

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

DISTRICT OF NEVADA

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10 PEDRO ROSALES-MARTINEZ,

Case No. 3:10-cv-00748-MMD-VPC

11 Plaintiff,

12 v.

13 ORDER

14 COLBY PALMER ,et al.,

15 Defendants.

16 I. **SUMMARY**

17 This action concerns a convicted felon's *Brady*- and *Giglio*-based § 1983 claims
18 as well as his Fifth Amendment-based § 1983 claim against the City of Reno, Reno Police
19 Department, Washoe County District Attorney's office, and a variety of individuals, many
20 of whom were associated with these three entities (collectively "Defendants").¹ After
21 granting in part and denying in part County Defendants' motion to dismiss (ECF No. 71)
22 and City Defendants' motion to dismiss (ECF No. 77), and denying Defendant Heidi Poe's
23 motion for a more definite statement (ECF No. 61), the Court ordered further briefing on
24 the threshold issue of whether Plaintiff's claims are barred under *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512

25
26 ¹In the Court's September 21, 2015 Order ("Dismissal Order") (ECF No. 115), the
27 Court divided Defendants who had filed motions seeking dismissal into three groups: (1)
28 State Defendants (state of Nevada, Aaron Hurley, K.M. Lorenzo, Jennifer Reichelt, Mark
Smith, and Mark Woods); (2) Count Defendants (Washoe County and Washoe County
District Attorney's Office); and (3) City Defendants (City of Reno, Reno Police
Department, Colby Palmer, and Rick Ayala).

1 U.S. 477 (1994). (ECF No. 118.) The Court has reviewed Defendant Washoe County's
2 Opening Brief in support of *Heck* Bar ("Opening Brief") (ECF No. 121), Defendant Heidi
3 Poe's Joinder to Washoe County's Brief (ECF No. 122), Defendants City of Reno, Rick
4 Ayala, and Colby Palmer's (collectively, "the City of Reno") Supplemental Brief in support
5 of their motion to dismiss ("Supplemental Brief") (ECF No. 123), and Plaintiff's corrected
6 Omnibus Response to Defendants' various briefs (ECF No. 131).

7 For the reasons discussed below, the Court finds that Counts I and II of Plaintiff's
8 First Amended Complaint ("FAC") are not *Heck*-barred but that Count III is *Heck*-barred.

9 **II. BACKGROUND**

10 A thorough overview of the facts and procedural history leading up to specific
11 Defendants' motions to dismiss and motion for more definite statement may be found in
12 the Dismissal Order. (ECF No. 115 at 2-4.)² There, the Court stated, "The denial of these
13 previous three motions (ECF Nos. 61, 71, 77) is without prejudice to these Defendants to
14 reassert the arguments that the Court did not address after the Court resolves the
15 threshold question of whether Plaintiff's § 1983 claims are barred under *Heck v.*
16 *Humphrey*." (ECF No. 115 at 11.) This Court then ordered that pro bono counsel be
17 appointed for Plaintiff in order to resolve this threshold issue which may bar Plaintiff's
18 claims. (ECF No. 116, 117.)

19 Plaintiff asserts three claims for relief. Count I alleges that Defendants violated
20 Plaintiff's rights under *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963), by "willfully or with
21 deliberate indifference or reckless disregard for their obligations to Plaintiff under *Brady*"
22 suppressing evidence of Cortez's criminal history. (ECF No. 57 at 20.) Count II alleges
23 that Defendants violated Plaintiff's rights under *Giglio v. United States*, 405 U.S. 150
24 (1972), by being deliberately indifferent to or recklessly disregarding evidence that
25 Plaintiff could have been used to impeach prosecution witnesses who described Cortez
26 as a model probationer. Count III alleges that the "sentence imposed by the state court

27 ²The Dismissal Order also dismissed the Washoe County District Attorney's Office
28 and the Reno Police Department as parties to this action. (ECF No. 115 at 11.)

1 pursuant to [Plaintiff's] guilty plea to the Nevada crime of unlawful giving away of a
2 controlled substance violates the constitutional guarantee against multiple punishments”
3 because the sentence of time served was unconstitutional “to the extent that the sentence
4 exceeded the 36 months that [Plaintiff] had fully served for that same crime.” (*Id.* at 23-
5 24.) Plaintiff specifically states in the FAC that he is not challenging his guilty plea or the
6 conviction for the crime of unlawful giving away of a controlled substance pursuant to that
7 plea or the 36 months he served for that crime. (*Id.* at 24.) Rather, he is challenging his
8 sentence of time served as unconstitutional to the extent it exceeds the 36-month
9 sentence originally imposed for the crime of unlawful giving away of a controlled
10 substance. (*Id.* at 24-25.)

