

Eleven inmates dead in a month of violence at Mississippi state prisons

By Aaron Murch
27 January 2020

The death toll of Mississippi prisons has risen to eleven already since the beginning of the year following a spate of violence at the end of December and beginning of this month when three men were killed and dozens wounded in a week of rioting at the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm.

Since December 29, eleven inmates have died in Mississippi prisons, many of them in one week during what prison officials have claimed is a “gang war” among inmates, but prisoners have insisted was instigated by the prison guards who are themselves gang members.

Two inmates died this week at Parchman from injuries sustained by hanging, in what Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) officials declared to be an “apparent suicide” in the case of the prisoner found dead on Wednesday and cause yet to be determined pending an autopsy for the man who died Saturday morning. As of this writing, neither man has been identified.

In both cases, the men were being held in cells in the crumbling Unit 29 at Parchman Farm. Unit 29 was deemed unsafe this month by MDOC, with no power and no running water in many cells and black mold taking over the facility. While 375 inmates have been moved out of the decrepit unit, some 625 have been left to rot, while others have been moved to a section known as Unit 32, which was previously condemned in 2010 over the same conditions.

Parchman is Mississippi’s only maximum-security prison for men, and Unit 29, which opened in 1980, has been used to house the state’s death row inmates.

Prior to the two suicides last week, two prisoners were killed by “blunt force beatings” on January 20, according to official statements. MDOC has identified

the victims as 35-year-old Timothy Hudspeth and 36-year-old James Talley; both were serving nearly ten-year sentences for felony possession of a firearm. The men were pronounced dead at the facility “following an altercation with other inmates,” according to prison officials.

This month alone, Parchman has had seven inmate deaths, including three killed by other prisoners, one of natural causes and three apparent suicides. The most recent deaths have been called “isolated incidents” and are not, according to officials, related to gang reprisals or targeted assassinations. Republican Governor Tate Reeves tweeted in response to the most recent killings, “We have been working around the clock with MDOC and DPS to respond immediately and prevent this going forward.”

Prisoners who had contraband cell phones were able to send photos and videos of the bloodstained walls and squalid conditions of the prison during the chaos that reigned in the first few days of the year. Benny Ivey, a prisoner advocate and former Mississippi prison inmate, told the *New York Times*, “This was gang violence—it’s the fact of the matter,” he added. “But also the fact of the matter, if you ain’t treated like animals, you won’t act like an animal. They’re people, man. They’re our loved ones. They are our brothers, our uncles, our daddies, our grandfathers.”

While a lockdown that affected prisons across the state has mostly been lifted, the inmates at Parchman continue to be subjected to extra security.

Gang violence and interpersonal conflicts among prisoners cannot be solely blamed for the spate of deaths and injuries that have plagued the Mississippi state prison systems in recent years. Budget cuts combined with brutal management have created a degraded environment of violence and desperation.

Mississippi has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country while its prisons are notorious for their abuses and unsafe conditions. “Unfortunately, this is another chapter in what is a history of mismanagement and neglect that have infected the Mississippi prison system for decades,” said Eric Balaban, of the ACLU’s National Prison Project.

In June of last year, a Mississippi State Department of Health inspection report revealed poor conditions throughout Parchman penitentiary. Many cells were reported as having no power or no pillows or mattresses, often lacking in all three basic necessities. Showers contained black mold and across the prison there was a lack of hot and cold water. Dead flies and bird nests were found in prison cells and living spaces and food preparations were in dire and unsanitary condition. The report was released within days of the violence that led to three deaths at that very facility.

Parchman, a storied and infamous prison, has been known for decades for its brutal and racist treatment of prisoners. The prison, with its historic use of chain gangs and other dehumanizing punishments, has been the subject of many blues songs as well as references in cinema and historic fiction since it began operating in the early 20th century. Indeed, for much of its history Parchman functioned as a working farm employing prisoners as essentially slave laborers.

The ACLU has been pursuing cases against Parchman for decades, including notable cases in 2002 and 2003 against the conditions of the prison’s death row, where temperatures reached 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the sweltering summer heat. Leaky roofs and poorly maintained infrastructure combined with easily accessed contraband and drugs have led to multiple deaths in recent decades from drug overdoses and illnesses.

Prison reform activists have been protesting for nearly a year against the Mississippi correctional system, Parchman penitentiary in particular, for prisoner mistreatment and chronic understaffing across the entire state. In the last two years, dozens of inmates have died in Mississippi’s prisons and in 2018 the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center brought a lawsuit against the state for abuses and mismanagement at the Eastern Mississippi Correctional Facility.

More recently, hip-hop artists Jay-Z and Yo Gotti

filed a lawsuit on behalf of prison inmates against Mississippi prison officials. The lawsuit alleges that the spate of deaths in the first week of this year are a “direct result of Mississippi’s utter disregard for the people it has incarcerated and their constitutional rights,” and that the prisons are criminally “underfunded and understaffed,” creating an environment prone to violence.

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