

LONG ISLAND / CRIME

Man alleging he was attacked by Suffolk police officers in 2021 files federal lawsuit



Attorney Frederick Brewington shows a photograph of his client, Christopher Cruz, at news conference in his office last year. Credit: Reece T. Williams

By Michael O'Keeffe

michael.okeeffe@newsday.com 

Updated February 24, 2022 6:47 PM

A man allegedly beaten by police officers while he was handcuffed and face down in dirty snow filed a federal lawsuit late Wednesday that alleges the Suffolk County Police Department and its officers violated his civil rights when they arrested him in Mount Sinai last year.

The lawsuit filed in the Eastern District of New York by Christopher Cruz of Long Beach — almost one year after he claims he was punched and kicked by officers on Feb. 24, 2021 — names the Suffolk County Police Department, the county, former Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart and the 19 officers as defendants and seeks at least \$10 million in damages.

"These members of the SCPD used their uniforms to shield them from accountability and responsibility," Cruz's attorney, Frederick Brewington of Hempstead, said in a statement. "This type of behavior has been supported and allowed within the Suffolk County Police Department, creating a pervasive culture of accepted abuse."

The lawsuit said Cruz was targeted by police because he is Hispanic and the assault was part of a longstanding pattern of discrimination against Latino communities by the Suffolk police. It alleges Cruz

was subjected to hate-filled taunts and slurs by officers who beat him last year. One defendant told Cruz as he was handcuffed with his face to the ground to "eat the (expletive) snow, you (ethnic slur)," according to the lawsuit. The complaint also claims a cop told Cruz, "You are lucky you didn't get a bullet in your (expletive) face."

Suffolk County officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The police department and Hart also declined comment, both saying it would be inappropriate to discuss pending litigation. The Suffolk Police Benevolent Association also declined to comment on pending litigation.

Suffolk Officer Matthew Cameron, listed as a defendant in the lawsuit, was charged in December with second-degree offering a false instrument after allegedly submitting a false police report about the incident. Cameron, who has pleaded not guilty, is the only officer to face criminal charges in the incident, which the lawsuit said is further evidence of a coverup.

Suffolk police said in February 2021 that Cruz had stolen a Jeep Grand Cherokee and used it to ram a police car at a gas station. He fled the scene and crashed into a snow bank, then rammed another police vehicle. Police said two officers were injured during the incident.

Sign up for the NewsdayTV newsletter

From breaking news to special features and documentaries, the NewsdayTV team is covering the issues that matter to you.

Sign up

By clicking Sign up, you agree to our [privacy policy](#).

The lawsuit, however, alleges that Cruz was attempting to leave the gas station when his vehicle was struck by a police car driven by Officer Frank Filiberto, a defendant in the case. Filiberto "deliberately lied" when he said he was injured after Cruz rammed his. Other officers also filed false statements that said Cruz had rammed police vehicles, the complaint said.

Cruz surrendered and was pulled from his vehicle and handcuffed. He was then kicked, punched and pushed to the ground. According to the lawsuit, at least 15 officers participated in the attack or failed to intervene. Many of the facts alleged in the lawsuit were captured on body camera video. Criminal justice experts told Newsday last year that the video contradicted an officer's sworn accusation that

Cruz intentionally rammed his vehicle while trying to flee.

Prosecutors in June dropped second-degree assault, third-degree criminal mischief and resisting arrest charges that had been filed against Cruz, saying they were not sustainable. Cruz pleaded guilty to petit larceny in September after admitting before Suffolk District Judge Richard Dunne that he entered a 2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee and drove off without the owner's permission. Dunne sentenced Cruz to time served.

The lawsuit notes that Suffolk police entered into a consent decree with the U.S. Justice Department in 1986 that prohibited discrimination against Hispanics. Suffolk also reached an agreement with the Justice Department in 2013 to overhaul policing of minority communities.

Despite those agreements, the lawsuit said, Suffolk police remain hostile to the county's Latino community and dismissive of its concerns, according to the complaint.

Suffolk police say they have been in "substantial compliance" with many of the requirements laid out in the 2013 agreement with the Justice Department, including language assistance, hate crimes and allegations of misconduct. Suffolk legislators approved a 1,000-page police reform plan last year that calls for most officers to wear body cameras and provide civilian oversight of misconduct complaints, among other things.

By Michael O'Keeffe

michael.okeeffe@newsday.com 

Michael O'Keeffe covers Suffolk County police and other Long Island law-enforcement agencies. He is an award-winning journalist and the co-author of two books, "The Card" and "American Icon."