

Four Florida prison guards arrested and charged in murder of mentally ill inmate

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Four Florida Corrections officers were arrested last week and charged with murder for the February 14 death of an inmate who was allegedly beaten to death after being removed from his cell. The inmate's tragic death at the hands of a violent assault at the south Florida facility is one of many examples of rampant abuse and fatal incidents that occur in prisons throughout the US.

The victim has been identified as 60-year-old Ronald Ingram, an inmate who was in the process of being transferred out of Dade Correctional Institution in Miami-Dade County and moved to a different prison in North Florida. Ingram's cell was in the prison's mental health unit. The four officers arrested on Thursday and Friday—Ronald Connor, 24, Christopher Rolon, 29, Kirk Walton, 34, and Jeremy Godbolt, 28—reportedly put Ingram in handcuffs and took him from his cell, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Although Ingram was in handcuffs and compliant with officer commands, the officers began to beat him. Before he was removed from his cell, he “reportedly threw urine on one of the officers,” FDLE said.

“The inmate was beaten so badly he had to be carried to the transport van,” the department said, adding he was placed in a secure compartment alone. In a surveillance video shown at the news conference Friday, Ingram can be seen walking from his cell to the transportation area with corrections officers. The group is out of sight of the camera for a period, and it is during that time authorities believed Ingram was beaten. When the group comes back into view of the camera, Ingram appears to no longer be able to walk unassisted.

The van Ingram was placed in made a stop in Ocala, Florida, where the prisoner was found lying on a bench. According to the arrest warrant, the medical examiner determined the cause of death to be from blunt-force trauma to Ingram's upper body during an assault, resulting in broken ribs, a punctured right lung, and the internal bleeding which followed that eventually killed him. Ingram had also acquired bruises all across his face and torso.

Three of the correctional officers thus far, Connor, Rolon and Walton, are facing charges of second-degree murder, cruel treatment of a detainee and aggravated abuse of an elderly person. Despite complaints from Walton's attorney, Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Mindy Glazer determined there was probable cause to imprison all three men without bond. The three are expected to make their first appearance in court on Friday morning.

Dade Correctional Institution possesses one of the largest psych wards of any of the state's prisons and is also one of a handful of

institutions that cater to inmates with psychological issues.

While the exact nature of Ingram's psychological state remain unclear, the admission that the victim was placed in a mental health unit before being killed is also a testament to the problems of mental illness that plagues the prison system, which experts call “the new asylums.” In a 2016 study performed by the Treatment Advocacy Center on mental illness prevalence in correctional institutions, researchers found that a jail or prison holds more mentally ill individuals than the largest remaining state psychiatric hospital in 44 states.

The Los Angeles County Jail, Chicago's Cook County Jail and New York's Riker's Island Jail each hold more mentally ill inmates than any psychiatric hospital in the United States. Approximately 20 percent of inmates in jails and 15 percent of inmates in state prisons are now estimated to have a serious mental illness. Based on the total inmate population, this means approximately 383,000 individuals with severe psychiatric disease were behind bars in the United States in 2014, or nearly 10 times the number of patients remaining in the nation's state mental hospitals.

In fact, US prisons and jails have widely taken on the role of de facto mental health facilities for the most exploited and impoverished sections of workers and youth who are unable to afford psychiatric treatment and residential mental health programs and resources. This is coupled with the scarcity of community-based programs, bound up with decades of severe cuts to public health and mental health services.

According to one estimate highlighted in the report, correctional facilities confine at least 360,000 men and women with serious conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression. In a federal survey, 15 percent of state prisoners and 24 percent of jail inmates acknowledged symptoms of psychosis such as hallucinations or delusions.

In addition to mental problems among inmates going widely untreated, correctional staff are notorious for responding with violence when prisoners engage in behavior that is symptomatic of their mental health problems, even if it is minor and nonthreatening. In a detailed report from Human Rights Watch in 2015 titled “Callous and Cruel,” researchers noted staffers would use violent force “in the absence of any emergency, and without first making serious attempts to secure the inmate's compliance through other means.” There is no national data on the prevalence of staff use of force in the more than 5,000 jails and prisons in the

United States, with widespread abuse going unreported.

