

# Fifteen prisoners die in a month in Mississippi

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Prisoners in Mississippi are dying at the highest rate the state has ever seen. During the month of August alone, 15 people were killed while in custody across the state, a sharp increase over the state's monthly average of four.

The dead include prisoners young and old, both black and white, nearly all of whom were imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses or minor theft—crimes resulting from the horrific social crisis in the US. Among those whose causes of death have still not been revealed pending autopsies are Troy Pittman, 59, Chris Hughes, 45, and Tony Springer, 75.

Despite the alarmingly high number, Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner Pelicia Hall denied any wrongdoing, maintaining that the deaths were the result of “natural causes,” including “cancer, coronary and other medical conditions.” No representative of the state has addressed the deteriorating conditions in the prisons and the lack of medical care afforded to the inmates.

The claim that the sudden spike in deaths is from “natural causes” falls flat in the face of overwhelming, well documented evidence. The harsh reality of life for prisoners in Mississippi was most openly revealed in recent a lawsuit filed this spring by the American Civil Liberties Union and Southern Poverty Law Center against the state over conditions at East Mississippi Correctional Facility.

The facility charged is home to 1,200 inmates, 80 percent of whom have been diagnosed with a mental health condition. One inmate, Terry Beasley, who testified in the case explained that prisoners are regularly denied access to basic medical treatment. He told the court that he has diabetes and can go into shock and eventually die if his blood sugar drops too low. When asked by plaintiffs how he feels knowing it can take guards minutes to respond in emergency situations, Beasley began crying and said, “It’s scary.”

In many cases, prisoners resort to dangerous tactics to get the guards’ attention in hopes of receiving much needed medical treatment. One such tactic is to set fire inside one’s cell, risking severe burns or even death. A video provided as evidence by plaintiffs in this case revealed that in one instance guards at East Mississippi Correctional Facility did not respond to the scene of a cell fire until five minutes after flames could be seen from outside of the cell.

Other tactics used to beg for medical treatment revealed during the case include inmates cutting themselves and then reaching their bloody arms through the cell’s tray slot.

Other inmates reported that their cells and facilities were overridden by cockroaches and mouse droppings, particularly in the kitchen, and that they had to regularly deal with sewage backing up into cells and bathrooms. At the time, the warden blamed the plumbing problems, among many others, on the inmates.

Each inmate death, at private and state-run facilities alike, is an avoidable tragedy whose responsibility ultimately lies with the ruling class of both parties.

The abuse documented in the case against East Mississippi Correctional Facility is widespread in Mississippi and throughout the country. These 15 deaths have taken place amidst the backdrop of one of the largest prison strikes in US history—spanning at least 11 states, parts of Canada, and even an immigrant detention facility in Washington—against the inhumane conditions, lack of healthcare, and virtual slave labor mandated in many prisons.

The prison abuse in Mississippi is an especially stark expression of the social crisis. The state has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country with 609 out of 100,000 people behind bars. As is the case in prisons and immigrant detention facilities across the country, the state prisons in Mississippi are starved of resources.

In place of funding, there has instead been a push to privatize the entire prison industry under false claims that they are better managed and more efficient. In Mississippi this past spring, a massive relocation of prisoners from state prisons to private prisons took place, in the hopes of offsetting budget cuts.

The private prisons often make their profit by understaffing the prisons. Additionally, these facilities are often being paid per day, per inmate, creating a situation in which they are incentivized to keep inmates as long as possible. The results of such a system are deadly.

Among the first prisoners to die during August in Mississippi was Albert McGee, who was held at the South Mississippi Correctional Institution. McGee, 57, was a diabetic. Prison officials found him unconscious in his cell, at which point he was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead soon thereafter. There was no report provided documenting the circumstances leading up to his death or investigating whether or not he had received proper medical attention for his condition. How long he was passed out in his cell before officers become aware has not been made known.

The death of 24-year-old Nija Syvallus Bonhomme took place at privately run Wilkinson County Correctional Center in southwestern Mississippi. Bonhomme died in his cell in a fight with another prisoner. His family has spoken out on the circumstances, saying that the prison failed to protect him from violent conditions that he had repeatedly warned about. They claim that officers forced him to return to his cell after a violent altercation with the cellmate, who would later allegedly kill him. His sister told Democracy Now! that the guards “threw him back to the dogs.”

Alma Dunning is demanding that the state answer for its handling of her son, Lucious Bolton, who died of stomach cancer in early August. In the days leading to his death prison officials refused to allow his mother to talk to him. When she was finally given his location and allowed to come visit, he was dead within 20 minutes. “My main concern is to get this story out so they can’t do this to other people,” said Dunning, 51, adding, “It’s eating me up inside to not see my baby when he died.”

One of the deceased, Nicole Rathmann, was slated to come home this week after serving six years on a

nonviolent drug conviction. Rathmann, 33, died August 23 at a hospital in Jackson. Her family says they have not gotten an explanation about her death.



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