11 **III. DISCUSSION**

12 As a preliminary matter, after the Ninth Circuit issued its opinion reversing this
13 Court’s first dismissal order (ECF No. 42), Plaintiff filed a petition for rehearing on the
14 issue of whether all four or only three of the counts in his original conviction had been
15 vacated. (ECF No. 131-4 at 4.)³ The Ninth Circuit denied Plaintiff’s petition for rehearing
16 but ordered that “[t]he issues raised in the petition may be raised before the district court
17 on remand.” (ECF No. 43 at 1; ECF No. 131-5 at 2.) A review of the record clearly shows
18 that all four counts of Plaintiff’s 2004 conviction (“first conviction”) were vacated, and
19 therefore Plaintiff’s first conviction was vacated in its entirety.⁴

20 / / /

21 ³The Court takes judicial notice of documents from the state court proceedings.
22 See *Lee v. City of Los Angeles*, 250 F.3d 668, 688-89 (9th Cir. 2001) (finding that a court
23 may take judicial notice of matters of public record where the documents’ authenticity is
not contested and the plaintiff’s complaint necessarily relies on them).

24 ⁴Defendants state in their Opening Brief that only three of the four counts in the
25 original conviction were held invalid (ECF No. 121 at 11); however, the proffered
26 documents show that convictions on all four counts were vacated. (See ECF No. 121-5
27 at 2 (“This matter coming before the Court on a Writ of Habeas Corpus and Upon
28 stipulation by Counsel for State and Counsel for Defendant to *vacate the prior Judgment
of Conviction.*”) (emphasis added); *see also* ECF No. 121-2 at 2 (“Petitioner’s convictions
in this case are vacated based on the cumulative errors ground as alleged in the petition”)
(emphasis added); *see also* ECF No. 131-16 at 8 (in the post-conviction state court
hearing, the judge stated that “if the court follows this stipulation, or this agreement, then
all the convictions on the four counts will be vacated or taken away”).)

1 **A. Relevant Law**

2 In *Heck v. Humphrey*, the Supreme Court held that “in order to recover damages
3 for allegedly unconstitutional conviction or imprisonment, or for other harm caused by
4 actions whose unlawfulness would render a conviction or sentence invalid, a § 1983
5 plaintiff must prove that the conviction or sentence has been reversed on direct appeal,
6 expunged by executive order, declared invalid by a state tribunal authorized to make such
7 determination, or called into question by a federal court’s issuance of a writ of habeas
8 corpus[.]” 512 U.S. at 486-87 (footnote omitted). However, “if the district court determines
9 that the plaintiff’s action, even if successful, will *not* demonstrate the invalidity of any
10 outstanding criminal judgment against the plaintiff, the action should be allowed to
11 proceed, in the absence of some other bar to the suit.” *Id.* at 487 (emphasis in original
12 and footnotes omitted).

13 *Brady* dictates “that the suppression by the prosecution of evidence favorable to
14 an accused upon request violates due process where the evidence is material to either
15 guilt or to punishment, irrespective of the good faith or bad faith of the prosecution.” 373
16 U.S. at 87. Evidence is considered “material” where “there is a reasonable probability
17 that, had the evidence been disclosed to the defense, the result of the proceeding would
18 have been different.” *United States v. Bagley*, 473 U.S. 667, 682 (1985). The rule also
19 applies to evidence “known only to police investigators and not to the prosecutor.” *Kyles*
20 *v. Whitley*, 514 U.S. 419, 438 (1995). *Giglio* violations are an outgrowth of *Brady*. In *Giglio*,
21 the Supreme Court found that the reliability of a given witness may be determinative of
22 an accused’s guilt or innocence; therefore, the failure to disclose evidence that may be
23 used to impeach the witness’s credibility falls within the ambit of “material evidence” under
24 *Brady*. See *Giglio*, 405 U.S. at 154.

25 The appropriate remedy for a *Brady* or *Giglio* violation is usually a new trial. *US v.*
26 *Kohring*, 637 F.3d 895, 913 (9th Cir. 2011). As a result, when a state prisoner alleges a
27 *Brady* or *Giglio* violation under § 1983, a determination by the district court that the
28 prisoner was denied his right to exculpatory or impeachment evidence and thus denied

1 his right to a fair trial would necessarily demonstrate the invalidity of the prisoner's
2 conviction that resulted from those violations. *See Skinner v. Switzer*, 562 U.S. 521, 536-
3 37 (2011). Therefore, *Heck* requires that *Brady*- or *Giglio*-based § 1983 claims be brought
4 only after the conviction allegedly caused by the *Brady* and *Giglio* violations has been
5 invalidated. *See Jackson v. Barnes*, 749 F.3d 755, 760 (9th Cir. 2014).

