

Cybercrime, murder and 'The Situation': The top court cases to watch in 2018

Posted January 06, 2018 at 07:00 AM | Updated January 06, 2018 at 07:05 AM

By [Thomas Moriarty](#) | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com



The Richard J. Hughes Justice Complex in Trenton, home of the state judiciary. (File photo)

Even a casual scan of New Jersey's court dockets shows the legal profession remains alive and well in the Garden State. In 2017, New Jersey's federal courts alone saw the country's **first trial of a sitting U.S. senator** in nearly a decade, a Camden County teenager **admit a terrorist plot to assassinate the Pope** and the former mayor of Passaic **sentenced to prison for bribery**.

The new year is shaping up to be equally busy for both state and federal courts. These are some of the most noteworthy cases to watch in 2018:



Ali Muhammad Brown is escorted by state Department of Corrections officers into Judge Ronald Wigler's courtroom in Newark for a hearing on July 18, 2017. Brown is charged with murder, terrorism and other offenses in the June 2014 slaying of Brendan Tevlin, shown in inset photo at right. (Court photo: Robert Sciarrino | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com; Inset photo: Courtesy of Tevlin family)

Brendan Tevlin's alleged killer heads to trial

More than three years after Livingston native Brendan Tevlin was **gunned down as he stopped at a traffic light in West Orange**, Ali Muhammad Brown is scheduled to stand trial this winter on murder and terrorism charges in Tevlin's June 25, 2014, killing.

Authorities have said Brown, a Seattle native, killed Tevlin, 19, as part of a cross-country crime spree that included the slayings of three men in Seattle and armed robberies in

West Orange and Point Pleasant Beach. **In a statement to detectives**, Brown — the first person to be charged with terrorism under state law in connection with a homicide — said the killings were acts of vengeance for lives lost in the Middle East.

While Superior Court Judge Ronald D. Wigler has ruled Brown's confession can be introduced as evidence at trial, he also ruled that prosecutors **won't be allowed to introduce evidence of the killings in Washington state**.

Brown is currently incarcerated at the New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, where he's serving **a 36-year sentence for the West Orange armed robbery**. He **refused to attend his own trial** in that case.

Jury selection for the murder trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 29. Brown has yet to stand trial in the Point Pleasant Beach robbery case.



Preston Taylor (center) has agreed to testify against Liam McAtasney (right) in his trial on murder and other charges in the killing of Sarah Stern (left) (NJ Advance Media photos)

Co-defendant set to testify against alleged killer in Sara Stern slaying

One of two young men charged in the death of 19-year-old Neptune City resident Sarah Stern has **agreed to testify against the other** in a plea deal with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office.

Preston Taylor, 20, pleaded guilty in April to charges of robbery, evidence tampering, desecrating human remains and hindering apprehension in connection with the death of Stern, whose body he admitted helping Liam McAtasney dump over the side of the Route 35 bridge in Belmar in December 2016. Prosecutors have said they plan to ask for a 20-year prison sentence.

Prosecutors and Taylor allege McAtasney, also 20, **strangled Stern** in order steal \$10,000 she had received from her grandmother. Stern's car was discovered parked on the bridge on Dec. 3, **sparking an extensive search effort**. Her body still has not been recovered.

The prosecutor's office filed charges against McAtasney and Taylor in February, and McAtasney was later indicted on charges of murder, felony murder, conspiracy and robbery, in addition to the evidence tampering, desecration and hindering offenses to which Taylor pleaded guilty.

A trial date has not yet been set.



Former Rutgers University student Paras Jha, left, leaves the U.S. District Courthouse in Trenton with his attorney, Robert Stahl, on Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2017. (Jeff Granit | For NJ.com)

Former Rutgers student admitted role in global botnet

A former **Rutgers computer science student** is slated to be sentenced this spring after admitting he was responsible for both crashing the university's computer networks in a series of attacks and for helping develop a **devastating botnet** — a network of computers infected by the same virus — later used in a global attack in fall 2016.

