

A family can lose someone in a few seconds and spend years trying to establish what happened. During those years, grief becomes entangled with police reports, medical findings, court deadlines, television coverage, and arguments about a person who can no longer speak. Ben Crump has built his career in that difficult space. He represents people whose injuries or deaths raise questions about the exercise of power, and he works to prevent their families from being overwhelmed by institutions with greater resources. His most visible cases have made him one of the country's best-known civil rights attorneys. They have also produced widely different results. Some ended in substantial settlements. Some were followed by criminal convictions. Others brought acquittals, dismissed charges, or continuing litigation. Understanding his work requires looking beyond the photograph at the press conference and following each case far enough to see what the law actually delivered.

Benjamin Lloyd Crump was born on October 10, 1969, in Lumberton, North Carolina. He grew up in an extended family, with a mother whose work included hotel housekeeping and employment in a shoe factory. He later attended high school in Florida and earned both his undergraduate degree and law degree at Florida State University, graduating from law school in 1995. His background helps explain his attention to the distance between having rights on paper and possessing the resources to enforce them. A person can be legally entitled to fair treatment while lacking money for investigators, expert witnesses, or years of litigation. Crump entered a profession in which those practical differences can shape whether an injury is ever meaningfully examined. His subsequent career has included leadership of the National Bar Association, the longstanding organization of predominantly African American lawyers and judges. [Crump's background](#), [Florida State University's profile](#)

His professional identity needs to be established clearly: Crump generally represents injured people and families in civil matters; he is not the prosecutor who brings criminal charges against the people accused of harming them. A prosecutor acts for the government and can seek a conviction and imprisonment. A civil attorney acts for a client and can pursue compensation or other remedies permitted by law. Crump can advocate for an arrest, challenge an official account, present information to investigators, and support a family during a prosecution. He cannot personally order charges or deliver a criminal verdict. Consequently, saying that he “sent an officer to prison” usually misstates his role. Saying that he “lost the case” whenever prosecutors fail to obtain a conviction can be equally misleading. The family's civil lawsuit and the government's criminal prosecution are separate proceedings, even when they arise from the same death.

The legal standards also differ. In most civil cases, the plaintiff—the person bringing the lawsuit—must prove the claim by a preponderance of the evidence, meaning that it is more likely true than not. Criminal guilt must be established beyond a reasonable doubt, a much higher burden because the government is seeking to impose criminal punishment. A settlement introduces another distinction. It is an agreement resolving a

dispute, usually without a trial determining all the contested facts. Settlements frequently include no admission of wrongdoing. A jury verdict, meanwhile, is a decision reached after evidence is presented, and it may still face challenges or appeal. These distinctions explain how a family can receive compensation without anyone being convicted, or win a large verdict without immediately receiving the amount announced. [Cornell Law School on the civil burden of proof, settlements](#)

One of the cases that established Crump's reputation before national audiences knew him involved Martin Lee Anderson, a fourteen-year-old who died in January 2006 after being restrained and struck at a juvenile boot camp in Bay County, Florida. Video of the encounter became central to public scrutiny. There was a serious dispute over the medical explanation: the first autopsy attributed the death to complications involving sickle cell trait, while a second concluded that the actions of the guards caused suffocation. Crump represented Anderson's family during the struggle to challenge the initial account. The case illustrates why independent examination matters. A medical conclusion is consequential evidence, but it can be disputed through additional expertise; the first official explanation does not become unchangeable simply because an authority issued it. [The investigations into Anderson's death](#)

The results were substantial in some respects and devastating to the family in another. Florida provided a \$5 million settlement, with the Legislature approving the portion beyond the amount already paid by the state. The death also contributed to the closure of Florida's juvenile boot camp system. Yet the seven guards and nurse prosecuted in connection with Anderson's death were acquitted in October 2007. An acquittal means the prosecution did not establish criminal guilt to the jury's satisfaction; it does not mean the state never compensated the family or that the institutional response never changed. Anderson's case therefore resists being compressed into either a complete victory or a complete failure. It produced compensation and major policy consequences, but no criminal conviction of the people tried. [Florida's legislative settlement record, the criminal verdict](#)

Trayvon Martin's death brought Crump to much broader national attention. Martin was seventeen when George Zimmerman, a neighborhood-watch volunteer, shot him in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012. Zimmerman said he acted in self-defense. Crump represented Martin's parents, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, and worked with others to obtain information and attract scrutiny to a case in which Zimmerman had not initially been arrested. The family's public presence mattered because they were challenging the reduction of their son to the account supplied by the surviving participant. Their advocacy helped make the case a national discussion about suspicion, race, self-defense, and whose explanation receives the benefit of the doubt. Crump's work here involved both legal representation and the effort to ensure that officials would have to explain their decisions publicly. [The family's legal and public response](#)

