcement.”

Bercovici recalled “one particularly memorable example” of this conduct in 1994, when he was working in the LAPD and was shown a Polaroid depicting the murdered body of Nicole Brown Simpson, the ex-wife of football star O.J. Simpson.

ON DEFENSE: Lawsuit a 'no-win' situation for LA County trying to put up defense

Another example came in England in November, when two police officers admitted taking photos of two murdered sisters at a crime scene in June 2020 and sharing them on WhatsApp with “distasteful” remarks about them, according to authorities. They were fired and sentenced to two years and nine months in jail.

“These officers were tasked with protecting a tragic crime scene, but instead they violated it for their own purposes, with no regard to the dignity of the victims,” a prosecutor there said in November.

In a separate case in England, a police forensic specialist pleaded guilty to “misconduct in public office” in November after authorities said he accessed the police computer system and improperly downloaded numerous images of dead bodies from murder scenes or post-mortem exams. He was due to be sentenced in 2022.

Court records in Vanessa Bryant’s lawsuit also have cited the case involving 18-year-old Nikki Catsouras, who was nearly decapitated in a car crash in Orange County, California, on Halloween in 2006. In that case, two California Highway Patrol dispatchers leaked the photos of her mutilated body, triggering their widespread dissemination onto the internet for public consumption and morbid titillation, including harassment of her family. The family sued and reached a \$2.37 million settlement with the CHP in 2012.

Why they do it

After Cruz left the bar on the night of Jan. 28, 2020, the bartender walked over to other patrons at the restaurant in a state of excitement, according to deposition testimony of one of the patrons, Rafael Mendez, Jr.

“He began to describe the photos that were shown to him,” Mendez testified.


The bartender mentioned body parts and Kobe Bryant’s possible remains, Mendez stated in the transcript filed in court Dec. 6. The bartender appeared eager to tell them more, but it was “getting graphic,” Mendez stated. “And so we just said, ‘We heard enough.’”

Mendez then filed a complaint about what he just heard with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. The case blew up from there and led to Cruz being questioned in an internal investigation.

“Do you believe it was appropriate to share these photographs with the people you shared them with?” a sergeant asked Cruz, according to a transcript filed in court in November.

“Let’s start with the bartender.”

“At the time sir, I didn’t think anything of it,” replied Cruz, who was a deputy trainee at the time of the crash. “I didn’t think much of it. Until now, going through this, now I know that it’s not appropriate.”

 In an image obtained from surveillance video, deputy Joey Cruz (left) shared images on his phone with a bartender at a bar near Los Angeles, according to court filings. Court records state the images were of victims' remains after a helicopter crash that killed Kobe Bryant and eight others last year.

In the same interview, Cruz stated he couldn't remember what he and the bartender said about the photos. Surveillance photos show the two laughing after the bartender looked at the phone. Cruz testified he was suspended 10 days as a result but appealed and got that reduced to two days without pay and three days of classes.

“In my experience, some individuals appear to enjoy improper death images because they allow the officer to show off that he is 'in the know' or in possession of something exclusive that others do not have,” Bercovici stated in his court declaration.

In the Catsouras case, one of the dispatchers said he e-mailed the photos to friends and family to warn about the dangers of drunk driving. A state appeals court didn't buy that explanation, however, noting there was no evidence to support it. Catsouras died in a high-speed crash, but alcohol did not contribute to it.

“It is a sad day, to be sure, when those upon whom we rely to protect and serve do the opposite and make the decapitated corpse of a teenage girl the subject of international gossip and disrespect,” the court stated.

The attorney for the Catsouras family, Keith Bremer, told USA TODAY that the reasons officer engage in this conduct varies and that there is “no explanation or excuse for what the officers did.”

“In our case, we believe that the photographs were taken for the shock and awe value, among a certain group, being that it was near Halloween,” Bremer said. “In fact, the officer saved each photograph by the name, `Halloween 1, Halloween 2, etc.”