Paras Jha, 21, of Fanwood, was one of three men who pleaded guilty in a federal court in Alaska on Dec. 8 under agreements with the Justice Department in connection with their roles in the creation of the "Mirai" botnet, which authorities said was used by others to crash websites around the world in October 2016.

Jha was first **publicly named as a possible author of the Mirai botnet** — which targeted internet-connected consumer devices — in January 2017 by cyber security blogger Brian Krebs, a former reporter for The Washington Post.

Jha, whose attorney described him as "a brilliant young man whose intellect and technical skills far exceeded his emotional maturity," also pleaded guilty in federal court in Trenton on Dec. 13 to intentionally crashing Rutgers' computer network in a number of attacks between 2014 and 2016.

Prosecutors said school officials spent **between \$3.5 million and \$9.5 million** on cyber security upgrades as a result of Jha's attacks, which cut off internet access for system users for days at a time.

Jha faces a maximum potential sentence of 10 years in prison at sentencing, which has been scheduled for March 13.



Carteret police officer Joseph Reiman, right, with his defense attorney Charles Sciarra, left, before his pre-indictment hearing in state Superior Court in New Brunswick on Thursday, Aug. 24, 2017. Reiman is accused of assaulting a teen during his arrest. (Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Carteret cop indicted in assault on teenager

Joseph Reiman, **a Carteret police officer and the younger brother of the borough's mayor**, was indicted in state Superior Court in September on aggravated assault and official misconduct charges in connection with his **alleged beating of a teenage boy after a car chase**.

Reiman, who has been **suspended from the department** since the first charges were filed, was slapped with **additional charges** in November, accusing him of giving false statements and tampering with department records after the teen's May 31 arrest.

Reiman was first placed on leave after NJ Advance Media reported in June on the teen's allegations against the officer, which the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office said were corroborated by dashcam video. He was initially denied pay following his suspension, but his wages were later reinstated after an independent hearing officer ruled the borough didn't have just cause to deny him pay.

His attorney has called the charges against Reiman "shameful," and claimed they are politically motivated.

Reiman, who has pleaded not guilty, is next scheduled to appear in court on Jan. 5, court records show.



Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino leaves the federal courthouse in Newark with his fiancée after a hearing in his tax evasion case. (Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Trial looms for 'The Situation' and his brother

The federal judge in Newark overseeing the tax evasion case against reality TV star Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino and his brother Marc has ruled the pair's trial will proceed in February, according to court filings.

The Sorrentino brothers were **first charged in 2014** with conspiring to defraud the government and filing false tax returns. The U.S. Attorney's Office accused them of understating income from businesses they created to cash in on Michael Sorrentino's fame from the MTV show "Jersey Shore."

A superseding indictment **returned this April** added charges that Michael Sorrentino, who grew up in Manalapan, had made cash deposits of less than \$10,000 into different bank accounts in an attempt to avoid government scrutiny. Prosecutors also allege that Marc Sorrentino falsified records sought by a federal grand jury for two of the businesses.

U.S. District Judge Susan D. Wigenton, who is presiding over the case, has denied a request by Michael Sorrentino's attorney to postpone the trial until June, court records show. Jury selection is scheduled to begin Feb. 8.



(Left to right) Hanif Thompson, Kevin Roberts, Karif Ford. (NJ Advance Media photos)

Trio faces sentencing for fatal carjacking at Short Hills mall

The last remaining defendants in the Dec. 15, 2013, **carjacking during which Dustin Friedland was fatally** shot at The Mall at Short Hills are scheduled to be sentenced on Jan. 18.

The gunman, 32-year-old Irvington resident Hanif Thompson, **pleaded guilty in October** to felony murder and weapons offenses, while Karif Ford, 35, of Newark, pleaded guilty to carjacking, according to the Essex County Prosecutor's Office. Kevin Roberts, 39, of Newark, previously had **pleaded guilty to carjacking**.

Thompson faces 30 years in prison before he is eligible for parole, while both Roberts and Ford must serve at least 17 years each of a 20-year sentence, prosecutors said.