6 **B. Counts I and II**

7 In Washoe County's Opening Brief, they argue that Plaintiff is "challenging the
8 validity of his ongoing conviction" because his sentence of time served "evidences a
9 continuous validity to a portion of his original conviction and sentence, and an
10 inconsistency between it and a § 1983 claim." (ECF No. 121 at 8, 11.) For the reasons
11 stated below, this argument fails on Counts I and II.

12 As an initial matter, there is no "ongoing conviction" here; rather, there are two
13 distinct convictions. Plaintiff's first conviction on all four counts resulted from a jury verdict
14 in 2004 and was ultimately vacated in 2008 in an Amended Judgment issued by the state
15 district court. (ECF No. 121-5.) Plaintiff's second conviction on the count of unlawful giving
16 away of a controlled substance resulted from a plea agreement with the prosecution in
17 2008. (See *id.* at 2.) The punishment for Plaintiff's second conviction was a sentence of
18 time served, backdated *nunc pro tunc* to the prior date of judgment.⁵ (See *id.* at 2-3.)

19 Plaintiff's first conviction was clearly held to be invalid for purposes of *Heck*. The
20 City of Reno asserts that because Plaintiff chose to withdraw his habeas petition and

22 ⁵The City of Reno argues that because the Amended Judgment, which was issued
23 December 2, 2008, was dated *nunc pro tunc* to September 28, 2004 this shows that "there
24 are [not] two discrete events of conviction in this case," and that the "legal effect here is
25 that Plaintiff is deemed, from the time of his single criminal trial, to have been guilty of the
26 one count to which he pled guilty." (ECF No. 123 at 5.) However, the phrase *nunc pro*
27 *tunc* was used in the Amended Judgment specifically to justify the imposition of a
28 sentence of time served for Plaintiff's second conviction. Without this phrase and
backdate, any sentence imposed for the second conviction would require Plaintiff to be
imprisoned for a term going forward from December 2, 2008. Thus, the use of *nunc pro*
tunc merely allowed the court to impose a sentence, thereby entering judgment, on
December 2, 2008 that had the same legal effect as if the sentence had been imposed
and this judgment entered on September 28, 2004. See *Nunc Pro Tunc*, Black's Law
Dictionary (10th ed. 2014). The phrase in no way upheld the validity of the original
conviction.

1 accept a plea agreement this suggests a continuing validity to a portion of Plaintiff's first
2 conviction. (ECF No. 123 at 4.) The fact that the habeas petition was withdrawn is
3 irrelevant for purposes of *Heck*. The manner in which Plaintiff's first conviction was
4 vacated is sufficient to meet the example of "declared invalid by a state tribunal authorized
5 to make such a determination," 512 U.S. at 487, because the Amended Judgment clearly
6 vacated all four counts, including the count Plaintiff ultimately pled guilty to, on the basis
7 that the conviction on all four counts was the result of the "cumulative errors ground as
8 alleged in "[Plaintiff's] petition." (ECF No. 121-5 at 2.)

9 Moreover, for purposes of *Heck*, the prosecution's intent is irrelevant when the
10 record clearly establishes that a conviction has been rendered invalid. The City of Reno
11 argues that it was the prosecution's intent to preserve a portion of the original conviction.
12 (ECF No. 123 at 5.) Such intent is not express, nor can it be implied from the records. If
13 the parties had, in fact, intended to preserve Plaintiff's first conviction on the count of
14 unlawful giving away of a controlled substance, the stipulated agreement and Amended
15 Judgment would have clearly stated that only three of the four counts of Plaintiff's first
16 conviction were to be vacated. That a conviction stands is not an insignificant matter and
17 the absence of any explicit reference to a conviction remaining shows that it was vacated.
18 Moreover, it is inconsistent with *Heck* and common sense to agree to vacate a conviction
19 on the basis of possible or actual constitutional errors committed by the prosecution,
20 permit a plaintiff to then plead guilty to one of the original counts in lieu of being re-tried
21 and potentially convicted on all four counts (even where no *Brady* or *Giglio* violations
22 would occur in a second trial), and then argue that the first conviction the prosecution
23 agreed to vacate is somehow still valid.

24 In addition, recent case law clearly compels a finding that Counts I and II are not
25 *Heck*-barred because the basis of the first conviction is distinct from the basis for the
26 second conviction. For example, in *Jackson v. Barnes*, the plaintiff was re-tried and
27 convicted in a second trial after his first conviction was reversed on appeal. 749 F.3d at
28 758. The Ninth Circuit found that the *Heck* bar was inapplicable because the plaintiff was

1 challenging the use of evidence at his first trial that was obtained in violation of his
2 *Miranda* rights, and this evidence was not used in his second trial. *See id.* at 758, 762.

3 Here, Plaintiff is similarly challenging the prosecution's failure to disclose evidence
4 at his first trial in violation of his rights under *Brady* and *Giglio*. Neither this evidence nor
5 the lack of disclosure was implicated or used in connection with Plaintiff's second
6 conviction. This is because Plaintiff's second conviction was based on the decision to
7 plead guilty to one count of unlawful giving away of a controlled substance in order to
8 avoid trial and to be immediately released from prison.

