

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/getting-root-suicide-behind-ohio-prison-bars>

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This ACLU of Ohio Op/Ed originally appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer on 9/30/2013 On Sept. 11, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction revealed that prison inmate James Blackburn committed suicide while in prison. Blackburn's death followed the more high-profile suicides of Ariel Castro and Billy Slagle weeks before and marked the eighth suicide in Ohio prisons in 2013. Last week, officials released [a preliminary report](#) on the death of Billy Slagle that found that the electronic log maintained by one of the corrections officers monitoring Slagle was falsified, and that nearly three-fourths of corrections officers on duty were relief officers not fully trained to work in high-security settings like Death Row. Director Gary Mohr has rightfully embraced new practices such as supervisors verifying with video surveillance that corrections officers complete their rounds, and ensuring relief officers have necessary training.

[Read this column on Cleveland.com.](#)

However, placing blame solely at the feet of those who were entrusted with the care of these inmates risks ignoring the deeper problems that have led to a crisis in our prisons. These individuals were able to commit suicide in part because Ohio operates a broken criminal justice system that has led to bloated prisons with few resources to aid those in need. Our system of mass incarceration has come at a steep price tag, both literally and figuratively. Currently, Ohio prisons are operating at 130 percent capacity and growing. Many of our prison facilities are dangerously overcrowded, leading to spikes in violence. A recent inspection by the [Correctional Institution Inspection Committee](#) found that the Toledo Correctional Institution had a 113 percent increase in violence over a two-year period. The reason? Overcrowding forced prison officials to double-bunk inmates, which led to more violence and an overall deterioration of conditions at the prison. Some of this overcrowding can be attributed to the slashing of government funding for mental health services in Ohio. According to [a 2011 report by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill](#), Ohio was in the top 10 most extreme cuts to mental health budgets with \$57.7 million stripped from the states general fund. This follows a decades-long decline in funding of community mental health services, in turn forcing those with mental illness into the criminal justice system before they can receive the treatment they desperately need. These circumstances have combined to create a situation in which our prisons are now some of our largest mental health facilities. One in five Ohio prison inmates receive mental health treatment and more than 40 percent of them are considered seriously mentally ill, a higher proportion than in the outside community. Unfortunately, there has not been a corresponding increase in funding to provide for the increased mental health needs of these prisoners. In fact, in fiscal year 2013, mental health services in prison received nearly \$2.2 million less than the year before. This years state budget predicts another 2.5 percent decrease in funding in the 2014 fiscal year. Given the sheer mass of Ohios prison system, and the overwhelming mental health needs of a large portion of these individuals, it is not hard to imagine how these men were able to commit suicide. The combination of sparse resources and overcrowding has made it impossible to keep some individuals from falling through the cracks. It is important to remember that when society takes away a persons liberty, we take on the responsibility to care for those individuals and ensure they are treated humanely. Whenever someone dies a non-natural death in prison, whether it be at their own hand or anothers, it represents a failure on the part of our justice system. We cannot allow ourselves to become callous and simply shrug off the death of anyone, no matter how heinous their crime.

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