

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/eji-demands-alabama-address-abuse-of-prisoners/>

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01.25.11

EJI has asked the Alabama Department of Corrections to adopt a zero-tolerance policy directed at eliminating prisoner abuse by prison guards after an ongoing EJI investigation revealed a troubling rise in the number and severity of violent assaults on inmates by guards at prisons across the state.

In August 2010, [EJI investigated reports that correctional officers at Ventress State Prison beat to death Rocrast Mack](#), a young man incarcerated for non-violent offenses, and learned that the beating was unprovoked and continued long after Mr. Mack lost consciousness. The Department of Corrections initially stated that Mr. Mack died from injuries he suffered while being restrained by officers after he assaulted a female guard.

This month, however, prison officials released records showing that the beating was unprovoked and reported that its internal investigation led to the firing of two officers and quitting of four others, and could lead to criminal charges against all six guards.

EJI's ongoing investigation into inmate abuse in Alabama prisons has revealed that the unprovoked beating of Rocrast Mack was not an isolated incident. In the past year, EJI received an unprecedented number of complaints about guard-on-inmate assaults in several Alabama prisons and investigated dozens of them. A large number of these reports came from Ventress and Draper, two medium-security prisons in central Alabama.

Ventress confines more than twice the number of inmates it was designed to house and is one of Alabama's most overcrowded prisons. Draper is at nearly double its capacity, but also is significantly understaffed. Many inmates at Draper are teenagers and young adults.

EJI discovered that the majority of guard-on-inmate assaults it investigated were unprovoked or involved inmates who, like Rocrast Mack, had been subdued or handcuffed. Many assaults occurred in connection with informal investigations by guards into rumors or possible disciplinary infractions; witnesses reported that inmates were slapped in the face, punched in the back, kicked and stomped while lying on the ground, beaten in the head with batons, and choked as guards attempted to extract information.

One young man was handcuffed when five guards ordered him to the ground and began hitting him with batons and stomping him in the stomach. He required stitches for lacerations to the head. Another incident involved an inmate who was in the shower when an officer ordered him to lie on the floor. When he complied, two officers began beating him with batons. He lost three teeth as a result of this beating.

EJI's investigation revealed a number of incidents in which subdued inmates were stomped, hit with batons, punched in the back, and kicked in the stomach. Witnesses reported that these assaults took place against a backdrop of routine physical and verbal abuse: guards slap inmates in the face and challenge inmates to defend themselves physically against insults and profanity on a daily basis.

Witnesses report a total lack of meaningful access to safe avenues for reporting abuse by prison guards. The Alabama Department of Corrections eliminated the official inmate grievance system, and has no formal, system-wide procedures for lodging grievances or for investigating complaints. The escalating violence in Alabama's prisons and absence of any formal complaint mechanism has contributed to growing anxiety and concern among incarcerated people and their families.

Based on these troubling findings, EJI has asked Department of Corrections to make elimination of prisoner abuse a core objective of the new administration and to adopt and enforce a written zero-tolerance policy against abuse.

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