

Two dead, 100 injured in Los Angeles County jail riots

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On Saturday, February 4, racial riots broke out in Los Angeles County jails between black and Latino inmates. The rioting continued for more than two weeks, involving thousands of prisoners at several different facilities. More than a hundred have been injured, many critically, and two inmates are dead.

The violence began at the North County Correctional Facility, part of the Pitchess Detention Center, in Castaic. The first outbreak—which by all accounts was instigated by leaders of the Mexican Mafia as means of establishing dominance over rival black gangs—involved hundreds of inmates.

Outdated plumbing had caused sheriff's deputies to move 500 extra inmates to an already overcrowded wing of the jail, which helped ignite the situation. By Saturday evening, well over 2,000 inmates were embroiled in the melee, using makeshift weaponry and bunk beds hurled from the upper stories of the jail onto brawling inmates below.

To retake control, hundreds of law enforcement officers from all over Southern California were called into emergency service. Repeatedly firing tear gas, pepper bombs and “sting ball grenades,” the guards were unable to contain the riot for nearly a day.

Ten inmates were sent to local hospitals for emergency treatment of their critical injuries and one inmate, Wayne Tiznor—a 45 year old black man—was found beaten to death. Tiznor was in jail awaiting trial for failing to register with local police as a sex offender. He was the ninth inmate killed by other inmates in the county jails in the past 2 1/2 years.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca ordered a system-wide lockdown and eliminated all visits in the county's six jails, which house over 20,000 inmates. Despite last year's Supreme Court ruling that racial segregation of prisoners is unconstitutional, the Sheriff's Department ordered black and Latino inmates placed in separate cells.

The emergency measures failed and more violence erupted Sunday night and again on Monday, February 6. The fighting seemed to be ending on February 9. Less than an hour after officials gave the media a guided tour of the

Pitchess Detention Center, however, a new conflict erupted among 200 Latino and black inmates. This rioting continued four more days, culminating in a second death, that of 38-year-old black inmate Sean Anthony Thompson, who was killed at Men's Central Jail while assisting an older inmate under attack by three Latino inmates.

Baca sought out the Catholic Cardinal of the diocese of Los Angeles, Roger M. Mahony, for assistance in ending the riots. “The goal is to start a dialogue with the Latino inmates in such a fashion that they're appealing to their common good as human beings,” Baca said.

When the violence continued into a second week, Baca came under increasing criticism from both law-and-order politicians and black officials. Right-wing County Supervisor Michael Antonovich, a reliable supporter of police violence in minority communities, said the department should have done more to protect black inmates.

After a further outbreak on February 18, Baca ordered more than 100 inmates to strip naked, with mattresses taken away, and left with only blankets to cover themselves for a 24-hour period. Mark Rosenbaum, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “We would be horrified if these methods had taken place at Abu Ghraib. However effective or ineffective, humiliation and degradation is not a proper procedure for discipline.”

During an interview on Pasadena radio station KPCC-FM, Baca blamed the rioting on insufficient funds to incarcerate violent offenders. “And so it's the almighty dollar that affects improvement when this thing is said and done,” Baca said.

Programs which once helped mitigate harsh economic conditions have been systematically cut, and the Los Angeles County jail has the highest inmate-to-guard ratio of any major county jail system in the United States. For example, while New York City has a jail population of about 15,000 and a staff of 12,000, Los Angeles County has more than 20,000 inmates and a staff of only 5,000.

Despite the calls for more money, the Sheriff's

Department's budget has almost doubled from \$1.1 billion to \$1.9 billion, and the budget for LA County jails has grown about 75 percent over the last 10 years.

The Los Angeles County Jail system, like the metropolitan area itself, has a long history of racial violence. According to police, the Pitchess Detention Center alone has been the site of more than 150 racially motivated brawls since 1990, most pitting black inmates against Latinos.

The rioting cannot be explained as the product of an increasingly violent jail population. The vast majority of jail and prison inmates are nonviolent offenders. The California Attorney General's website documents a considerable drop in violent crime in California since the 1960s. During the last decade violent crimes, excluding robbery, have decreased from 207,000 to 141,000 per year, and the number of homicides fell in the same period from 3,699 to 2,402 annually, despite a rapidly growing population.

At the same time as the drop in the incidence of violent crime, California's average daily jail population has increased from 69,000 to over 81,000. The prison population has rocketed to a record 168,000, nearly double the capacity of the state's 33 prisons.

Anticipating even more inmates, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is calling for a \$600 million increase in state corrections spending, raising it to \$7.9 billion. To put California's incarceration rate in some perspective, Canada, with about the same population as California, has only about one quarter as many people behind bars.

California's massive inmate population is the fruit of three decades of bipartisan efforts to whip up anti-crime hysteria and push through increasingly severe and long-term punishments. Some examples include a "Three Strikes law" authorizing life imprisonment for non-violent felonies, draconian drug sentences and, most recently, the ominously named California Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, which can add up to 10 years to a person's sentence if the crime was committed "in furtherance of a gang"—one of the more amorphous legal standards in criminal law.

The result has been such acute overcrowding that critical state prison programs and services are breaking down (prison medical services were so poor and disorganized that they have recently gone into federal receivership) requiring local jails to house more inmates for longer times.

Racially based gangs have developed increasing influence within the prisons and jails, which has carried over to the streets. The LA county sheriff's office claims that as much as 80 percent of the jail population has a gang affiliation. There has been a subtle attempt in the media coverage of the riots to conflate violent inmates with gang membership. This false connection will doubtlessly be employed to steer even

more spending into the bottomless pit of jails, prisons and law enforcement.

To be sure, it is gang influence that has increased, not the number of violent criminals. But what is behind this growing influence?

Longer sentences for lesser crimes packs jails and prisons with nonviolent youth and the revolving door parole system ensures that even those released will be swept back into the system—parolees returning on mostly technical violations, such as missing an appointment or failing a drug test, make up nearly 50 percent of incoming inmates.

This system permanently criminalizes a widening swath of the poor and working-class men. Although ostensibly free, parolees lose almost all rights to judicial process and constitutional rights, along with voting rights and even eligibility for urgently needed welfare programs. The state pays an estimated \$1.5 billion a year for parolees returned to prison.

In the 30 years of bipartisan "law and order" demagoguery, California's economic crisis has sharpened and is now at the breaking point. Today basic needs such as housing, health care and even food are increasingly out of reach for growing numbers of people.

In June, the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) released a study reporting that millions of Californians suffer food insecurity, and in October the California Budget Project reported that an annual income of over \$71,000 was required for a family in California to enjoy a modest standard of living. Insecure in their basic needs, poor children—largely black and Latino—are pushed through a deteriorating educational system, which has failed them. The educational priorities of the state can be seen in the fact that in the last 20 years 22 new prisons have been built, and only one University of California campus.

According to the Little Hoover Commission, an independent state research body, half of all parolees are illiterate, 80 percent are unemployed and 80 percent are drug users. In the face of the fear-mongering media accounts of the riot, it must be recalled that these traumatized young men are, in the first instance, products of the crisis of American society.



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