

Six inmates have died in the past three months at Louisville, Kentucky jail

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Six Louisville, Kentucky prison inmates have died since Thanksgiving. The most recent victim had not been convicted of a crime, but was in jail only because he could not afford to pay bail.

On Sunday, February 6, Lesley Starnes, 36, died after trying to hang himself. Corrections officers said that they found Starnes with a sheet tied around his neck during midnight rounds, but, in an unbelievable account, said that they were unable to cut it off for several minutes because their knife was too dull.

Starnes was pronounced dead an hour later at the local hospital. He had been held at the Louisville Metro Corrections facility since January 26.

Starnes was the third inmate to die so far this year, and the sixth since November. He was in jail for alleged nonpayment of child support in Bullitt County, and he could not afford bond.

Amber Duke, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Interim Executive Director for the state of Kentucky, told local news station WDRB that Starnes only died because he did not have the money to buy his freedom.

“Mr. Starnes should never have been held in custody. He was not a danger to his community. He just lacked the wealth necessary to purchase his freedom and his life.”

“No one should ever die in our jail,” Kungu Njuguna, ACLU Kentucky Policy Strategist, told the news station WDRB. “This death is a testament to the complete and utter failure of our criminal legal system.”

Starnes was being kept in a cell without lights, which is against policy. Denying a person light, especially someone suffering from depression, can deepen their depression.

Currently there are about 1,450 inmates at Louisville

Metro Corrections, down more than 200 over the past five months, but still almost twice the number who should be in the facility.

Two other inmates died in January. Keith Smith, 66, died on Sunday, January 9. Officials say Smith, who was being housed in the medical unit, was found unresponsive and when they could not revive him, he was taken to the University of Louisville Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Smith was booked on January 5 but officials did not say for what reason. Another inmate is said to have committed suicide on January 2.

Three other inmates died in the facility during the last week of November and the first week of December.

In what is a generic term, Louisville Metro Corrections Director Dwayne Clark said 59-year-old Kenneth Hall was found in his cell unresponsive by an officer. Why a 59-year-old man should die was not explained.

Also during that week in November-December, 34-year-old Rickitta Smith died after being taken to a hospital after having a seizure. A third 48-year-old woman committed suicide after having been in two fights with other inmates.

Officials did not say what the fights were over or why officials were not able to keep the women safe. Officials also did not say what caused Smith’s seizure, although seizures are often associated with beatings.

The FBI has been brought in to investigate the deaths.

The death of these six people in the past three months is another example of the brutality of the criminal justice system.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Kentucky has about 41,000 people behind bars. Of these, 27,500 are in state and federal prisons, 500 are youth and another 13,000 people are held in local jails like the

Louisville Metro Department of Corrections facility. About half of those held in local jails are imprisoned because they are poor, awaiting trial but unable to post bail.

In Kentucky, 930 people per 100,000 are behind bars, giving it the 7th highest incarceration rate in the United States. In contrast, Britain has 130 people per 100,000 behind bars, France 110 and Germany 69.

Overall the United States has the highest number of people in prisons and jails in the world. More than 2.3 million people are behind bars, which represents an incarceration rate of 664 per 100,000 people.

In addition, 3.6 million people are on probation and another 840,000 are on parole. In total, over 7 million people are under some form of control by the prison system.

An astonishing 555,000 people are locked up who have not been convicted of anything. Most are being held in local jails because they cannot afford bail while they are awaiting trial. The average bail for a felony is \$10,000, which represents 8 months' wages for the typical person who is locked up and cannot afford bail.

In addition to those currently in jail or prisons, as of 2010 there were 4.9 million people who were formerly incarcerated. Nineteen million people have a felony conviction and 77 million people have a criminal record.

Most of these people also face "collateral consequences" even after serving their sentences. In most states, anyone convicted of a felony loses the right to vote, while everyone with a criminal record confronts housing, education, employment and other restrictions.

Under the Death in Custody Reporting Act, signed into law more than six years ago by then-President Barack Obama, state and local agencies are supposed to report to the US Department of Justice the death of any person who dies while in any form of custody or during any interactions with police.

However, the federal government is not releasing any of the data which it has collected or reports on the data. Researchers who study the problem have found that the mortality rate for the US jail population is 128 per 100,000 and for prisons it is 264 per 100,000.

The fact that almost one quarter of the country's population is currently or in the past connected to the criminal justice system is another reflection of the

enormous inequality that exists in the United States and the brutal and barbaric treatment that is necessary to maintain it.

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites family and friends of those who have died at the Louisville Metro Corrections facility, or current inmates, to contact us to share their stories.



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