

# Equal Justice Initiative

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/death-mentally-ill-incarcerated-man-raises-questions/>

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12.05.18

(The Marshall Project)

Nearly 10,000 people in New York's state correctional facilities are diagnosed with a mental illness one out of every five incarcerated people. *The Marshall Project* [reports](#) that the rising number of incarcerated people with a serious mental illness makes managing prisons more difficult and is raising serious questions about using prisons instead of hospitals to manage serious mental health problems.

In a feature published in partnership with the *Atlantic*, reporter Tom Robbins details the case of Karl Taylor, a 51-year-old African American man who died after an altercation with guards at Sullivan Correctional Facility, a New York State maximum-security prison in the Catskills.

Mr. Taylor was diagnosed with delusional disorder and paranoid personality disorder. Roughly half of the 10,000 people with mental diagnoses in the New York prison system are, like Mr. Taylor, considered seriously mentally ill.

In New York, the number of incarcerated people with mental health problems has increased even as the overall state prison population has fallen from a high of 72,000 in 1999 to about 48,000 today. That trend is widespread across the country, TMP reports.

Prison officials often fail to provide appropriate treatment for people whose behavior is difficult to control. Were not designed for it, Brian Fischer, New York's correctional commissioner from 2006 to 2013, told TMP. We can do crisis management, but that's not treatment.

Mr. Taylor spent nearly 10 years in solitary confinement, which can aggravate mental health problems. In 2009, during a lengthy term in solitary at Southport Correctional Facility, he was observed on all fours and barking like a dog.

Just weeks before he died, psychologists in the mental-health observation unit in a separate wing of the prison concluded that Mr. Taylor's condition was deteriorating and recommended he be transferred to Central New York Psychiatric Center, a special prison hospital where he could receive court-ordered medication. But the supervising doctor instead returned him to E North, the residential mental-health unit at Sullivan Correctional.

When he returned to E North in April 2015, Bruce Tucker, a white ex-marine known for violently enforcing prison rules, ordered Mr. Taylor to clean up his cell.

Mr. Tucker had worked in the unit for over 20 years. Under their union contract, New York correctional officers get to select their posts based on seniority and an officer cannot be reassigned by prison supervisors unless he or she is found guilty of serious misbehavior.

TMP spoke to prison officials, fellow officers, and men who were incarcerated in Mr. Tucker's unit. He had taken in part of 12 out of 23 total use-of-force incidents in the cellblocks where he worked for the previous two years; in all 12, the incarcerated people involved had been classified as mentally or physically disabled.

Incarcerated men told TMP that Mr. Tucker was a mental bully to guys in the unit, calling them stupid and assholes. One man reported that Mr. Tucker had called Mr. Taylor the n-word, telling him he's a piece of shit. Several people complained to other officers about Mr. Tucker using racial epithets with them. And Mr. Tucker, alone among the officers on the unit, carried a baton that incarcerated witnesses said he was quick to wield.

There is no dispute that Mr. Taylor's cell was a mess when he returned from the observation unit. A neighbor of Mr. Taylor's in E North told TMP that he had watched Officer Tucker and other officers trash Mr. Taylor's books and legal work and throw his clothes on the floor while Mr. Taylor was gone. When he returned, Mr. Taylor refused to clean up the mess the officers made, which aggravated Mr. Tucker.

On April 7, 2015, Mr. Taylor filed a grievance about the destruction of his property and his fear of abuse from Officer Tucker. It was dismissed.

On the morning of April 13, 2015, Officer Tucker ordered Mr. Taylor's cell door opened after Mr. Taylor did not respond to his orders to clean up his cell. Mr. Tucker and fellow officers reported that Mr. Taylor came out of his cell and punched Mr. Tucker. The officer in the control booth said at his deposition that Mr. Tucker took the first swing with his baton.

Eight witnesses who were incarcerated at the time of the incident gave depositions in a federal lawsuit against the prison and officers. These witnesses reported that, as Mr. Taylor turned away from Mr. Tucker, the officer drew his club and repeatedly struck Mr. Taylor to the head.

Mr. Taylor grabbed the baton and began chasing Mr. Tucker, TMP reports, flailing at him and other guards, one of whom was knocked unconscious after a blow from Mr. Taylor caused him to hit his head on a brick wall.

Multiple officers piled onto Mr. Taylor, punching and kicking him, incarcerated men said. One of the officers had his knee on Mr. Taylor's back and was choking him. Multiple witnesses heard Mr. Taylor saying, I can't breathe.

Officers handcuffed his hands behind him and frog-marched him towards the clinic, about a five-minute walk away. An incarcerated man watched through a window in a hallway door as officers kicked, punched, and brutally beat Mr. Taylor in the head on the way to the clinic. One of two men assigned to clean up the blood in the corridors later that morning said he mopped up a lot of blood in the hallway, from E North to the clinic.

Mr. Taylor arrived at the clinic 20 minutes later. The nurse could not get a pulse and he was not breathing. He was declared dead at 9:25 a.m.

The medical examiner reported that Mr. Taylor died of a heart attack caused by hypertension, even though her examination showed he lacked symptoms of hypertension. A leading forensic pathologist found that report overstated evidence of hypertension and downplayed indications that Mr. Taylor had been choked to death, including bleeding and bruising of muscles along his neck that were consistent with sustained pressure from an arm or a baton, and petechial hemorrhages on his eyelids that had likely resulted from force applied to the jugular vein.

There were also no bruises on his knuckles that would indicate he had punched someone. He suffered at least eight blunt impacts to his head and numerous others to his body. The primary cause of death, the pathologist wrote in his findings on the case, was physical injuries sustained during an altercation(s) with correctional officers.

In the three years since Mr. Taylor's death, TMP reports that policy changes, including de-escalation training for officers and the use of pepper spray as an alternative to physical force, have reduced the number of injuries throughout New York's prisons. More staff and beds have been added to mental health units, and more are expected next year for seriously mentally ill people. Mr. Tucker and another officer involved in the beating have retired.

The lawsuit filed by Mr. Taylor's sister is nearing trial, and while she is glad it has provided some answers about her brother's death, troubling questions remain. It's made me wonder, what about the others like him in prison? she told TMP. The ones we don't hear about?

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