Superior Court Judge Michael L. Ravin, who is presiding over the case in Newark, previously sentenced Basim Henry **to life plus 10 years in prison** after a jury **convicted him of murder. felonv murder. cariackin~~g~~ and other offenses** in the death of



Khalil Wheeler-Weaver appears in Superior Court in Essex County on Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2017 for a hearing in his triple murder case. Wheeler-Weaver is charged with murder in the deaths of Sarah Butler, 20, Joanne Brown, 33, and Robin West, 19, and with attempted murder and sexual assault in a Nov. 15, 2016 attack on a woman in Elizabeth. (Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Alleged Essex County serial killer

Khalil Wheeler-Weaver, 21, of Orange, is charged with the slayings of three women in Essex County last fall, as well as **the attempted murder and sexual assault of a fourth woman in Elizabeth.**

The body of Wheeler-Weaver's alleged first victim, Robin West, 19, of Philadelphia, was **found by firefighters on Sept. 1, 2016**, when they responded to a fire at a vacant home in Orange. Sarah Butler, a 20-year-old Montclair resident who was **reported missing** on Nov. 23, 2016, was later found buried underneath leaves and debris at **the Eagle Rock Reservation** in West Orange. The body of Joanne Browne, 33, of Newark, was discovered a few days later inside a vacant home in Orange, authorities said.

The prosecutor's office said **an examination of data from his cellphone** placed Wheeler-Weaver at the locations where Browne and Butler's bodies were found, and that the last phone call Browne made to anyone was placed from his phone. The prosecutor's office has not released further information about Wheeler-Weaver's alleged fourth, surviving victim — a 34-year-old woman — but the indictment against him indicates the attack took place on Nov. 15, 2016.

Wheeler-Weaver was first arrested on Dec. 6, 2016, in connection with Butler's killing. Charges in Browne's death soon followed, and he ultimately was indicted in February for all three killings as well as the Elizabeth attack. A spokesperson for the Essex County Prosecutor's Office said Wheeler-Weaver's case has been assigned to Judge Alfonse J. Cifelli, in front of whom he is expected to appear on Jan. 9.



A proposed \$56 million community center in Roselle, on which officials broke ground in April, is now at the center of litigation over the legitimacy of the lease for the land on which it is slated to be built. (Marisa Iati | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Lawsuit continues over \$56M community center project in Roselle

A judge in Union County in December ruled a lawsuit over a proposed \$56 million government-funded community center in Roselle **can proceed**, fueling fears by an attorney for at least one of the public entities involved that **the litigation could destroy the project**.

Anthony Esposito, a former Roselle school board member, has alleged numerous procedural issues with the borough's lease from the school board of the property on which the "Mind and Body Complex" is slated to be built.

The complex — which is slated to include classrooms, a gymnasium and other amenities — is supposed to be jointly operated by the school board and the borough, which has been guaranteed \$30 million in bonds by the county to cover its portion of the project.

Esposito has filed a revised complaint, while Union County has paused action on the project.



Anna Stubblefield testifies in state Superior Court in Newark on Sept. 23, 2015, during her first trial on aggravated sexual assault charges. Stubblefield was convicted at trial of sexually assaulting a man with cerebral palsy, but her convictions were later reversed by a state appeals court, which ruled the trial judge had unfairly precluded key testimony by an expert witness for the defense. (Ed Murray | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

After sex assault convictions tossed, ex-professor may face new trial

Almost two years after she was handed **concurrent 12-year prison sentences**, Marjorie Anna Stubblefield is back in state Superior Court in Newark following **the reversal of her sexual assault convictions by an appeals court**.

Stubblefield, a former Rutgers Newark professor, was **convicted of sexually assaulting a then-29-year-old man with cerebral palsy** — identified in court only as “D.J.” — who was unable to speak, and who prosecutors argued did not have the ability to consent to sex. D.J.’s family later was awarded \$4 million in damages in a civil judgment in October 2016.

The appeals court ruled Stubblefield’s attorneys should have been allowed to introduce as evidence the evaluation of a specialist that would have supported her defense that D.J. was able to consent to sex through a typing method called “facilitated communication,” which relies on another person supporting the disabled person’s arm.

