

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/alabama-reaches-new-record-high-number-prison-homicides>

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(William Widmer)

On February 9, 2018, 25-year-old Travis Wilson was stabbed to death at St. Clair Correctional Facility, becoming the 11th person killed in an Alabama prison in less than a year.

Alabama has the highest prison homicide rate in the country. At more than 30 homicides per 100,000 incarcerated people, the state's rate is more than six times the national average (five per 100,000) and more than double the rate of the next most violent state. Many of the victims are lower security prisoners, like 33-year-old Cedric Jerome Robinson, who was killed at Bibb County Correctional Facility in Brent, Alabama, on September 8, 2017, while serving a six-year sentence for fraudulent use of a credit card and possession of a forged instrument; he was scheduled to be released this month.

Mr. Wilson was in his assigned dorm when he was attacked by a prisoner who was not assigned to that dorm. How prisoners are able to gain entry into unauthorized areas of the prison and what the prison is doing to control unauthorized movement are central questions in EJI's investigation at St. Clair. EJI [alleged in a lawsuit](#) filed in 2014 that St. Clair is one of the most dangerous prisons in the nation. Homicides, sexual assaults, stabbings, and robberies occur on a daily basis, and the majority of these incidents involve inmates in unauthorized areas.

EJI's lawsuit was filed after the Alabama Department of Corrections failed to address dangerous conditions and the extraordinarily high rate of violence at St. Clair, including six homicides in the preceding 36 months. EJI's investigation revealed a shocking level of serious and chronic violence, including sexual assaults, deadly violence, and daily stabbings. Correctional staff and prisoners consistently reported that a majority of the population is armed for protection, officers do not feel safe entering dorms and living areas, and stabbings are a daily occurrence. Former Warden Carter Davenport described the access to weapons as a security nightmare.

Expert Steve Martin observed that the frequency of assaults resulting in life-threatening injuries is quite simply among the highest I have observed in my 43-year career in corrections. Pursuant to an [agreement](#) reached in the lawsuit in November 2017, ADOC has agreed over the next two years to implement crucial reforms and engage nationally recognized experts to reform practices. The recent homicide underscores the urgency of these reforms.

Through the lawsuit, EJI worked with national experts to identify remedies for the patterns of uncontrolled movement and violence at the facility. Experts identified video surveillance equipment as a critical tool for monitoring and tracking inmate movement and reducing violence. The experts found that the few cameras that did exist at St. Clair were thoughtlessly positioned, virtually all were broken, and none was connected to a recording surveillance system. ADOC agreed to submit a proposal to the legislature to fund installation of this equipment in the 2018 legislative session. At [Tutwiler Prison for Women](#) in Wetumpka, Alabama, EJI revealed, and the Justice Department confirmed, widespread sexual abuse of incarcerated women by prison staff. Resulting reforms included the installation of a prison-wide video surveillance system, which demonstrates that these systems are achievable and advance the safety of staff and prisoners.

ADOC also agreed to request assistance from the National Institute of Corrections to address contraband interdiction and detection. Experts found that contraband weapons are a significant contributor to violence at St. Clair and that a majority of incarcerated people were armed to protect themselves. EJI alleged that knives were so widespread that prison leadership, including Warden Dewayne Estes, acknowledged that the prison did not have the capacity to separate and discipline inmates found with knives. EJI calls on the legislature to support the Commissioner in this request for assistance from NIC and to fund reforms identified by NIC. NIC was instrumental to advancing reforms at Tutwiler Prison and can play a crucial role in Alabama's men's prisons.

EJI has recently reached an agreement with ADOC to retain an expert to conduct an independent audit addressing compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) at St. Clair. EJI found that many of the problems identified at Tutwiler Prison also exist at St. Clair, where a culture of sexual violence is tolerated. EJI agreed to donate funds to hire a PREA auditor to conduct an independent audit this

spring.

EJI has called on the legislature and ADOC to replicate the remedies implemented at Tutwiler, including new leadership, cameras, and PREA consultations. EJI believes these remedies can reduce or eliminate much of the violence, and these solutions can be implemented without the costly expenses and payments to private firms that litigation entails.

EJI has donated 100 percent of its legal fees to experts, monitoring and implementing reforms at Alabama prisons.

EJI has agreed to serve as a monitor at St. Clair. Anyone with information can contact our monitoring staff by sending an email to [\[emailprotected\]](#) or calling [\(334\) 269-1803](#).

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