

Hundreds of prison deaths in Florida under investigation

Matthew MacEgan
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The Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) is under federal and state investigation after a large number of inmates have died under suspicious circumstances in recent months. The share of homicides has increased from 1.4 percent of all deaths in 2001 to 2.1 percent in 2011. More than 200 deaths in the state's prisons are under investigation.

The most recent victim of the Florida prison system was Latandra Ellington, a 36-year-old mother of four children who was being held in the Lowell Correctional Institution, who died on October 1. Ellington had been placed in solitary confinement in response to complaints from her family that a prison guard had threatened her life. In a letter written under a false name to protect her safety, Ellington revealed to her family that "Sgt. Q," a guard who obscured his badge when dealing with the inmate, had threatened "to beat me to death and mess me like a dog." She reported one instance where the unnamed prison guard "[grabbed] his radio and said he was gone bust me in my head with it."

After receiving no information concerning the cause of Ellington's death aside from a telephone call from the prison chaplain, her family hired a doctor to perform a private autopsy on the young woman, which "revealed hemorrhaging caused by blunt force trauma consistent with kicking or punches to the lower abdomen." This report contradicted the autopsy performed by the prison medical examiner, who found "no identifiable trauma anywhere in the body."

Ellington was only seven months away from freedom and a reunification with her children when she died. Her aunt told reporters that she feared Latandra was being sexually abused or had known about the sexual abuse of other inmates and had complained. Ellington had written in her letter that she had filed complaints

with several officers at the prison and feared retaliation.

The suspicious death of Latandra Ellington follows the release of the results of an investigation that found that an inmate was gassed to death by DOC guards in the Franklin Correctional Institution in 2010. The report showed that Randall Jordan-Aparo, who was 27 years old, had begged nurses for medical attention due to a documented condition that left him hardly able to breathe, walk or talk. When nurses refused, Jordan-Aparo threatened to sue them if they would not get him to a hospital.

The nurses reported the threat to prison guards, who placed Jordan-Aparo in a steel-walled solitary confinement cell. The following day, the captain sprayed the inmate with a mustard-colored gas until he died. Photographs of the scene show that so much gas was used that an outline was left on the ground where Jordan-Aparo's body had lain. Gas also appeared all over the cell walls. The medical examiner reported that he died of "natural causes."

A similar incident was unearthed recently concerning the death of 50-year-old Darren Rainey, who died in 2012 at the Dade Correctional Institution. Rainey suffered from mental illness and was accused of defecating in his cell without cleaning it up. As punishment, guards forced Rainey to stand in a narrow chamber where they blasted him with scalding hot water and steam and left him to suffer for over an hour.

According to an investigative report, Rainey screamed, "I can't take it no more! I'm sorry! I won't do it again!" Fellow inmates reported hearing the guards answer Rainey's pleas by sadistically asking, "Is the shower hot enough?"

The water was so hot that it made Rainey's skin shrivel away from his body before he collapsed and died. When his body was found, his skin was cooked to

the point where it was coming loose from his body, a condition known as “slippage.” The 911 recording, which would indicate that the killing was not treated as a homicide, was not saved. No autopsy was performed, and facility supervisors alleged that he died from a heart attack.

On September 19, as a result of the investigations into the deaths of Jordan-Aparo and Rainey, 32 employees were fired by DOC Secretary Michael Crews, who has opened up a series of investigations into the various allegations. This is a response to whistleblowers who have uncovered evidence of the systematic forging of incident reports and statements by guards who told inmates that they know how to “act for the cameras.”

The six department investigators who revealed the killing of Jordan-Aparo filed a lawsuit against leaders of the department, including Crews, earlier this year, alleging that they were retaliated against after revealing the cover-up. Reports have also surfaced that whistleblowers at a North Florida prison were punished by their bosses after exposing abuse of inmates.

“Punishment for disclosing wrongdoing is part of the culture within [the DOC]. Any disclosures that go against respondent and staff are likely to be met with hostility and retaliation,” wrote attorney David Organes in a fact-finding report.

Margaret Summers, a former worker at the Wakulla Correctional Institution who has since become an agency investigator, said she was retaliated against by Megan Dillard, a former captain at Wakulla. Dillard had allegedly ordered guards to randomly select about a dozen inmates and punish them for an alleged insult from an unknown prisoner. One guard emptied a can of chemicals into one prisoner’s mouth, later claiming that the prisoner tried to bite him. A medical examination later showed that the guard had bitten himself.

In retribution for her whistleblowing, Dillard had Summers transferred from her job reviewing records to one supervising inmates, a potentially dangerous task due to the fact that she lacked the cooperation of her coworkers. She was warned not to “irritate” her supervisors, and was repeatedly written up for disciplinary incidents that never occurred.

Other whistleblowers have reported being discriminated against at work, including being the last to receive equipment and not being allowed to use the

restroom without an escort. Others have been threatened outside of work and some have had their pets wounded or killed.



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