The outcome must be stated without softening it: Zimmerman was acquitted in the state criminal trial in July 2013. In February 2015, the Justice Department announced that it

lacked sufficient evidence to bring federal criminal civil rights charges. Separately, Martin's parents reached a confidential settlement with the neighborhood's homeowners association in 2013. The amount was not publicly confirmed, and it should not be invented from estimates or repeated as a verified figure. The settlement did not overturn Zimmerman's acquittal. Nor did the federal decision amount to a finding that every action surrounding the encounter was wise or just; it concerned whether prosecutors could prove a federal crime. For Crump's clients, a civil resolution existed alongside the failure to obtain the criminal accountability they wanted. The Justice Department's decision, the separate civil settlement

A difficult test of factual honesty appears in the case of Michael Brown, the eighteen-year-old killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. Crump was among the attorneys representing Brown's family. The shooting helped ignite a national movement, and the image of Brown surrendering with his hands raised became widely associated with it. However, the Justice Department's 2015 investigation did not substantiate that account. Its examination found that claims of surrender were contradicted by physical evidence or were not credible, and it concluded that the evidence did not establish a prosecutable federal civil rights violation by Wilson. A responsible account cannot repeat the surrender narrative as an established fact simply because it became an influential slogan. The Justice Department's investigation of the shooting

At the same time, a separate Justice Department investigation found serious constitutional violations and racial discrimination in Ferguson's policing and municipal court practices. Those findings concerned an institutional pattern and were not erased by the decision against charging Wilson. Both conclusions belong in the same account. In 2017, Brown's parents' civil lawsuit was resolved through a \$1.5 million settlement, paid by the city's insurer on behalf of multiple defendants. Wilson was not criminally convicted. The settlement was not a judicial endorsement of every allegation made during the public controversy. The case teaches a demanding form of judgment: evidence can undermine a particular narrative while also exposing genuine systemic misconduct. Respect for a grieving family and respect for factual accuracy do not require choosing one and abandoning the other. The Ferguson institutional investigation, the settlement

In the case of George Floyd, the evidence and outcomes followed a markedly different course. Floyd died on May 25, 2020, while Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin restrained him with a knee on his neck. The video recorded by Darnella Frazier became indispensable evidence and prevented the encounter from remaining an event described only through official reporting. Crump worked with a legal team representing Floyd's family, and Minneapolis approved a \$27 million civil settlement in March 2021. The agreement included \$500,000 designated for the community around the intersection where Floyd was killed. That was a concrete result of the family's civil litigation, separate from the criminal proceedings. Credit belongs to the legal team and family, while the

wider history must also recognize witnesses, investigators, medical experts, journalists, and prosecutors. The Floyd family settlement

Chauvin was convicted in the state trial in April 2021 and sentenced to twenty-two and a half years. He later pleaded guilty in federal court to civil rights offenses involving Floyd and a separate teenage victim, receiving a twenty-one-year federal sentence in July 2022, to run concurrently with the state sentence. Concurrent sentences overlap; they are not simply added together. The three other officers involved also received federal convictions and prison sentences. This case therefore produced both a substantial civil settlement and criminal punishment. Crump's role was significant, but he did not prosecute Chauvin. The distinction preserves the real achievement instead of enlarging it through an inaccurate description of his authority. The state and civil proceedings, Chauvin's federal sentence, the other officers' federal cases

Breonna Taylor's case demonstrates how compensation can arrive years before the criminal process settles into anything resembling clarity. Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old medical worker, was killed during a police search of her Louisville apartment on March 13, 2020. Her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, fired a shot because he said he believed intruders were entering; officers returned fire. The circumstances of the entry, the warrant, and individual officers' actions became subjects of separate investigations and legal disputes. Crump worked with attorneys including Lonita Baker and Sam Aguiar in representing Taylor's family. In September 2020, Louisville agreed to a \$12 million settlement accompanied by police-reform commitments, including increased supervision of search-warrant procedures. The money and commitments were meaningful, but the family continued seeking criminal accountability. The settlement and accompanying reforms

