

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF
KENTUCKY, PADUCAH DIVISION

Austin Sporea v. Trent Hardin, et al.

Sporea · No. 5:25-CV-230-JHM · Decided May 8, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky conducted an initial review of Austin Sporea’s pro se 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint. The court allowed Fourth Amendment false-arrest and illegal-search-and-seizure claims, and a Fifth Amendment compelled-self-incrimination claim, to proceed against the individual officers in their individual capacities. It dismissed the First and Fourteenth Amendment claims and the claims against the McCracken County Sheriff’s Office for failure to state a claim.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky, Paducah Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Joseph H. McKinley Jr., Senior Judge
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky, Paducah Division
DECIDED	May 8, 2026
DOCKET	5:25-CV-230-JHM
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Initial review of a pro se 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint filed in forma pauperis under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2).
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), the court must dismiss an in forma pauperis action that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from an immune defendant. A complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to state a plausible claim for relief, while pro se pleadings are held to a less stringent standard.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district court memorandum opinion and order; persuasive authority only.

TOPICS

section 1983

fourth amendment

fifth amendment

civil procedure

police misconduct

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

constitutional law

civil procedure

criminal procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated claims under § 1983 against the McCracken County Sheriff's Office and, by construction, McCracken County.
2. Whether the allegations stated viable Fourth Amendment claims for false arrest and illegal search and seizure and a Fifth Amendment claim for compelled self-incrimination against the individual officers.
3. Whether the complaint stated claims under the First Amendment for retaliatory arrest or under the Fourteenth Amendment for due process or equal protection violations.
4. Whether the claims potentially implicating the validity of a criminal conviction could be affected by the Heck doctrine or require a stay under *Wallace v. Kato*.

HOLDINGS

1. A county or municipal department, including a sheriff's office, is not a person subject to suit under § 1983; the court construed the claims against the Sheriff's Office as claims against McCracken County.
2. The complaint failed to state a § 1983 municipal-liability claim because it alleged no facts showing that a McCracken County policy or custom caused the constitutional violations.
3. The complaint stated sufficient claims at the initial-review stage for Fourth Amendment false arrest and illegal search and seizure and for Fifth Amendment compelled self-incrimination against the individual officers in their individual capacities.
4. The First Amendment retaliation claim and the Fourteenth Amendment due-process and equal-protection claims failed because the complaint alleged no facts supporting those theories.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“In allowing these claims to proceed, the Court passes no judgment upon their merit or upon the ultimate outcome of this action.” (Section IV)

“civil tort actions are not appropriate vehicles for challenging the validity of outstanding criminal judgments,” (Section III.B.1)

“a plaintiff’s obligation to provide the ‘grounds’ of his ‘entitle[ment] to relief’ requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of a cause of action’s elements will not do.” (Section III.B.2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Sporea alleged that McCracken County officers unlawfully detained and arrested him without probable cause, conducted an investigative stop and frisk, and searched his vehicle without a warrant, consent, or probable cause. He alleged that officers questioned him after he invoked his right to remain silent, used intimidation tactics, and

