

Seven killed, 17 injured in South Carolina prison riot

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On Sunday evening, a prisoner riot resulted in the death of seven individuals and serious injury of at least 17 others at the Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, South Carolina. This was the worst prison riot in the United States since 1993, when nine prisoners and one guard died at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility.

Triggered by a gang-related confrontation over money and territory in the outside world, the confrontation spread to three dormitory buildings. Many inmates used homemade knives to stab and slash their targets, while others were severely beaten.

One anonymous inmate who witnessed the killings told the Associated Press that bodies were “literally stacked on top of each other” while corrections officers and personnel did nothing to respond to the deadly violence. “They just sat in the control bubble,” he said, “called the issue in, then sat on their collective asses.”

The vast majority of reporting has focused on the fact that Lee is a “maximum security” facility and holds the most violent and dangerous criminals, rather than the atrocities that are fueled within the dehumanizing prison system. It is especially shocking that it took hours for the officers to respond with medical and social attention after the chaos began around 7:00 pm.

South Carolina prisons have seen 13 other prisoner homicides since the start of 2017. With the highest rates of prisoner deaths in the state, Lee Correctional three weeks ago was the scene of an inmate uprising where a group held a guard hostage and took over a building. Single murders also occurred in February as well as last November and July.

Between 2016 and 2017 there were 250 prisoner assaults in South Carolina facilities that required external medical attention, which is twice as high as the previous two years. The state follows a national trend

of higher numbers of prisoner deaths.

In 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed a three-year-long increase in the number of inmates who have died in state prisons and local jails. That year there were 4,446 deaths, which was an all-time high despite declining rates of incarceration. Just over a third of those who died committed suicide, which remains the leading cause of death within the prison system.

These high violence and suicide rates speak to the deplorable conditions at prisons across the United States, which hold a combined population of more than 2 million people. About one-quarter of the entire population in correctional facilities have a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, major depression and bipolar disorder, a rate which is less than 4 percent in the general population. Rather than provide prisoners with adequate social services to rehabilitate them, the prison system often exacerbates mental, emotional, social and physical health problems.

Some prison systems, like those in New York and Los Angeles, now comprise the largest mental health treatment centers in the nation. Since people with mental illness are four and a half times as likely to use drugs, the mass incarceration triggered by the “war on drugs” plays a role in the high rates of mental illness in the overflowing prison system. Furthermore, rising costs encouraged by the private health care system impact the quality of treatment in states like South Carolina, which do not have contracts with private prison corporations.

Despite the massive social need for mental health care in the prison system, only one-third of state prison inmates and one-sixth of jail inmates receive the care they need.

Judge Michael Baxley of South Carolina ruled in favor of a class-action lawsuit against the state’s

corrections department in January 2014, writing that inmates have died due to “lack of basic mental health care, and hundreds more remain substantially at risk for serious physical injury, mental decompensation, and profound, permanent mental illness.” Mentally ill inmates were also left naked in solitary confinement for extended periods of time, sometimes sitting with their own feces and urine for days.

In 1976, in *Estelle v. Gamble*, the US Supreme Court affirmed that prisoners have a constitutional right to adequate medical attention and concluded that the Eighth Amendment is violated when corrections officials display “deliberate indifference” to an inmate’s medical needs. More than four decades later, conditions are even more deplorable.

Packed into tight quarters of extremely low standards, cut off from socialization with friends and family, and with either little or no access to mental health care, American prisoners are at a much higher risk of violent outbreaks, especially when they have preexisting conditions.

Those in prison, the majority of whom come from poor or working-class backgrounds, are turned into an oppressed segment of society that is legally and socially alienated from society by the state-sanctioned criminal justice system. Mass violence in prisons, much like the general homicides and mass shootings that occur on a weekly basis, is a sharp expression of the social crisis in America.



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