

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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In October 2018, after receiving dozens of reports of officer-on-prisoner assaults including one reported murder of an incarcerated man and officer complicity in drug trafficking, EJI [re-initiated](#) its investigation at Elmore Correctional Facility (formerly Staton Annex) and adjacent Staton Correctional Facility in Elmore, Alabama. EJI's investigation, which included interviews with dozens of incarcerated people, former officers, and staff, has uncovered a pattern of officer-on-prisoner assaults, officer complicity in widespread drug trafficking and extortion, and a growing rate of abuse and violence.

Inadequate staffing at Elmore/Staton has created serious security conditions and put incarcerated men at risk of unprecedented levels of violence. In the past three years, 11 incarcerated men were killed at Elmore/Staton, which had an annual homicide rate over that period of 144 homicides per 100,000 incarcerated people a rate that is 20.5 times the national average.

Staff and incarcerated men report there is often no officer presence in the housing units. Staffing levels are grossly inadequate for sufficient monitoring or security. At Elmore, for example, as few as eight officers are at times responsible for managing the entire prison, with a population of over 1,100 men. A single officer is typically assigned to a dorm of 198 men and rarely enters the dorm. Basic security functions, including searching for contraband and controlling movement in the facility, have been all but abandoned.

As a result of the freedom of movement and absence of staff, stabbings, assaults, and extortion are regular features of daily life in these Alabama prisons. These conditions have in turn fueled an epidemic of drug use, untreated mental illness, and a thriving underground economy. Drugs, weapons, and other contraband flow through the prisons unregulated and sometimes aided by correctional staff. Incarcerated people accumulate debts to other incarcerated people, who enforce collection through violence and sexual assault.

This economy, and the physical and sexual violence and torture employed to collect debts, is so entrenched that the pleas of incarcerated people and their families for protection from extortion are routinely ignored.

According to multiple sources, drug overdoses and serious violence have become so common at Elmore that groups of two to three incarcerated men are regularly assigned to ambulance teams that are tasked with going into housing units to retrieve men who are overdosing on drugs or injured in assaults. On an average day at Elmore, an ambulance team will retrieve 30 men who are so intoxicated they require medical attention. On a single day in fall 2017, an ambulance team retrieved over 100 incarcerated men who were overdosing.

The consequences of officer misconduct and complicity in the drug overdose epidemic at Elmore and Staton have been deadly. On December 9, 2017, 35-year-old Billy Smith died at Jackson Hospital in Montgomery, Alabama, after being violently assaulted at Elmore. EJI received information from multiple credible sources implicating Elmore officers and leadership in the assault. A lieutenant, sergeant, and several officers were in the shift office when the assault occurred. Mr. Smith was later sent to the hospital, where he died on December 9, 2017. The prison reported Mr. Smith's death as a natural death.

In October 2018, an intellectually disabled young man was found by officers to be in possession of a cell phone. The officers placed one of his hands in handcuffs and then body-slammed him onto the floor, head first, before cuffing his other hand. After they dragged him a few feet outside the dorm, the officers were joined by a sergeant. An officer then put on a pair of rubberized gloves and punched the handcuffed man in the ear. He immediately collapsed and was unable to get up.

This widespread extortion and officer complicity also impacts the families of incarcerated people. One family reported to EJI that between 2015 and 2017 they paid over \$6,000 to officers and other incarcerated men who threatened to kill their son if they did not cooperate. The young man was assaulted on a number of occasions and was at particular risk of violence because he was intellectually disabled and suffered from severe mental health issues. The family made payments on over 50 occasions in the short period that their son was at Elmore and, when they could no longer afford the escalating requests, the young man was sexually assaulted. The trauma from this experience continued even after he was released, ultimately leading to his hospitalization for psychiatric treatment after he returned home.

Former officers and staff reported that abuse and excessive use of force in confronting non-threatening incarcerated men is commonplace. They identified the failure of leadership to hold abusive officers accountable as a principal reason officers and staff resign. One officer reported that, on his second day as an officer, he saw his fellow correctional officers pull a man off his bunk, beat him, and drag him through the dorm. During such assaults, cadets were instructed to leave the area and not intervene, which led many cadets to accept the abuse as part of the systems operation.

The culture of violence and abuse of power at Elmore has been documented repeatedly by EJI over the past six years. EJI [filed a complaint](#) with the Department of Justice in 2013 after an investigation revealed a pattern of excessive physical violence at Elmore, where correctional staff at the highest levels have been found to have engaged in extreme and excessive violence against incarcerated men. EJI found that a group of officers were taking men into isolated areas of the prison where they were handcuffed, stripped naked, and beaten. Several incarcerated men were beaten so severely they required hospitalization and suffered permanent injuries. The warden and other high-ranking prison officials were implicated in some of the beatings and misconduct.

Several officers involved in beatings at Elmore reportedly were previously accused of sexual abuse of women at Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama, or physical abuse of male prisoners at other Alabama prisons. Alabama Department of Corrections officials were notified about criminal misconduct but failed to hold institutional officers and leadership accountable. EJI subsequently [filed an official complaint](#) with the Department of Justice, asking it to intervene. The department launched a criminal investigation at Elmore in 2014 that led to indictments of officers for criminal misconduct.

The first of a group of officers who beat handcuffed inmates at Elmore [pleaded guilty](#) in federal court in 2017 to assaulting a handcuffed inmate.

On April 1, 2019, the Justice Department announced that it had obtained a second [guilty plea](#) to a brutal officer-on-inmate assault that took place in February 2019. The department also found that Elmore officers not only beat and brutalized handcuffed prisoners but also falsified reports in violation of the law. Sergeant Ulysses Oliver pleaded guilty in federal court to criminal abuse of a prisoner. EJI identified Mr. Oliver as one of the officers who engaged in misconduct at Tutwiler Prison for Women, where he was accused by several women of choking, assaulting, and sexually abusing women. Despite these reports, he was elevated to sergeant and transferred to Elmore.

While the recent conviction of Mr. Oliver is a long-awaited response to widespread abuse of incarcerated men by some correctional staff at Elmore/Staton, serious and significant reforms aimed at reducing violence and abuse have not yet been implemented.

Tags:

[Prison Conditions](#)

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