

From Georgia to Indiana, inmates left by jailers to die in deplorable, inhumane conditions

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This week, two horrendous cases of inmates dying inside American jails have shocked and horrified millions of people.

In Georgia last September, a man was found dead in his cell, his body riddled with sores, after his lawyer said he was “eaten alive” by bed bugs while incarcerated. In Indiana, a man suffering from schizophrenia died of dehydration and malnutrition in 2021 after spending 20 straight days in solitary confinement while suffering severe psychosis, according to a family lawyer.

The terrible and inhumane circumstances that preceded the deaths of the two men, both of who were clearly in need of medical attention for weeks, yet ignored, have further exposed the deplorable and unhygienic conditions inmates throughout the US prison-industrial complex are forced to endure.

In both instances, the incarcerated, 29-year-old Indiana resident Joshua McLemore and 35-year-old Georgia resident Lashawn Thompson, had yet to be convicted of any crime. This did not prevent them from being jailed until their condition deteriorated to the point of no return. While McLemore was white and Thompson was black, their captors, also white and black, treated them with the same cruel indifference they would any working class person suffering under their “care.”

According to PrisonPolicy.org, the US jails more people per capita than any other nation, at the staggering rate of 565 per 100,000 residents.

As of 2023, between the thousands of federal, state, local and tribal “justice” systems, PrisonPolicy.org found that nearly 2 million people in the US are currently incarcerated across “1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails, 1,323 juvenile correctional facilities, 181 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian country jails, as well as military prisons, civilian commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the US territories.”

One of the jails most notorious for its mistreatment of inmates in the US is the crowded Fulton County Jail, located in Atlanta, Georgia. On June 12, 2022, Lashawn Thompson was arrested and detained inside the jail on a simple battery charge, according to family attorney Michael Harper. Three months later, on September 12, 2022, Fulton County jail staff declared Thompson dead in his cell, although, according to Harper, the officer who found Thompson dead was unsure the last time anyone had seen him alive.

In a statement published on Wednesday, Harper revealed that he had obtained records showing that jail staff knew Thompson was “deteriorating, but did nothing to administer aid to him or to help him.” Harper continued: “They literally watched his health decline until he died. When his body was found one of the detention officers refused to administer CPR because in her words she ‘freaked out.’”

Harper wrote that the cell “Mr. Thompson was housed in was not fit for a diseased animal. He did not deserve this.”

Speaking at a press conference Thursday, Harper called for a criminal investigation into Thompson’s death. The lawyer provided disturbing pictures showing Thompson’s emaciated body covered in sores and bugs. His cell was filthy, covered in debris and refuse.

“There is no excuse for a mentally ill inmate to be left alone in a jail, abandoned to die,” Harper said. Refuting claims from jail staff that they checked Thompson’s condition every two hours, Harper added, “There is no way this man was being monitored every two hours. It seemed like he wasn’t monitored for months.”

Speaking at the same press conference, Brad McCrae, Thompson’s brother, called for a “full investigation” into the death of his sibling. “No inmate should be housed in those conditions,” McCrae said. Reflecting on the pictures released showing the state his brother was in, starved and riddled with sores, McCrae said, “I thought about Emmett Till, comparing those photos. It was heartbreaking. It was hard to look at.”

As of this writing, no police or jail staff have been charged with a crime and Harper has yet to file a lawsuit. However, the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office released a statement on Thursday claiming that a “full investigation” into Thompson’s death inside the jail was ongoing and that the “health, well-being and security of inmates in our care is our top priority.”

These empty words are betrayed by the dead bodies. Last year, the Southern Center for Human Rights (SCHR) found that there were at least 10 deaths inside the Fulton County jail in 2022. In an article released on November 9, 2022 titled “Uncontained Outbreaks of Lice, Scabies Leave People at Fulton Jail Dangerously Malnourished,” SCHR revealed that during a September outbreak “100 percent of the people held in one unit had either lice, scabies and or both.”

The documents obtained by SCHR through an open records request showed that the outbreak occurred in the units that house “people diagnosed with mental illnesses requiring treatment,” i.e., the unit where Thompson was held.

Reviewing the documents, SCHR also “found that 90 percent of the people in the unit had not been completing their ‘activities of daily living’—including showering, dressing, getting out of bed, walking and using the toilet—or receiving essential medications.” The report added, “Further medical findings showed that over 90 percent of the affected people were *significantly malnourished, showing clear signs of cachexia*—a wasting syndrome leading to the loss of muscle and fat, often seen in people with late stage cancers” (emphasis in original).

The atrocious conditions at Fulton County Jail are not unique. In a lawsuit filed on Wednesday, the estate of Joshua McLemore accused Jackson County, Indiana Sheriff Chris Everhart and Jackson County Jail Commander Scott Ferguson, as well as medical staff and Advanced Correctional Healthcare Inc., of leaving the 29-year-old alone in a

windowless cell without access to a bathroom or sink for 20 days before he died of dehydration and malnutrition.

According to the lawsuit, McLemore graduated from Long Beach High School in Long Beach, Mississippi and attended Mississippi State University. He enjoyed reading, playing chess, video games and watching sports. Joshua was raised by Rhonda McLemore, a single mother and a veteran of the US Navy, who died this past December, some 16 months after losing her son.

