

Trial of Kyle Rittenhouse for BLM protest killings begins

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Kyle Rittenhouse faces life in prison if convicted for killing two men and injuring another with a military-style rifle during demonstrations against racism and police violence on the streets of Kenosha, Wisconsin in August 2020 [File: Nam Y Huh/Pool via Reuters]

Madison, November 2 (RHC)-- The trial of Kyle Rittenhouse, the U.S. teenager charged with killing two men and wounding a third with a military-style rifle during protests against racism and police brutality in Wisconsin last year, got underway on Monday with jury selection.

Lawyers from the prosecution and defence have begun probing potential jurors for their political leanings and perceived biases in a case that has drawn widespread attention. Lawyers are expected to ask potential jurors about their views on issues including policing and gun rights, on which the trial is expected to hinge.

Rittenhouse was 17 years old when he made the short trip north from his home in Illinois, just across the Wisconsin border, to Kenosha, during protests that broke out in August 2020 after a white police officer shot Jacob Blake, a Black man. Rittenhouse, now 18, faces life in prison if he is convicted of first-degree homicide during the Black Lives Matter protests.

Rittenhouse faces seven charges, including homicide in the fatal shootings of Joseph Rosenbaum, 36, and Anthony Huber, 26, and attempted homicide for wounding Gaige Grosskreutz, 27. He's also charged with possession of a dangerous weapon by a person under 18. He has pleaded not guilty on all counts.

Prosecutors are expected to argue that Rittenhouse, who has said he was in Kenosha to help protect a business, was looking for violent conflict and reacted with disproportionate force. The defense will stress that Rittenhouse feared for his life in each encounter.

Judge Bruce Schroeder, who has experience presiding over high-profile trials, told lawyers that he believed picking the 20-member jury pool from 150 prospective jurors can be accomplished in a day. The trial is expected to last two to three weeks.

"As much as the judge does not want this to be a political trial, politics are going to run deep through this thing," Keith Findley, a professor at the University of Wisconsin Law School told the Reuters news agency.

Judge Schroeder said each side will be allowed to strike seven people to reach a total of 20 jurors. The judge has not specified how many of those would be alternates.

The case has been polarising, with Rittenhouse painted by his backers as a patriot exercising self-defence and gun rights protected by the U.S. Constitution. Others see him as a vigilante and police wannabe who never should have been armed in Kenosha in the first place.

Rittenhouse is white, as were those he shot, but many are watching his trial as the latest referendum on race and the U.S. legal system.

Rittenhouse fatally shot Rosenbaum with an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle after Rosenbaum chased Rittenhouse across a parking lot and threw a plastic bag at him shortly before midnight on August 25, 2020. Moments later, as Rittenhouse was running down a street, he shot and killed Huber, a protester from Silver Lake, Wisconsin, and shot and wounded Grosskreutz, a protester from West Allis, Wisconsin.

Bystander video captured Rosenbaum chasing Rittenhouse but not the actual shooting. Video showed Huber swinging a skateboard at Rittenhouse before he was shot. Grosskreutz had a gun in his hand as he stepped towards Rittenhouse and was shot.

The prosecution, led by Kenosha County Assistant District Attorney Thomas Binger, will likely try and choose left-leaning jurors inclined to view protests over-policing and racial justice favorably and frown upon armed citizens taking to the street, legal experts said.

The defense, led by lawyer Mark Richards, is expected to focus on securing a right-leaning jury, with people who back the right to bear arms, support law enforcement and likely voted for former US President

Donald Trump.

“The scripts are flipped on this one,” Michael F Hart, a criminal defence lawyer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin told Reuters, noting that the prosecution would normally be the side trying to secure jurors who view law and order as important. “That’s what makes this case unique and an interesting one to watch.”

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