Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://eji.org/news/alabamas-prisons-are-deadliest-in-nation/

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12.03.18

Data drawn from Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) statistical reports and the US Bureau of Justice Statistics.

On Monday, Vaquerro KinjuanArmstrong, was murdered at Holman Correctional Facility. It follows the stabbing death of James Lewis Kennedy at Elmore Correctional Facility on November 18, 2018. This violence reflects new findings which show that Alabamas prisons are the most lethal in the nation. With 19 homicides in the last two years, and nine homicides in 2018, Alabamas rate of over 34 homicides per 100,000 people incarcerated is more than 600 percent greater than the national average from 2001 to 2014.

Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the level of violence in Alabama state prisons. Serious understaffing, systemic classification failures, and official misconduct and corruption have left thousands of prisoners vulnerable to abuse, assaults and uncontrolled violence.

St. Clair Correctional Facility witnessed three homicides this year alone. In 2018, the homicide rate at St. Clair is set to exceed 300 homicides per 100,000 incarcerated people.

Thirty-five prisoners have been murdered in ADOC facilities in the past five years. Nine of the homicides occurred at St. Clair. Twenty-one of the homicides occurred at medium security facilities: seven at Elmore, four at Bullock, four at Bibb, and four at Staton, one at Ventress and one at Kilby. This weeks violence at Holman along with violent incidents at Elmore and St.Clair have created an unprecedented crisis in Alabama prisons with regard to the safety of prisoners and staff.

The mortality rate within Alabama prisons is at a record level.The number of deaths in Alabama prison, many of which are from non-natural causes including homicide, suicide, and drug overdoses greatly exceed what other states are seeing.The mortality rate in Alabamas prisons has more than doubled over the past 10 years. Between 2008 and 2014, Alabamas prison population decreased by 2 percent from 25,303 to 24,816 while mortality in Alabama prisons nearly doubled, going from 61 deaths in 2008 (241 per 100,000 people incarcerated) to 111 in 2014 (447 per 100,000 incarcerated). This trend continued in 2017 as the prison population fell 14 percent to 21,213 even as 120 people died in ADOC facilities, for a mortality rate of over 565 per 100,000 incarcerated people. This is more than double the national mortality rate of 275 deaths per 100,000 incarcerated people in 2014 (the most recent year in which data is available) and makes Alabama an outlier among its neighboring Southern states of Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi.

Data drawn from Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) statistical reports and the US Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Documented instances of abuse by correctional staff have aggravated the culture of violence within state prisons. EJI filed a complaint with the Department of Justice in 2013 after an investigation revealed a pattern of excessive physical violence at Elmore, where correctional staff at the highest levels have been found to have engaged in extreme and excessive violence against inmates. In multiple incidents, correctional officers at Elmore illegally stripped and beat inmates while they were handcuffed and shackled, and have punched, kicked, and struck them with batons and other objects.

The conditions are getting worse, and state officials must act now, said EJI Attorney Charlotte Morrison. This epidemic of violence has once again created a crisis that requires a more committed and effective response from state leaders.

EJI re-initiated its investigation at Elmore this year after receiving dozens of reports of stabbings, assaults, extortion and excessive use of force. Inadequate staffing has created serious security conditions where prisoners are at risk of unprecedented levels of violence. According to multiple sources, a single officer is typically assigned to a dorm of 198 prisoners andthere are periods at the prison where a total of eight officers are responsible for managing the entire prison with a population of over 1200 men. As a result of the freedom of movement and absence of staff, stabbings, assaults, and extortion are regular features of daily life.

The data on violence in Alabamas prisons makes clear that the security crisis in state correctional facilities is worsening and needs an urgent and immediate response from elected officials.

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