The criminal results have been narrower and more complicated than the phrase "justice for Breonna" can communicate. Former officer Brett Hankison was acquitted of state wanton-endangerment charges, then convicted in a federal retrial in November 2024 of violating Taylor's civil rights. He received thirty-three months in prison in July 2025. His shots did not kill Taylor, so describing that conviction as a murder conviction would be wrong. Former detective Kelly Goodlett separately pleaded guilty in 2022 to a conspiracy charge connected to the warrant. In March 2026, a federal judge dismissed the remaining cases against Joshua Jaynes and Kyle Meany after the Justice Department requested dismissal. The dismissal was with prejudice, meaning those charges could not simply be filed again. Reporting that month also noted that Hankison had been released while appealing. These developments show why a 2020 settlement announcement cannot serve as the final account of the case. Hankison's sentence, the March 2026 developments

Taylor's case also makes clear that policy promises and lasting oversight are different achievements. A settlement can contain reforms, but implementation requires continued attention to training, supervision, discipline, and actual behavior. A separate proposed federal police-reform agreement for Louisville was dismissed after the Justice

Department withdrew its support; city officials said local reform efforts would continue. That later federal process should not be confused with the family's original civil settlement. Several institutions can respond to the same event through different legal mechanisms, and one can move forward while another is weakened or abandoned. Crump's ability to negotiate compensation does not give him control over federal enforcement priorities or guarantee that a police department will carry out durable change. The separate federal reform agreement

Ahmaud Arbery's murder involved private citizens rather than an on-duty police shooting. Arbery was twenty-five when Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael, and William "Roddie" Bryan pursued him through a Georgia neighborhood on February 23, 2020. Travis McMichael shot him. Crump was among the attorneys advocating for Arbery's family, alongside lawyers whose work included representing different family interests and pursuing accountability. The delay before arrests became a central public concern. Once the video became widely known, the case received a level of scrutiny that it had previously lacked. In November 2021, all three men were convicted of murder in state court. In January 2022, the McMichaels received life sentences without parole; Bryan received life with the possibility of parole. The state proceedings

Federal jurors also convicted all three men of hate crimes and attempted kidnapping in February 2022. The McMichaels subsequently received additional federal life sentences, and Bryan received a thirty-five-year federal sentence. The federal case mattered because it specifically addressed the role of race in the pursuit and killing. Evidence of racial motivation had to be established, rather than assumed solely from the races of the victim and defendants. A federal appeals court upheld the hate-crime convictions in November 2025. This was a major instance of criminal accountability associated with a family Crump represented, but the convictions were obtained by government prosecutors. The achievement should be described as collective: family persistence, legal advocacy, public scrutiny, investigative work, and courtroom proof all contributed. The federal proceedings, the appellate ruling

The case of Botham Jean exposes an issue often hidden by enormous verdict announcements. Jean, a twenty-six-year-old accountant from Saint Lucia, was killed in his own Dallas apartment in September 2018 by police officer Amber Guyger, who said she mistakenly believed she had entered her own apartment. She was convicted of murder in 2019 and sentenced to ten years. In November 2024, a federal jury awarded Jean's family \$98.65 million against Guyger. Crump was part of the family's legal representation. The number is striking, but the defendant matters as much as the amount: this was a verdict against Guyger, not an announcement that Dallas had agreed to pay the family nearly \$100 million. The criminal and civil outcomes

A judgment establishes a legal obligation; collecting it can require a separate and difficult effort. A defendant may lack assets or applicable insurance sufficient to satisfy an award. Appeals, exemptions, and other enforcement questions can also affect recovery. Consequently, "the jury awarded \$98.65 million" and "the family received

\$98.65 million” are not interchangeable statements. The first is supported by the verdict; the second requires evidence of payment. That distinction does not make the verdict meaningless. It can establish liability and formally recognize the magnitude of a wrong. But readers deserve to understand the practical limit before treating the announced amount as money already available to the family. A lawyer’s record should not be inflated by confusing a legal award with a completed transfer.

Tyre Nichols’s case has produced an especially painful sequence of outcomes. Nichols died in January 2023 after a violent encounter with Memphis officers. Crump and attorney Antonio Romanucci represented his family in civil litigation. Five officers were initially central to the criminal proceedings, and all five were Black—a fact that complicates any account reducing abusive policing exclusively to encounters between white officers and Black civilians. In October 2024, a federal jury convicted Demetrius Haley, Tadarrius Bean, and Justin Smith on differing charges. Haley’s convictions included civil rights offenses; Bean and Smith were convicted of witness tampering. Emmitt Martin III and Desmond Mills Jr. had separately pleaded guilty. Those differences matter because the jury did not find every defendant guilty of every accusation. The original federal verdicts