retaliated against him for exercising First Amendment rights. He also alleged that a K9 alerted on his vehicle but no illegal substances were found, and asserted supervisory and municipal liability.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Austin Sporea filed a § 1983 action against four McCracken County law-enforcement officers and the McCracken County Sheriff's Office based on an October 2, 2025 arrest. On initial review, the court permitted Fourth Amendment false-arrest and search-and-seizure claims and a Fifth Amendment compelled-self-incrimination claim to proceed against the individual officers in their individual capacities. The court dismissed the First and Fourteenth Amendment claims and all claims against the Sheriff's Office for failure to state a claim.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- McGore v. Wrigglesworth, 114 F.3d 601, 608-09 (6th Cir. 1997)
- Jones v. Bock, 549 U.S. 199 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555, 570 (2007)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972)
- Jourdan v. Jabe, 951 F.2d 108, 110 (6th Cir. 1991)
- McDonald v. Hall, 610 F.2d 16, 19 (1st Cir. 1979)
- Flint ex rel. Flint v. Ky. Dep't of Corr., 270 F.3d 340, 351 (6th Cir. 2001)
- Gomez v. Toledo, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980)
- West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988)
- Christy v. Randlett, 932 F.2d 502, 504 (6th Cir. 1991)
- Rhodes v. McDannel, 945 F.2d 117, 120 (6th Cir. 1991)
- Smallwood v. Jefferson Cnty. Gov't, 743 F. Supp. 502, 503 (W.D. Ky. 1990)
- Matthews v. LMPD, 2019 WL 5549209, at *2 (W.D. Ky. Oct. 25, 2019)
- Collins v. City of Harker Heights, Tex., 503 U.S. 115, 120 (1992)
- Monell v. N.Y.C. Dep't of Soc. Servs., 436 U.S. 658, 691 & n.55 (1978)
- Deaton v. Montgomery Cnty., Ohio, 989 F.2d 885, 889 (6th Cir. 1993)
- Searcy v. City of Dayton, 38 F.3d 282, 286 (6th Cir. 1994)
- Polk Cnty. v. Dodson, 454 U.S. 312, 326 (1981)
- Assi v. Hanshaw, 625 F. Supp. 3d 722, 750 (S.D. Ohio 2022)
- Towns v. Elizabethtown Sheriff's Dep't, 2025 WL 3565511, at *4 (W.D. Ky. Dec. 12, 2025)
- Heck v. Humphrey, 512 U.S. 477, 486-87 (1994)
- Ruff v. Runyon, 258 F.3d 498, 502 (6th Cir. 2001)

- *Wilkinson v. Dotson*, 544 U.S. 74, 81-82 (2005)
- *Schilling v. White*, 58 F.3d 1081, 1087 (6th Cir. 1995)
- *Wallace v. Kato*, 549 U.S. 384, 393 (2007)
- *Thompson v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, 25 F. App'x 357, 358-59 (6th Cir. 2002)
- *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 394 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc)
- *Buckler v. Marainis*, 2023 WL 4748176, at *4 (E.D. Ky. July 25, 2023)

OPINION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT WESTERN DISTRICT OF KENTUCKY PADUCAH DIVISION AUSTIN SPOREA PLAINTIFF v. CIVIL ACTION NO. 5:25-CV-230-JHM TRENT HARDIN, et al. DEFENDANTS MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER Plaintiff Austin Sporea filed the instant pro se 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action proceeding in forma pauperis. This matter is currently before the Court on initial review of Plaintiff's complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) and *McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 608-09 (6th Cir.

1997), overruled on other grounds by *Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S.199 (2007). For the reasons stated below, the Court will allow some claims to proceed and dismiss the remaining claims. I. SUMMARY OF COMPLAINT Plaintiff names as "individual defendants" Lieutenant Trent Hardin, Sherriff Ryan Norman, K9 Unit Officer Steve Croft, and Officer/Deputy Jordan Springer.

He also sues the McCracken County Sheriff's Office. The allegations in the complaint concern what appears to be Plaintiff's arrest on October 2, 2025. On that date, Plaintiff alleges: I was unlawfully detained by officers from McCracken County without probable cause. I was not trespassing, nor was I on the property when officers arrived. My vehicle was compliant, and I was fully compliant and cooperative.

The officers performed an unlawful investigative stop, frisked me, and searched my vehicle without a warrant, consent or probable cause. I was questioned despite invoking my right to remain silent, denied access to a supervisor, and subjected to intimidation tactics that violated my First, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights.

The K9 unit allegedly alerted on my car but no illegal substances were found raising suspicion of false arrest. This incident involved four officers and the county. I suffered emotional distress, fear and humiliation. Plaintiff states that the incident described above resulted in violations of his Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Additionally, he alleges "retaliation [sic] against my protected First Amendment," and "supervisory and municipal liability under Monell." As relief, Plaintiff seeks "actual and punitive damages." II.

STANDARD OF REVIEW Because Plaintiff is proceeding in forma pauperis, the Court must review the complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e). *McGore*, 114 F.3d at 608-09. On review, a district court must dismiss a case at any time if it determines that the action is frivolous or

malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). To survive dismissal for failure to state a claim, “a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)).

The Court recognizes that pro se pleadings are to be held to a less stringent standard than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers. *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972); *Jourdan v. Jabe*, 951 F.2d 108, 110 (6th Cir. 1991).