9 Equally instructive is the Second Circuit's finding in *Poventud v. City of New York*,
10 750 F.3d 121 (2d. Cir. 2014), which the *Jackson* court relied upon. There, the plaintiff's
11 initial conviction for attempted murder was vacated because of a *Brady* violation, but he
12 subsequently pled guilty to the lesser charge of attempted murder. 750 F.3d at 124-25.
13 The Second Circuit found that the plaintiff's *Brady*-based § 1983 claim was not *Heck*-
14 barred because the plaintiff "was aware of the undisclosed exculpatory material prior to
15 his guilty plea." *Id.* at 124-25. Thus, the court determined that the plaintiff's second
16 conviction was not tainted by the *Brady* violation and was thus "clean," meaning that any
17 judgment in favor of the plaintiff on his § 1983 claim would not invalidate his second
18 conviction. *Id.* at 136.

19 While this case is distinguishable insofar as the state district court did not explicitly
20 find a *Brady* or *Giglio* violation in vacating Plaintiff's first conviction, Plaintiff was clearly
21 aware of the undisclosed exculpatory and impeachment evidence prior to entering into a
22 guilty plea that resulted in the second conviction.⁶ Plaintiff's second conviction is similarly
23 not tainted by the alleged *Brady* and *Giglio* violations that occurred at his first trial, and
24 any judgment in favor of Plaintiff on his § 1983 claims in Counts I and II would not
25 invalidate his second conviction, as Plaintiff's second conviction is in no way based on
26 the same alleged constitutional violations that resulted in his first conviction. *See also*

27
28 ⁶In their Opening Brief, Washoe County relies on the misconception of an "ongoing
conviction" to argue that Plaintiff's case is distinguishable from *Jackson*, 749 F.3d 755,
and *Poventud*, 750 F.3d 121. (ECF No. 121 at 9-12.)

1 *Ove v. Gwinn*, 264 F.3d 817, 823 (9th Cir. 2001) (finding that §1983 claims for supposedly
2 illegally-obtained evidence would not call into question the validity of the plaintiffs'
3 convictions under *Heck* where those convictions were based on pleas of *nolo contendre*
4 and did not result from the use of any illegally-obtained evidence).

5 Because Plaintiff's success on the merits of his *Brady* or *Giglio* claims would not
6 imply the invalidity of his second conviction, *Heck* does not bar Counts I or II.

7 **C. Count III**

8 Defendants argue that Plaintiff's case is *Heck*-barred to the extent that Plaintiff is
9 challenging his guilty plea by challenging a portion of the period he was incarcerated.
10 (See ECF No. 121 at 13.) The Court agrees that Plaintiff may not challenge any portion
11 of his incarceration for time served or seek damages for the time served beyond the 36
12 months to which he was originally sentenced for unlawful giving away of a controlled
13 substance.

14 The sentence of 36 months was vacated when the state district court vacated
15 Plaintiff's first conviction. (See ECF No. 121-5.) In the Amended Judgment, the court
16 signed the opinion *nunc pro tunc*, backdating the second conviction's sentence to
17 September 28, 2004 (the date the original judgment was entered). Thus, Plaintiff's
18 subsequent guilty plea to unlawful giving away of a controlled substance resulted in a
19 new sentence of time served. This sentence completely replaced the prior sentence of 36
20 months, which had been vacated when Plaintiff's first conviction on the count of unlawful
21 giving away of a controlled substance was vacated. As a result, challenging any portion
22 of the sentence of time served, including by seeking damages for any portion of that
23 sentence,⁷ implicitly challenges the validity of Plaintiff's second conviction. For these
24 reasons, Count III is barred by *Heck*.

25 ⁷While Plaintiff may not recover any actual or compensatory damages for the time
26 he served beyond the 36-month sentence imposed for his first conviction on the count of
27 unlawful giving away of a controlled substance, Plaintiff's request for punitive damages
28 (see ECF No. 57 at 22) may be granted if he prevails on the merits of his *Brady*- and/or
Giglio-based § 1983 claims and if other required factors are met. See *Jackson*, 749 F.3d
at 762 (the Ninth Circuit found that the plaintiff could still be entitled to punitive or nominal
damages if he prevailed on the merits of his *Miranda*-based §1983 claim).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Court notes that the parties made several arguments and cited to several cases not discussed above. The Court has reviewed these arguments and cases and determines that they do not warrant discussion as they do not affect the outcome of the Court's decision.

It is therefore ordered that Plaintiff may proceed with Counts I and II as they are not barred by *Heck*. It is further ordered that Count III be dismissed without prejudice.

DATED THIS 28th day of August 2017.



MIRANDA M. DU
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE