

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/rocrast-mack-murder-generates-national-attention/>

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124 results for "**Prison**"

11.29.11

A [new investigative report](#) published by *The Huffington Post* has generated national attention about guard-on-inmate violence in Alabama prisons. Last year, Rocrast Mack was brutally beaten to death by prison guards at Ventress Correctional Facility. The new report documents a history of violence by some of the officers involved and inadequate responses by state officials to staff violence directed at inmates.

Mass incarceration and prison overcrowding, driven in large part by [excessive sentences for non-violent drug offenses](#), is a nationwide problem with a multi-billion-dollar price tag. But Alabama stands out for the sheer brutality and freewheeling nature of its corrections system, which suffers from the worst overcrowding in the country.

Alabama prisons are operating at an average of 190% of their design capacity. Ventress Correctional Facility, where Mr. Mack was savagely beaten to death by prison guards while serving a 20-year sentence for a petty drug crime, currently holds 1665 prisoners more than 255 percent of its capacity.

Alabama is facing a crisis with its prisons too many inmates and not enough beds, Cam Ward, Republican chairman of the state senates judiciary committee, wrote in a recent *Birmingham News* [editorial](#).

The United States Supreme Court earlier this year ordered the release of up to 46,000 prisoners to relieve [serious overcrowding in California](#), where the states prisons had an overcrowding rate of about 170 percent.

Severely overcrowded, underfunded, and understaffed, Alabama prisons have become increasingly violent. Weve seen a dramatic increase in the number of complaints coming into our office concerning guard-on-inmate assaults, said Bryan Stevenson, executive director of EJI. Physical assaults of inmates by guards have become an accepted part of the culture in a lot of Alabama prisons.

Steve J. Martin, a nationally-recognized corrections expert and the former general counsel for the Texas Department of Corrections, reviewed practices at Donald Prison, in Bessemer, Alabama, and found extreme levels of violence and use of force practices that were far out of the mainstream. In a report to a federal court, he wrote, There is a disturbing level of staff-on-inmate violence at Donaldson, much of which is not investigated or questioned, even when inmates are seriously injured by guard abuse.

EJI has called on the Alabama Department of Corrections to improve training and supervision of correctional officers, install systems that monitor guard and inmate interactions, conduct thorough follow-up investigations after assaults, and to hold officers accountable for violent and illegal behavior.

After [EJI called on the Alabama Attorney General and the Justice Department](#) to immediately pursue criminal prosecution of the correctional officers who brutally beat Mr. Mack to death, [former correctional lieutenant Michael Anthony Smith was arrested](#) for the murder and [former correctional officer Scottie T. Glenn pleaded guilty](#) in federal court to civil rights and conspiracy charges arising from the beating death of Mr. Mack. The Justice Department is conducting an ongoing investigation.

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