However, this duty “does not require us to conjure up unpled allegations.” *McDonald v. Hall*, 610 F.2d 16, 19 (1st Cir. 1979). III. ANALYSIS Section 1983 creates no substantive rights but merely provides remedies for deprivations of rights established elsewhere. *Flint ex rel. Flint v. Ky. Dep’t of Corr.*, 270 F.3d 340, 351 (6th Cir. 2001). Two elements are required to state a claim under § 1983.

Gomez v. Toledo, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980). “A plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the Constitution and laws of the United States, and must show that the alleged deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law.” *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988). “Absent either element, a section 1983 claim will not lie.” *Christy v. Randlett*, 932 F.2d 502, 504 (6th Cir.

1991). A. County Defendant Plaintiff sues the McCracken County Sheriff’s Office. However, this Defendant is not a “person” subject to suit under § 1983 because county and municipal departments, such as sheriff and police departments, are not suable under § 1983. *Rhodes v. McDannel*, 945 F.2d 117, 120 (6th Cir. 1991) (holding that a police department may not be sued under § 1983).

In this situation, McCracken County is the proper defendant. *Smallwood v. Jefferson Cnty. Gov’t*, 743 F. Supp. 502, 503 (W.D. Ky. 1990). The Court will therefore construe the claims against the McCracken County Sheriff’s Department as brought against McCracken County. See *Matthews v. LMPD*, No. 3:19-CV-P581-RGJ, 2019 WL 5549209, at *2 (W.D. Ky. Oct. 25, 2019).¹ When a § 1983 claim is made against a municipality or county, the Court must analyze two distinct issues: (1) whether Plaintiff’s harm was caused by a constitutional violation; and (2) if so, whether the municipality or county is responsible for that violation.

Collins v. City of Harker Heights, Tex., 503 U.S. 115, 120 (1992). A municipality or county cannot be held responsible for a constitutional deprivation unless there is a direct causal link between a municipal or county policy or custom and the alleged constitutional deprivation. *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 691; *Deaton v. Montgomery Cnty., Ohio*, 989 F.2d 885, 889 (6th Cir.

1993). The policy or custom “must be ‘the moving force of the constitutional violation’ in order to establish the liability of a government”¹ The same is true if Plaintiff were to sue Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer in their official capacities, because “[o]fficial-capacity suits... ‘generally represent [] another way of pleading an action against an entity of which an officer is an agent.’” *Kentucky v. Graham*, 473 U.S. 159, 166 (1985) (quoting *Monell v. N.Y.C.*

Dep’t of Soc. Servs., 436 U.S. 658, 691 n.55 (1978)). Thus, any official-capacity claims against Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer would be brought against their employer, McCracken County. body under § 1983.” *Searcy v. City of Dayton*, 38 F.3d 282, 286 (6th Cir. 1994) (quoting *Polk Cnty. v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 326 (1981) (citation omitted)). Plaintiff does not allege that his constitutional rights were violated due to a policy or custom of McCracken County.

Instead, under the “Relief” heading of the complaint, he writes “municipal liability under Monell.” Because Plaintiff sets forth no facts establishing that any alleged violation of his constitutional rights is attributable to a policy or custom of McCracken County, his claims against the county must be dismissed. See e.g., *Assi v. Hanshaw*, 625 F. Supp. 3d 722, 750 (S.D.

Ohio 2022) (dismissing a claim for Monell liability because it was “simply too conclusory to survive”); see also *Towns v. Elizabethtown Sheriffs Dep’t*, No. 3:25-CV-489-JHM, 2025 WL 3565511, at *4 (W.D. Ky. Dec. 12, 2025) (dismissing Monell claim on initial review where Plaintiff failed to allege a constitutional violation due to a policy or custom of the county).

B. Individual Defendants 1. **Fourth and Fifth Amendment Claims** The complaint appears to identify Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer as the law enforcement officers involved in the October 2, 2025, arrest from which Plaintiff claims that he was subjected to false arrest, illegal search and seizure, and continued questioning after administration of his Miranda warnings in violation of the Fourth and Fifth Amendments.