The account changed further in 2025. A state jury acquitted Haley, Bean, and Smith of all state charges in May. In August, a federal judge ordered new trials for those three after finding problems involving the original judge’s conduct and the appearance of impartiality. The retrial order did not apply to Martin and Mills’s guilty pleas. It would therefore be inaccurate to repeat the original federal convictions without mentioning that they were set aside for new trials. Meanwhile, the family’s civil lawsuit originally sought \$550 million. That was an amount requested, not an amount won. August 2026 local reporting said the civil trial against Memphis had been postponed to May 2027. The record remains one of guilty pleas, acquittals, overturned trial results, and continuing civil litigation—not a completed compensation victory. The state acquittals, the federal retrial order, the civil case’s later schedule

Sonya Massey’s death brought another family to Crump after a request for help ended in a police killing. Massey called 911 about a possible prowler in July 2024. Former Sangamon County deputy Sean Grayson shot her inside her home near Springfield, Illinois. In February 2025, the county agreed to a \$10 million settlement with her family. Grayson was convicted of second-degree murder in October 2025 and received the maximum twenty-year sentence for that offense in January 2026. The distinction between first- and second-degree murder depends on the jurisdiction; it should not be explained through a single universal rule. What can be stated plainly is that the jury convicted him of the lesser murder offense and that the sentencing judge imposed its maximum prison term. The settlement and sentence

There has since been another development: the Associated Press reported that Grayson died in prison in August 2026. His death does not change the fact that he was convicted and sentenced, but it changes any account suggesting he will serve the full twenty years. Massey’s case also prompted changes concerning law-enforcement hiring, including

Illinois's Sonya Massey Act. The combination of compensation, a murder conviction, and legislative action represents several distinct responses to one killing. None returns a mother to her children. That observation should not be used to dismiss the legal results; it explains why families may acknowledge progress without experiencing anything resembling completion. The legal system can impose consequences, but it cannot restore the life around which a household was organized. [The subsequent development and legislative response](#)

Crump's work also extends well beyond policing. His representation of Henrietta Lacks's estate concerns the commercial use of cells taken from her during treatment for cervical cancer in 1951 without her knowledge or consent. Those cells, known as HeLa cells, became an extraordinarily important research tool because they could continue reproducing under laboratory conditions. The estate's case against Thermo Fisher Scientific focused on unjust enrichment: the claim that a company had benefited in a way the law should require it to remedy. Crump worked with attorneys from Seeger Weiss. In August 2023, the parties announced a confidential settlement. The result was a negotiated resolution, not a published jury verdict establishing a dollar value for everything medical science had gained from HeLa cells. [The settlement announcement, the scientific and ethical context](#)

The litigation has continued against other companies. Novartis reached a confidential settlement with the estate in February 2026. The family's legal team also reported a resolution with Viatris in March 2026, while litigation against Ultragenyx continued. Confidentiality means the financial terms cannot honestly be described as a known multimillion-dollar payout unless they are disclosed. Nor did the Thermo Fisher agreement create a universal rule requiring every researcher using human cells to pay the donor's descendants. The significance is more specific: an estate obtained negotiated resolutions from companies it accused of profiting from an exploitation with a documented history. The case connects civil litigation to medical ethics and economic benefit, showing how questions of dignity can arise long after the person at the center of them has died. [Reuters on Novartis, the legal team's litigation updates](#)

Another major result came after Tyre Sampson, a fourteen-year-old, died in a fall from the Orlando FreeFall amusement ride in March 2022. Crump worked with other attorneys representing the family in litigation concerning the ride's safety. In December 2024, a Florida jury awarded \$310 million against the Austrian manufacturer, Funtime. The manufacturer did not appear to defend itself at the trial, an important procedural fact when interpreting the result. Separate settlements had already been reached with other parties. The case also contributed to Florida legislation strengthening amusement-ride safety requirements. This was a personal-injury and wrongful-death matter, demonstrating that Crump's practice includes corporate safety failures as well as allegations of government misconduct. [The verdict and related developments](#)

Again, the award should not be described as \$310 million already paid. Enforcing a judgment against an overseas company can present substantial complications, and the

size of a verdict does not itself prove the amount ultimately recovered. The case's broader importance concerns the responsibilities of the adults and businesses controlling an attraction. A child purchasing access to a ride is not responsible for evaluating its engineering or verifying that its safety system will function. Operators and manufacturers occupy that position of knowledge and control. Litigation can examine whether those responsibilities were met through records, inspections, technical evidence, and expert testimony. Crump's public advocacy brings attention to the loss, while the legal claim must establish the particular failures attributable to the defendants.