'Ghoulish souvenirs'

Bercovici described it as part of the locker-room culture among cops.

“Many senior officers kept 'death books' as ghoulish souvenirs and would display the photos on their own initiative or at the request of other officers,” he stated in his declaration about his early years with the police. “These showings typically took place in the locker room, at the back of roll call, or in the police car. Photographs of suicides, often showing that the skull of a victim had been compromised and brain matter exposed, were a favorite among officers engaged in these practices.”

Bercovici stated that some officers collected such a large volume of human remains photos that viewing them was a “small event,” accompanied by distasteful humor.

He cited another incident in the Bryant case as a “textbook example” of why some first responders do this sort of thing – “to impress others with his exclusive access to a crime or accident scene.”

It happened at an awards banquet in February 2020, nearly three weeks after the helicopter crash that killed nine, including Kobe Bryant and his daughter. That's when L.A. County Fire Department Captain Tony Imbrenda took out his phone during the cocktail hour of this event and showed some photos from the crash scene.

By the end of the year, the department sent him a letter notifying him of its intent to fire him over this.

"You were aware that there were people nearby when you pulled out your phone and showed the group pictures from the crash site which depicted human remains," said the letter from December 2020. "You specifically stated that you were aware that there were people trying to see the photos so you kept them away and advised them that it was not something they would be interested in seeing. Yet the photos you shared depicted feet, shoes, a torso, a person bent in half, and human organs."

The letter was filed in court Dec. 13 as part of the Bryant case, which is scheduled for trial in February.

"After you shared these gruesome photographs, conversation regarding the photographs continued as you and the other guests walked into the dining room," the letter said. "One of the guests recalled discussions about Kobe Bryant's remains and 'bodies.' Another guest ... heard one of your colleagues make a statement to the effect of, 'I just saw pictures of Kobe burned up before I'm about to eat.'"

Imbrenda later was demoted, not fired. He gave a different account in a declaration filed in court in November, saying he and other fire captains were discussing how they identified the helicopter.

"I still had photos on my phone, which I had with me," Imbrenda stated. "I scrolled through the photos and showed them to this small group. I do not remember the exact contents of the photos. No one other than (other captains) saw the photos on my phone. My phone never left my (hand). It was a brief conversation."

Vanessa Bryant is suing Los Angeles County, its sheriff's department and fire department for invasion of privacy and negligence. She states she suffered distress from "the knowledge that images of her husband's and daughter's remains were taken and shared for the perverse gratification of law enforcement officers."

The county says her lawsuit is without merit, noting that the photos were deleted, not posted online and not publicly disseminated under the standard required by law. It cites the Catsouras case, which rewrote California law to establish that surviving family members have a right to privacy with autopsy or similar death photos.

In that case, the photos were posted on hundreds of websites. By contrast, the county says the photos in question in the Bryant case weren't shown to anyone outside of county personnel except for the bartender.

Vanessa Bryant said that doesn't matter.

"It makes no difference to me whether a person who needlessly gawks at photos of my loved ones' remains is a police officer or a construction worker," she said in a declaration filed in court Dec. 6. "My loss of privacy is the same. Regardless of profession, it is deeply distressing to me that at least twenty people—and likely many, many more—obtained photos of Kobe and Gianna's bodies for no reason at all."

The county also noted in a court document filed Dec. 13 that this is the first time it was "ever confronted (with) allegations of employees sharing photos of accident victims."

But Bercovici, the former cop, said this isn't surprising – and that doesn't mean it's not happening.

"Those photos are usually shared with other members of the law enforcement community or their family or friends, who are reluctant to report the misconduct," Bercovici stated. "When I was involved in internal affairs investigations, we did not receive complaints about improper sharing or retaining photos of human remains, but it was abundantly clear that this practice was widespread. In this case, the misconduct happened to come to light because one of the deceased individuals was a celebrity, and a courageous citizen chose to step forward with information."

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