

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/covid-19-crisis-has-made-a-bad-situation-worse-in-alabama-prisons/>

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04.02.20

Two men incarcerated in Alabama prisons have died violently after separate homicides in different prisons in less than one week. These murders bring the death toll in Alabama prisons to nine homicides in the past six months and 26 in the past two years.

Alabama has the [highest rate of prison homicide](#) in the nation. Overcrowding, poor management, and inadequate staffing have created a [crisis](#) in the states prison system. The public health crisis which is expected to hit prisons especially hard has made things worse.

On March 24, Kenneth Locke was killed in an assault at Fountain Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama. Less than one week later, the Alabama Department of Corrections reported that Dennis Benson had been killed in an assault at Ventress Correctional Facility in Clayton, Alabama, on March 30. Mr. Benson was serving a three-year sentence for nonviolent property and drug charges.

Both Ventress and Fountain are medium-security facilities where the majority of incarcerated people are housed in open dormitories that hold upwards of 100 people per housing unit with minimal officer supervision. According to data published by the Alabama Department of Corrections, there were over 1,100 assaults on incarcerated people recorded in medium-security prisons in 2019 alone. The rate of violent incidents has more than doubled in the past five years, from 4.2 assaults per 100 incarcerated people in 2015 to 9.8 in 2019.

One year ago on April 2, 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice notified Alabama officials that the conditions in the states prisons [violate the constitutional rights](#) of the people incarcerated there by failing to protect them from violence and sexual abuse violations that they noted are exacerbated by serious deficiencies in staffing and supervision and overcrowding. Since that time, the problems have gotten worse.

In 2017, data from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that Alabama had the [most overcrowded prisons](#) in the country, holding on average 167.8% of their intended design capacity. EJI [reported](#) that parole policy changes in 2019 erased all progress ADOC made in reducing the prison population in 2018.

These problems were exacerbated in late January 2020 by the decommissioning of Holman Prison and the transfer of 617 people in general population and restricted housing to other prisons. The closure of Holman eliminated more than 12% of ADOCs designed bed capacity in mens maximum-security facilities, with the additional overcrowding in other facilities forcing incarcerated people into even greater proximity.

Under these conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to make an already dire situation in Alabamas prisons worse. According to the most recent ADOC statistical report, nearly 20% of ADOCs jurisdictional population is over the age of 50 and many have preexisting conditions such as liver or kidney disease that the CDC has identified as putting people at heightened risk of serious illness from the novel coronavirus.

EJI has received numerous reports indicating that incarcerated people reporting health concerns have not been able to promptly access health care or obtain appropriate hygiene supplies. At the same time, ADOCs moratorium on all prison visitation including legal visits has further isolated incarcerated people at a time when they are particularly vulnerable.

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