



People gather outside the Alabama Governor's Mansion in Montgomery, Alabama, on Feb. 16, 2026, to urge Gov. Kay Ivey to grant clemency to Sonny Burton, who is scheduled to be executed on March 12, 2026. (AP photo/Kim Chandler)



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Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey on Tuesday commuted the death sentence of Charles "Sonny" Burton, sparing the 75-year-old inmate from a scheduled execution this week and ending more than three decades on death row.

Burton had been set to die Thursday (March 12) for his role in a 1991 robbery that led to the fatal shooting of Douglas Battle inside an AutoZone store in Talladega, Alabama. Though Burton was convicted of capital murder, he was not the person who pulled the trigger.

In announcing the commutation, Ivey said she could not allow the execution to move forward given the circumstances of the case. Burton's sentence has been reduced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

"I cannot proceed in good conscience with the execution of Mr. Burton under such disparate circumstances. I believe it would be unjust for one participant in this crime to be executed while the participant who pulled the trigger was not," the governor said.



Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey is shown in 2019 signing a bill into law. (CNS photo/Office of the Governor State of Alabama handout via Reuters)

The gunman in the robbery, Derrick DeBruce, was also originally sentenced to death but that sentence was later reduced to life in prison without parole [after courts determined](#) he had received ineffective legal representation during his trial. DeBruce died in prison in 2020.

Advocates for Burton argued that allowing his execution to proceed while the shooter avoided the death penalty showed a stark inconsistency in the justice system.

Burton was one of six men involved in the robbery. Court records show that he had already left the store when the shooting occurred and did not direct DeBruce to fire the fatal shot. Still, a jury [convicted](#) him of capital murder in 1992, sending him to Alabama's death row.

In a recent interview before the governor's decision, Burton acknowledged his involvement in the robbery while expressing regret.

"I didn't kill no one, true enough, but I made a mistake by being part of the crime," Burton [said](#). "I made a mistake, and it seems like all my friends have forgave me. I hope that my friends will remember me and remember that I was a real friend, a good friend."

The governor's decision was welcomed by Burton's family. His daughter, Lois Harris, said she felt immense relief after learning that the execution would not take place.

"I'm thankful. I'm glad she made that decision because it was the right decision," she [told](#) CNN, adding that the news felt like a weight was lifted from her shoulders.



Eddie Mae Ellison, Jackie Bradford, Mary Bradford and Lois Harris hold signs urging Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey to grant clemency for their family member Charles "Sonny" Burton, Jan. 28, 2026, in Montgomery, Alabama. (AP photo/Kim Chandler)

Clemency decisions are rare in Alabama. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, fewer than half of 1% of people sentenced to death in the state have received clemency. Ivey has granted such relief only once before during her time in office.

Advocates who had campaigned for Burton's life said the governor's decision corrected a troubling imbalance in the case.

Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, praised the move and highlighted the broader moral debate surrounding capital punishment.

"The Catholic Church teaches that all human life is sacred, regardless of innocence or guilt. There is no place for the death penalty in that vision of a consistent ethic of life," she said in a statement. "Today, I'm grateful that Mr. Burton's life has been spared."

Murphy also acknowledged the enduring impact on the victim's family, noting that decades of court proceedings often leave families without the closure they seek.

Battle's daughter, Tori Battle, had [publicly opposed](#) Burton's execution, writing in an op-ed that carrying it out would not bring healing.

"My opposition to this execution is not a betrayal of my father. It is an affirmation of the values he lived by, and that I have tried to instill in my children. Justice can be measured by our commitment to truth and our willingness to show mercy," she said.

"Executing a man who did not commit the killing does not heal wounds or strengthen public trust. It weakens it. ... I lost my father to violence. Another death will not bring him back. It will only deepen my trauma and the moral cost we all share."

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Burton's legal team said the governor's decision brought relief after decades of uncertainty.

"We are grateful to Governor Ivey for carefully considering this case and granting clemency to Mr. Burton," [said](#) Cecilia Vaca, executive director of the Federal Defenders of Middle Alabama, who assisted Burton in the case. "Sonny's team is with him now sharing the news, and they will have more to say very soon. For now, we are profoundly grateful that Sonny's life has been spared."

Opponents of the death penalty also pointed to the case as an example of broader flaws in the capital punishment system.

Laura Porter, executive director of the U.S. Campaign to End the Death Penalty, said it illustrated how unevenly the punishment can be applied.

"The death penalty process is deeply flawed when someone who was not present for the killing faces execution, while the person who committed the murder does not. It is uplifting to see that more and more governors across the ideological spectrum are recognizing problems with death penalty cases," she said.

Archbishop Mark S. Rivotuso of Mobile, Alabama, as well expressed gratitude to Ivey for commuting the death sentence of Burton. In a statement, Rivotuso said the decision reflects a core principle of Catholic teaching, adding that "in choosing mercy, Gov. Ivey has affirmed the dignity of human life and helped foster a greater culture of life in our society."

The archbishop also remembered the victim, Battle, saying his loved ones and family's loss "remains a profound tragedy," while assuring that prayers continue for them. He also invited the faithful of the Archdiocese of Mobile to pray "for all victims of violence, along with their loved ones, and for those who have been condemned to death."

This story has been updated with a statement from Mobile Archbishop Mark S. Rivotuso.