An honest account must also include a prominent civil case in which Crump's clients did not prevail. He represented members of songwriter Ed Townsend's family in the copyright case alleging that Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud" infringed "Let's Get It On," which Townsend co-wrote with Marvin Gaye. Crump publicly connected the dispute to the history of Black musicians losing control of the value they created. That history is real, but its existence could not decide whether Sheeran infringed this particular composition. The jury ruled for Sheeran in May 2023. The defense maintained that the songs were independently created and that the alleged similarities involved common musical elements. The result was a defeat for the plaintiffs in that trial. Crump's role and the competing arguments, the verdict

That case reveals a limit that applies throughout his career: a morally forceful argument still has to satisfy the law governing the specific dispute. Copyright protects qualifying expression, but it does not give a songwriter ownership of every familiar musical ingredient used in a song. Civil rights law likewise requires proof of particular violations, defendants, and connections between conduct and harm. Public concern may justify close examination; it cannot substitute for that examination. A losing case does not by itself establish that an attorney acted dishonestly, just as a settlement does not prove that every public statement made on behalf of a client was correct. Assessing legal work responsibly requires resisting both automatic suspicion and automatic endorsement.

The public attention surrounding Crump is one of his strongest assets and one of the reasons his methods attract criticism. He helps families communicate in a setting where police departments, corporations, and governments often have experienced public-relations operations of their own. A press conference can draw out witnesses, prompt journalists to request records, and prevent an incident from disappearing. Yet public advocacy also carries a responsibility to distinguish known facts from allegations and interpretations. An early statement may travel much farther than a later correction. The Michael Brown investigation is a reminder of that danger. A lawyer is an advocate for a client, not a neutral investigator, and readers should evaluate the evidence behind an assertion rather than treating confidence at a microphone as proof.

There is also a practical reason why many of these cases end in settlements. Litigation can last years, require costly experts, and expose families to invasive questioning about their loved ones. Legal barriers can prevent a trial even when a case raises serious concerns. Qualified immunity, for example, can protect government officials from

personal liability for damages when the relevant legal requirements are not met, including the requirement concerning clearly established rights. It is not immunity from criminal prosecution. Other rules govern whether a municipality can be liable for an employee's actions. A civil attorney must therefore evaluate more than the apparent wrongfulness of an event. The legal path to a remedy may be narrower than the public assumes. [Cornell Law School on qualified immunity](#)

Settling can provide a family with a certain recovery while avoiding those risks. It can also leave them without a full public trial or an admission of wrongdoing. The decision belongs to the client, advised by counsel, and there is no honest universal rule that settlement means either surrender or complete justice. The source of payment also matters. Municipal settlements are often funded through insurance, public funds, or a combination, rather than deducted directly from an individual officer's assets. That can compensate the injured family while leaving a separate question about personal and institutional deterrence. A serious discussion must be able to recognize the value of compensation while still examining whether the conditions that produced the injury have changed.

Crump's practice is also a business, and that fact should neither be concealed nor treated as evidence of wrongdoing by itself. Personal-injury and civil rights lawyers often work through a contingency fee, under which an attorney receives an agreed share of a recovery rather than requiring the client to pay ordinary hourly fees throughout the case. Such arrangements can make representation possible for people who otherwise could not afford it. They also make clear why the announced gross settlement is not necessarily the family's final net recovery: attorney fees, litigation expenses, and other lawful obligations may affect the distribution. The precise arrangement must be established from the agreement or court record. An observer cannot responsibly calculate Crump's personal income by taking a guessed percentage of every case associated with his name. [How contingency fees work](#)

His record is therefore best understood through several kinds of achievement rather than one running total. The Floyd and Taylor cases produced major negotiated settlements. The Lacks litigation produced confidential corporate resolutions. The Jean and Sampson cases produced substantial jury awards whose collection is a separate question. The Martin and Brown cases ended without criminal convictions of the men who shot them. The Townsend copyright plaintiffs lost at trial. Nichols's case has involved acquittals, guilty pleas, a retrial order, and a civil action still awaiting trial. These are not minor details attached to a reputation. They are the substance of the reputation, and they allow admiration or criticism to rest on something firmer than publicity.

Crump's significance lies partly in helping people insist that an official explanation can be examined, that a corporation can be required to answer a complaint, and that a family without institutional power can still enter a courtroom with capable representation. His work belongs to a much larger legal tradition, and its results depend on colleagues, clients, witnesses, experts, judges, jurors, and public officials whose names are less

familiar. There is real value in that work without needing to turn every case into a triumph or every allegation into a fact. The families deserve something more demanding than a flattering account of their attorney. They deserve an accurate record of what happened, what was established, what was compensated, and what remains unresolved.