A spokesperson for the Essex County Prosecutor’s Office said the case is being prepared for retrial after the state Supreme Court declined to reconsider the appeals court’s decisions. Attorneys are due back in court on Jan. 8 for a status conference.



Kiburi Tucker (left) and Linda Jumah (right) have pleaded guilty to tax evasion charges under agreements with the U.S. Attorney's Office. (Photos by Steve Strunsky and Patti Sapone for NJ Advance Media)

Newark consultants with ties to city hall plead guilty in federal investigations

Two political consultants, [Kiburi Tucker and Linda Jumah](#), have pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to tax evasion charges after an investigation by the Internal Revenue Service and the FBI. Tucker — **the son of state Assemblywoman Cleopatra Tucker** — also pleaded guilty to wire fraud in connection with his misuse of \$330,000 funds from The Centre Inc., a non-profit of which he was the executive director.

A spokesperson for the city of Newark told NJ Advance Media in November that Tucker and Jumah, partners in the firm Elite Strategies, had performed more than \$26,000 worth of work for the city between September 2014 and December 2015.

Both are scheduled to be sentenced in February by Chief Judge Jose Linares in Newark — Jumah on Feb. 14 and Tucker on Feb. 27, court records show.

The tax evasion charge to which they pleaded guilty carries a maximum potential sentence of five years in prison, while the wire fraud charge to which Tucker pleaded guilty carries up to 20, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.



Former Rutgers football player Tejay Johnson appears in Superior Court in New Brunswick on Friday, June 30, 2017 for a hearing in his armed robbery case. (Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

Former Rutgers football player chooses trial in armed robbery cases

One of 14 former Rutgers football players charged in a 2015 investigation into armed robberies in New Brunswick and Piscataway has **decided to take his chances at trial** this winter in state Superior Court.

In choosing to face a jury, Tejay Johnson in July rejected a plea deal that would have seen prosecutors recommend a 15-year sentence, as opposed to the 151 ½ years he could face if convicted of three home invasions in New Brunswick and Piscataway, as well as an assault in New Brunswick in April 2015.

Judge Dennis Nieves ruled in June that **prosecutors will be able to introduce text messages and photos** from Johnson's cellphone at trial to place him at the scene of the robberies.

Jury selection for Johnson's trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 8.



Andreas Erazo, of Keansburg, appears in Monmouth County Superior Court in Freehold on Monday, Aug. 28, 2017 for a pre-indictment conference in his murder case. Erazo has since been indicted on charges of murder and sexual assault in the death of Abbiegail Smith, his 11-year-old neighbor. (Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

18-year-old indicted in sexual assault, killing of 11-year-old

Andreas Erazo, 18, of Keansburg, has been **indicted on charges of murder, aggravated sexual assault and weapons offenses** in the killing of his 11-year-old downstairs neighbor, Abbiegail Smith.

Investigators **discovered Smith's body** on July 13, bound in a computer cord and wrapped in a comforter and bed sheet on the roof outside Erazo's window, barely a day after her mother reported her missing.

Erazo's friends and acquaintances have told NJ Advance Media **he struggled with anger issues**. The Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office has said Erazo admitted to investigators that he stabbed Smith, but his defense attorney has argued that Erazo never admitted to "knowing and purposeful murder."

Attorneys are next due in court for a discretionary conference on Jan. 23, court records show.



Ex-Bloomfield councilman's sentencing set for January

Elias Chalet, a former Bloomfield township councilman arrested by the state Attorney General's Office in November 2015, pleaded guilty in Newark in May to second-degree bribery in connection with a \$15,000 payment he demanded from a local business owner.

Authorities said Chalet, who forfeited his council seat as part of the plea, had solicited the bribe as a condition of ensuring the township purchased the business owner's property. The business owner recorded subsequent meetings with Chalet for investigators, who moved in to arrest Chalet on the day of the last payment, the Attorney General's Office said.

Under the terms of his plea agreement, Chalet faces five years in state prison, and would be ineligible for parole for at least two, prosecutors said.