Upon review, the Court will allow Plaintiff’s Fourth Amendment claims of false arrest and illegal search and seizure and his Fifth Amendment claim of compelled self-incrimination to proceed against Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer in their individual capacities.

The Court observes that these claims, which call into question the validity of his conviction, may be subject to the bar articulated in *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477, 486– 87 (1994). *Heck* holds that a state prisoner does not state a cognizable claim under § 1983 where a ruling on his claim would imply the invalidity of his conviction and/or confinement, unless and until the conviction has been favorably terminated, i.e., reversed on direct appeal, expunged by executive order, declared invalid by a state tribunal, or called into question by a federal court’s issuance of a writ of habeas corpus.

512 U.S. at 486–87; see also, *Ruff v. Runyon*, 258 F.3d 498, 502 (6th Cir. 2001). “[C]ivil tort actions are not appropriate vehicles for challenging the validity of outstanding criminal judgments,” *Heck*, 512 U.S. at 486, regardless of whether the plaintiff seeks damages or equitable relief. *Wilkinson v. Dotson*, 544 U.S. 74, 81–82 (2005).

Thus, “*Heck* makes clear that no cause of action exists [under § 1983] until a conviction is legally eliminated.” *Schilling v. White*, 58 F.3d 1081, 1087 (6th Cir. 1995). Plaintiff’s claims relate to rulings that would likely be made in a state criminal action.

However, the complaint contains no allegations pertaining to any state criminal proceedings against him arising from the October 2, 2025, arrest. As the United States Supreme Court has held, If a plaintiff files a false arrest claim before he has been convicted (or files any other claim related to rulings that will likely be made in a pending or anticipated criminal trial), it is within the power of the district court, and in accord with common practice, to stay the civil action until the criminal case or the likelihood of a criminal case is ended.

Wallace v. Kato, 549 U.S. 384, 393 (2007). In light of this jurisprudence, if Plaintiff has a criminal case stemming from his allegations that is still pending, it may be necessary for the Court to stay the instant action until completion of the criminal matter. Alternatively, if Plaintiff has been convicted of the charges which he claims were brought illegally, his claims may be barred by the *Heck* doctrine, explained above.

2. First and Fourteenth Amendment Claims Plaintiff also purports to bring his claims under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. However, he sets forth no facts to support a claim that his arrest was in retaliation for exercising his First Amendment rights. See *Thompson v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, 25 F. App’x 357, 358–59 (6th Cir. 2002) (complaint was properly dismissed where plaintiff’s “allegations of retaliation for exercising his First Amendment rights were insufficient to state a claim because he set forth no facts which would support his contention that the defendants were motivated by retaliation.”) (citing *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 394 (6th Cir.

1999) (en banc)). Likewise, there are no facts alleged in the complaint that state or support a viable claim for deprivation of due process or equal protection that would be cognizable under the Fourteenth Amendment. See *Buckler v. Marainis*, No. CV 7:22-055-GFVT, 2023 WL 4748176, at *4 (E.D. Ky. July 25, 2023) (finding that “mere reference” to the Fourteenth Amendment, “devoid of any factual allegations” to support such a claim, was insufficient to state a claim for relief); see generally, *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555 (“[A] plaintiff’s obligation to provide the ‘grounds’ of his ‘entitle[ment] to relief’ requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of a cause of action’s elements will not do.”).

Accordingly, any claims against Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer brought under the First and Fourteenth Amendments must be dismissed for failure to state a claim. IV. ORDER

For the foregoing reasons, IT IS ORDERED that the Fourth Amendment claims for false arrest and illegal search and seizure and the Fifth Amendment claim for compelled self-incrimination against Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer in their individual capacities will continue past initial review.

In allowing these claims to proceed, the Court passes no judgment upon their merit or upon the ultimate outcome of this action. The Court will enter a separate Service and Scheduling Order to govern the development of these claims. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the First and Fourteenth Amendment claims against Defendants Hardin, Norman, Croft, and Springer in their individual capacities and all claims against the McCracken County Sheriff's Office are DISMISSED pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

The Clerk of Court is DIRECTED to terminate McCracken County Sheriffs Office as a party to this action. Date: May 7, 2026 MMSinf Joseph H. McKinley Jr., Senior Judge United States District Court ce: Plaintiff, pro se 4414.015