The lawsuit notes that Joshua started having problems in high school, including drug abuse, and was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia. While McLemore received in-patient treatment that allowed him to experience “periods of relative stability that allowed him to work and enjoy life,” he still struggled with drugs and schizophrenia, eventually moving to Indiana in November 2020.

On July 20, 2021, Joshua’s mother was anxious because she could not reach her son after trying multiple times to call and text him. Eventually, the apartment manager where Joshua lived went to check on him and found him naked on the floor of his bedroom “confused and incoherent,” at which point they called for an ambulance. Medical personnel were able to transport him to the hospital.

During the ambulance ride, medical technicians noted the obvious signs of mental distress McLemore was exhibiting, which included speaking incoherently and trying to chew on the seat-belt restraints and rail of the stretcher. Upon arriving at the hospital, according to the lawsuit, McLemore continued to show signs of extreme mental distress, including at one point “barking like a dog.”

During an initial examination, McLemore acknowledged having used methamphetamine recently. Medical records indicate McLemore had previously been seen at the hospital for psychosis and drug use. After being at the hospital for roughly 30 minutes, the lawsuit notes that a nurse found McLemore laying on the floor of his room, naked. When the nurse went up to McLemore and tapped him on the shoulder to tell him to get back into his bed, McLemore reacted by pulling her hair.

A security guard, who was also an off-duty cop, witnessed Joshua grab the nurse’s hair and ordered McLemore not to touch her and to stay in his bed. McLemore complied, and the lawsuit notes “no further incidents occurred.”

This did not prevent the off-duty cop from calling other police and placing McLemore under arrest. He was essentially kidnapped from the hospital and transported in nothing but his underwear to the Jackson County Jail, where he would eventually die.

When McLemore arrived at the jail on July 20, 2021, the lawsuit notes that staff did not conduct an “intake medical or mental health screening,” despite the fact McLemore had just been in the emergency room. In fact, during McLemore’s nearly three weeks at the jail, no one sought to obtain his medical records, prescriptions or mental health history. Instead, the staff shoved McLemore into a room known as Padded Cell 7, where he would remain in “extreme isolation” for the next 20 days.

Padded Cell 7, or PAD7, does not have any windows, bed or seat. The bathroom in the cell is blocked by a door that was locked virtually the entire time McLemore was incarcerated, forcing the deeply disturbed man to urinate and defecate on the same floor on which he he slept and ate. The fluorescent lights were kept on inside his cell 24 hours a day, and in violation of every jail policy in the United States, McLemore was not even allowed one hour a day outside of his cell.

Despite being formally placed under “medical observation,” no medical monitoring of McLemore was ever conducted. Required observation logs that were supposed to document McLemore’s state and activities every 15 minutes stopped being filled out after seven-and-a-half days.

McLemore’s severe psychosis and urgent need for medical attention was clearly evident. An investigation by the jail staff following his death confirmed that during the 20 days McLemore was incarcerated, he slept a

total of 15 hours. Most of his waking hours, according to the lawsuit, were spent “staring into space, randomly gesticulating, playing with his food, rolling around in trash, smearing his feces, eating paper, randomly twisting his body into various contortions, chewing Styrofoam and attempting in vain to look out of the covered window in his door.”

Despite the fact McLemore never exhibited any violent or aggressive behavior while in the jail, the staff never let him out of his cell except on four occasions, and on each of those occasions he was placed in severe restraints. During his nearly three weeks in the jail, McLemore barely ate or drank, losing nearly 45 pounds. It was not until August 8, after jailers witnessed McLemore unable to drink without the assistance of a nurse, that they decided to call an ambulance.

However, before getting McLemore the urgent medical attention he needed, the jailers had to cover up their criminality by cleaning the filthy cell in which he wallowed for weeks, and wash McLemore, who had been covered in his own urine and feces.

The rush clean-up job delayed McLemore receiving care by several hours. Despite the efforts of the police, the lawsuit notes that when EMTs arrived at the jail to transport McLemore, they noted his cell “smelled like old urine and the blanket he was covered up with was covered in urine. There was urine all over the floor.”

Once he arrived at the emergency department at the Shneck Medical Center, doctors diagnosed him with hypoxia (lack of oxygen in body tissues), encephalopathy (brain damage), acute renal failure, hypernatremia (too much sodium in blood, indicative of severe dehydration) and rhabdomyolysis (breakdown in muscle tissue from electrolyte imbalance or long-term lack of use). McLemore’s condition was so critical he had to be transported to Mercy West in Cincinnati, where he arrived on August 9, intubated and sedated.

On August 10, McLemore’s condition continued to deteriorate—he was comatose and placed on life support, with his mother making the difficult decision later that evening to withdraw life support. Joshua McLemore died that evening.

Following McLemore’s death, the Indiana State Police conducted an “investigation” and sent the results to Jackson County Prosecuting Attorney Jeffrey Chalfant. In deciding against pressing any charges against any jail staff, Chalfant wrote that while McLemore “likely died due to prolonged lack of attention by Jackson County Jail staff as a group... no single person committed an act or omission that constituted a crime.”



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