Chalet's sentencing — which has been postponed several times — is currently scheduled for Jan. 19 in front of Superior Court Judge Martin G. Cronin in Newark, according to a spokesperson for the attorney general.



U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez arrives and is greeted by supporters at the federal courthouse in Newark on Thursday, Oct. 26, 2017, during his trial on bribery charges. Menendez's trial alongside Florida ophthalmologist Salomon Melgen ended in a hung jury in November. (Aristide Economopoulos | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

What's next for federal case against U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez?

The Justice Department has yet to announce **whether it will seek to retry New Jersey's senior U.S. senator**, whose 11-week trial on federal corruption charges alongside a wealthy Florida doctor ended with a hung jury in November.

Menendez, a Democrat, told reporters in Washington in December that his lawyers may make a motion for the government to "prosecute or dismiss" if prosecutors don't make a decision by mid-January, **according to The Washington Post**.

Federal prosecutors have accused Menendez, a Democrat, of intervening in government matters on behalf of Salomon Melgen, an ophthalmologist, in exchange for six-figure campaign contributions, private plane flights and luxury hotel stays. The senator is also charged with intentionally concealing from the Senate Melgen's gifts by omitting them from his annual disclosure forms.

The defense has argued Menendez's actions in the case were part of his routine legislative activity, and that Melgen's gifts were tokens of a friendship that spanned more than 20 years. Menendez's failure to list Melgen's gifts on his Senate financial reporting forms, they said, was an unintentional oversight compounded by confusing disclosure rules.

After seven days of deliberations ended with the declaration of a mistrial, one juror told reporters that 10 of the 12 had been prepared to acquit Menendez and Melgen.

Defense attorneys have since **renewed their motion for acquittal**, which remains pending before U.S. District Judge William H. Walls, who is presiding over the case in Newark.

Melgen is still in federal custody, awaiting sentencing in a separate Medicare fraud case in Florida in which he was convicted in April.



Ahmad Kahn Rahimi listens as an attorney speaks during Rahimi's appearance in state Superior Court in Elizabeth on attempted murder charges on Monday, May 15, 2017 (Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

As sentencing looms for NYC bombing, Rahimi still faces charges in N.J.

Ahmad Khan Rahimi, a 29-year-old Elizabeth native, is scheduled to be sentenced Jan. 18 by a federal judge in Manhattan after being **convicted of planting a homemade bomb** that injured 30 people when it **exploded on Sept. 17, 2016**, in the city's Chelsea neighborhood.

Rahimi, who prosecutors said faces life in prison for the New York City attacks, is also charged separately in U.S. District Court in Newark and in state Superior Court in Union County. The federal charges in New Jersey stem from a bomb he allegedly **planted along the route of a military benefit 5K run in Seaside Park**, as well as other devices found by the Elizabeth train station that **detonated when handled by a bomb squad robot**.

The state charges in Union County stem from his **alleged shooting of two Linden police officers** during his arrest in the city on Sept. 19, 2016, after a massive manhunt by federal, state and local authorities.

Rahimi has been indicted on attempted murder charges in the shooting of the two Linden officers, but a search of court records does not show any future court dates scheduled. He has not been indicted in the federal case in New Jersey, which remains pending, according to court records.

Other cases to watch:

- **Federal charges** remain pending against two Lakewood couples snared in a series of benefits fraud raids this summer.
- A Newark man has been **indicted in the killings of two children and a 27-year-old woman** in an attack on a household on Hedden Terrace in November 2016.
- Two men face **charges of murder, robbery and other offenses** in connection with the killings of three people at an apartment in Maplewood in January 2017.
- The alleged leader of a Bloods-affiliated drug trafficking gang in Newark still faces racketeering and murder charges in U.S. District Court, **despite being found ineligible for the death penalty**.
- Caleb "Kai the Hitchiker" McGillivary **remains jailed in Union County** awaiting trial in the 2013 killing of a lawyer in Clark.

Thomas Moriarty may be reached at tmoriarty@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@ThomasDMoriarty](https://twitter.com/ThomasDMoriarty). Find NJ.com on [Facebook](#).

Have a tip? Tell us. nj.com/tips