Florida State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle told the press, “We all recognize that misconduct, abuse or criminal behavior have no place in Florida’s correctional system.” She added, “Individuals who are sentenced to incarceration by our criminal courts have lost their freedom but not their basic rights. They should not be subjected to forms of ‘back alley’ justice, which are actions that violate Florida law.”

Florida Corrections Secretary Ricky Dixon professed his “absolute disappointment” in the staff members allegedly involved in the incident. “Based on the facts presented today, these men violated public trust, and they violated the trust of those that work alongside them,” Dixon said before saying a number of “changes” to the institution’s practices would be made following Ingram’s death, including moving the warden who was in charge of the facility, but adding that he held “complete confidence” in him.

Notwithstanding the remarks of authorities, one can be certain no serious changes will be made to significantly curtail the horrific and deadly atmosphere that characterizes the American corrections system, the largest in the entire world, where more than 2.3 million people every year are jammed like animals in a network of state and federal prisons, local jails and immigration detention camps. Nearly 7 million Americans, including those on probation or parole, pass through the country’s so-called “criminal justice system” annually.

This is also not the first time that Dade Correctional Institution has been at the center of an investigation into a horrific detainee death. In 2012, inmate Darren Rainey died after guards placed him in a scalding hot shower and locked him inside for several hours as punishment, with no way to control the water temperature himself. The 50-year-old inmate, who reportedly suffered from severe schizophrenia, died after suffering from severe burns that stripped the skin from his body. One inmate witness said Rainey was taunted by staff as he begged for mercy. Despite the ghastly killing, the state attorney’s office declined to even file charges against the officers responsible.

Ryan Andrews, a civil attorney who has represented prisoners who were the victims of high-profile beatings, expressed doubts on the claims of authorities that charges would be brought against officers accountable for beatings. Andrews noted the disturbingly high number of beatings that go entirely unaddressed in the state’s prisons. “DOC had the opportunity to do this for so many other inmate beatings and deaths, and they didn’t do jack,” Andrews told the *Miami Herald*. “In that regard, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

The problems of physical and sexual abuse have been rampant across Florida’s jails and prisons for years, with little to no changes in the barbaric conditions inmates face on a daily basis. In 2014, the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) was placed under federal and state investigations after a large number of inmates died under suspicious circumstances within a period of months. The share of homicides had increased from 1.4 percent of all deaths in 2001 to 2.1 percent by 2011, as more than 200 deaths in the state’s prisons were put under investigation.

In October of 2014, 36-year-old Latandra Ellington, a mother of four children who was being held at the Lowell Correctional

Institution in Ocala, Florida, died after being placed in solitary confinement and physically confronted by a guard. Ellington reported the guard threatened “to beat me to death and mess me like a dog.” A doctor hired by Ellington’s family who performed a private autopsy on the young woman revealed her death was the result of “hemorrhaging caused by blunt force trauma consistent with kicking or punches to the lower abdomen.” This report was greatly at odds with the autopsy performed by the prison medical examiner, who found “no identifiable trauma anywhere in the body.”

Andrews also represents Cheryl Weimar, a 52-year-old former prisoner at Lowell Correctional Institution who was suffering from mental health issues and was beaten and left paralyzed during her stay in 2019. The FDOC settled a federal lawsuit with Weimar for about \$4.65 million, after the victim sued both the agency and two Lowell corrections officers who she said violated her federal rights by nearly beating her to death. The lawsuit alleged the officers attacked her after she requested a different work assignment because of a physical disability.

Weimar told the officers she was having a medical emergency and a psychological emergency, but they ignored her complaints. She had severe anxiety as well as bipolar disorder and other mental disabilities. According to the lawsuit, the officers broke her neck, and then “dragged her like a rag doll” across the prison compound to continue beating her in a location “not covered by surveillance cameras.” No criminal charges against the officers were filed.

Lowell Correctional is infamous for abuse against its detainees. The all-women’s facility was the subject of a two-year-long investigation by the US Department of Justice that resulted in 34 pages of accounts of abuse. The DOJ released a report in December of 2020 detailing how corrections officers raped, sodomized, beat and choked female inmates at Lowell. The investigation found the prison violated incarcerated women’s Eighth Amendment rights and failed to protect them from sexual abuse, while also revealing that higher-ups at Florida Department of Corrections and Lowell failed to take timely action to resolve the systemic problems of abuse, enabling staff to continue assaulting Lowell prisoners.



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