

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/georgia-sees-alarming-rise-suicides-among-incarcerated-people/>

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Three apparent suicides last week bring the total to 21 suicides in the Georgia Department of Corrections over the last 12 months, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* [reports](#).

Advocates say the rising number of suicides is linked to Georgias increased use of strict isolation. The Southern Center for Human Rights and other groups have filed at least 15 lawsuits against the department to challenge its special management unit at the Georgia State Prison at Reidsville.

One of the three incarcerated people who died of apparent suicide last week was 29-year-old Michael Jordan, who was serving life without parole at Reidsville. Corrections officials would not tell reporters whether he was in the isolation unit.

The suicide rate in Georgia prisons is 22 per 100,000, substantially higher than the national rate of 16 per 100,000.

State corrections officials say they will add a psychologist and two psychiatrists to their staff and have given permission to incarcerated people to call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline.

But Sarah Geraghty, managing attorney for the Southern Center for Human Rights, said these responses are inadequate. People being held in isolation cannot access the suicide hotline. Those assigned to the special management unit spend 24 hours a day alone in cells with no outside light and solid metal doors, except for 2 1/2 hours per week when they are let out for exercise.

Three of the people who committed suicide last year did so while in isolation cells; a fourth person was in isolation on death row. Last fall, officers in the isolation-segregation unit at Smith State Prison in South Georgia [watched and waited](#) as Richard Tavera, a 24-year-old with a history of mental health problems, hanged himself in his cell.

While [s]ubstantially more oversight by psychiatrists and other mental health professionals would be helpful, Ms. Geraghty said, two more [mental health] providers statewide wont make a dent. As she [explained](#) to reporters:

For many people with serious mental illness in prison, treatment consists of a counselor shouting how are you doing through a cell door and then moving on to the next person.

Ms. Geraghty said she hopes Georgias DOC will re-think its over-reliance on solitary confinement, which is known to increase the prevalence of self-harm and suicide.

Last summer, a federal court [ruled](#) that mental health services in Alabama prisons are horrendously inadequate and have led to a skyrocketing suicide rate among incarcerated people. The suicide rate in Alabama reached 37 per 100,000 incarcerated people in 2015-2016 and is projected to be as high as 60 per 100,000 in the current fiscal year, almost triple the suicide rate in Georgia.

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