Rising death toll in San Diego jails

Norisa Diaz
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Within the short span of six weeks, four people have died while in custody in jails in San Diego, California's second most populous county. The deaths of Joseph Castiglione, 56, Michael Wilson, 32, Derek King, 45, and Ivan Ortiz, 26, are evidence of the brutality of the prison system not just in one city, but throughout the US.

On February 7, Joseph Castiglione was shackled by authorities at the Vista Detention facility when he began behaving erratically. Castiglione's wrists and ankles were bound, and officers placed him face down on a gurney. After some time, a deputy noticed that Castiglione had stopped breathing and was "was turning blue." An autopsy concluded that a bag of meth had burst open in his stomach.

Michael Wilson suffered heart failure in San Diego's Central Jail on Valentine's Day. After being imprisoned for allegedly breaking his bail terms, Wilson called his mother from jail to tell her he was having trouble breathing and had been denied his prescribed heart medication. Wilson's mother called repeatedly during his 10 days in jail to ask that her son be relocated to the facility's medical unit, but the authorities kept Wilson in the jail's general population.

Wilson's sister told the British *Guardian* newspaper that he was born with a congenital heart defect and had recently had a defibrillator placed in his chest. The local news outlets later reported that Wilson died of "natural causes."

Derek King passed away February 16 as a result of colon cancer that had spread to other parts of his body. King had recently been returned to jail from a state psychiatric hospital after being found incompetent to stand trial.

Ivan Ortiz, who suffered from severe mental illness, was kept in the jail's psychiatric observation unit for the last two months. His mother called the jail repeatedly to urge that her son not be left alone, but Ivan was still placed in a single cell, where he was able to commit suicide on March 18.

San Diego has the second-highest death rate of jailed inmates in the state, with 135 dead over the last decade, according to public records. The majority of the 135 who died suffered from serious mental illness, and many died due to a lack of medical care or by suicide.

A 2018 report by Disability Rights California found that more inmates killed themselves in San Diego's jail system than in LA county jails, despite LA's inmate population being three times the size of San Diego's. The report found that in San Diego's jails there was an over-incarceration of people with mental health-related disabilities, but the authorities failed to provide adequate mental health treatment and lacked adequate suicide prevention practices. According to the website of Disability Rights California, 383,000 people with mental illness are currently in jails and prisons in the US.

The spate of deaths reflects larger problems of social inequality, mental illness, homelessness and mass incarceration. The nonprofit organization Volunteers of America noted that "more than 10 percent of those coming in and out of prisons and jails are reported to have been homeless in the months before their incarceration, and for those with mental illness, the rates are about 20 percent."

San Diego has the fourth largest homeless population in the nation, behind Seattle, Los Angeles and New York City, cities with some of the highest living costs in the US.

According to the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) for 2017, California's real poverty rate is 19 percent, the highest in the country. The SPM takes into account cost-of-living, including taxes, housing and medical costs, and is considered a more accurate reflection of poverty than the standard survey.

California hosts the largest prison population in the US, with 241,000 people currently held in its prisons. The US confines the largest prison population in the world, totaling more than the combined prison population of the rest of the world.

The barbaric conditions faced by inmates in California are by no means unique to the state, as demonstrated by the wave of 15 suicides within 15 months in Alabama's prisons. A federal Department of Justice report on the suicides revealed pleas for help scrawled in blood on the walls from prisoners held in solitary confinement. It also documented a high incidence of rapes, murders, beatings, stabbings, mutilations and arson.

According to a report, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie," published last month by the Prison Policy Initiative: "The American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals and prisons in the US territories."

The newly inaugurated Democratic governor of California, Gavin Newsom, campaigned on a platform of ending "the outrage that is private prisons in the state of California." This campaign pledge, which received a great deal of popular support, was little more than a sop to the prison guard union, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, which spent $1 million on television commercials promoting Newsom for governor and Tony Thurmond for superintendent of public instruction.

A San Diego sheriff's spokeswoman wrote to the *Guardian* that she had no comment on the deaths of Wilson, Ortiz, Castiglione and King, stating that "our jail system provides excellent medical screening and care."

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