

215 bodies, known to the police, found in unmarked graves behind jail in Jackson, Mississippi

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A horrifying situation is unfolding in Jackson, Mississippi, where 215 bodies were recently discovered in unmarked graves behind a state jail. The families of those buried, in what is known as the “pauper’s field” behind the Hinds County Penal Farm, were never informed of the death of their loved ones, let alone given the chance to retrieve their bodies and pay their respects.

The extent and scope of this travesty and utter disregard for human life is still largely being kept under wraps. However, what has been reported thus far is chilling. The gravesites of the victims are identifiable only by a number and a metal rod. The bodies were not embalmed, given coffins, or properly buried. The graves were dug by inmates and it is likely the burials were carried out by the same inmates.

One activist, known as Arthur “Silky Slim” Reed, who has been outspoken on the events, described a morbid scene at the burial ground when visiting, reporting that buzzards fly overhead, attracted to the disturbing stench that emanates from the improper burials and shallow graves.

The shocking revelation was unearthed only due to the persistence of Bettersten Wade, who spent seven months looking for her middle child, Dexter Wade, who suddenly went missing in March 2023. Bettersten would not find out the truth about her son until October 2023. Dexter had been killed shortly after leaving his mother’s home, hit by a Jackson police car while crossing a nearby interstate highway.

Police were aware of Dexter’s identity, as he was killed with identification on him, and yet still failed to notify the family. Instead, the police department let Dexter’s body remain unclaimed for months in the county morgue.

Bettersten repeatedly called the Jackson Police Department to ask the police if they had any information on her son after officially reporting him missing to the police on March 14, 2023, just days after he went missing. The grieving mother emailed pictures of her son to the police and requested they show the photo on television. Finding no help from the authorities, she took to social media to appeal to the public to look out for her missing son.

Bettersten reported to NBC News that the decision to call the

police was difficult for her because of her lack of trust in the department. Her 62-year-old brother died at the hands of the Jackson police in 2019 when an officer slammed him to the ground. The officer was convicted of manslaughter but is appealing.

It was not until August, several months later, when a new investigator took over Dexter’s case and finally notified the Wade family of the death. It took Bettersten two more months before she could track down her son’s body in the pauper’s field. Moreover, like the other victims buried in the same plot, it cost the Wade family a \$250 fee to claim Dexter’s body.

On a Tuesday afternoon in early October, accompanied by a sheriff’s deputy and two inmates in jumpsuits, Bettersten, her sister and daughter were taken to plot No. 672 where Dexter was buried. Dexter Wade was the father of two girls.

Since the initial revelation, several more harrowing stories have come to light over the bodies buried at the Hinds County Penal Farm.

Marquita Moore was notified of the death of her older brother, Marrio Terrell Moore, 40, from an online article revealing cases of two dozen homicide victims in which the Jackson police had failed to notify the public or the families. Moore’s brother was the second on the list.

All two dozen victims were from a single year.

Moore read the news of her brother’s death on October 10. However, the article reported that Marrio had been killed on February 2, over eight months earlier. NBC News reports that upon learning of the tragedy, Moore shuddered and cried out: “Lord, this is my brother ... Someone done killed my brother.”

After discovering the truth, Moore immediately went to the Jackson Police Department’s headquarters to find out more information but was told that no one was available.

Moore would later learn that Marrio had been bludgeoned to death, wrapped in a tarp and left on the street. For months, his body had lain in the Hinds County morgue, unclaimed. Then, on July 14, inmates at the county penal farm had buried his remains in the pauper’s field.

Like the dozens of other families, the news has wrecked the Moore family. “What are you hiding?” Moore said in a recent

interview. “Why can’t you just come and just tell somebody that their child is gone?”

Marrio was buried the same day and in the same place as Dexter Wade.

On December 4, the family of Jonathan David Hankins, 39, learned of his death from news outlets. Hankins was reported missing in June 2022, nearly a year before the first pauper’s field has been going on for years.

Jonathan Hankins was discovered dead by the authorities days after he went missing, on May 23, 2022, in a hotel room in Jackson. The death is widely believed to have been due to an overdose. Investigators were able to verify his identity without problem or delay. However, like the other cases, the Police Department did not inform the family, and the county inmates were made to bury his body alongside the other inmates. Jonathan’s grave was plot No. 645.

The Hankins story echoes the first two. For over a year Jonathan’s mother Gretchen contacted the sheriff’s office every few weeks asking for any news. She was told time again that they had no information.

Speaking with NBC News, Gretchen Hankins said: “I want people to know that somebody is not doing their job making folks go through what I’ve been through ... They can’t even do the job of notifying a dead person’s next of kin. They probably just thought, ‘Another drug addict, gone.’”

The pauper’s field graveyard revelation has made headlines on and off again since the first major case was unveiled in fall. However, the news coverage is not nearly proportional to the scale of the crime nor to the level of public outrage. Moreover, there are countless pressing questions that must be answered, including the identity of the remaining bodies.

Predictably, there appears to be very little effort from the establishment to carry out a formal investigation and critical details are still being kept from the public.

The most moving and heartfelt accounts of the situation can be found on social media, as hundreds of thousands of workers and young people react and grieve for the families.

In reaction to one Tik Tok that went viral on the story, commenters expressed their widespread reactions. One user, “emma,” writes: “I really want to say I’m shocked but I’m just ... not anymore.” The comment has eight thousand “likes” and is filled with replies such as, “Me too, and the fact that I’m not shocked actually breaks my spirit.”

Other comments complain, “How is this not huge national news!?!?” and “This needs more attention.” Another video with over a million “likes” has a comment noting, “the only place I have heard about this is TikTok. Wild.” Of course, countless more express pure outrage: “This sickens me to the core to hear”; “the system is corrupt everywhere”; and “I trust nothing if it comes from our government.”

There are dozens of videos on all social media platforms that echo

the same sentiments. The public reaction speaks volumes about the state of social relations in the United States and more broadly. Workers are outraged, horrified, heartbroken and deeply angered by the events. However, there is very little surprise to be found. It is largely considered predictable that the state institutions would be so quick and careless to disregard human life. Nearly four years of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has cost the lives of millions, has revealed clearly that both political parties and all the major state institutions value profits over the lives of workers.

There are countless threads of the immense social crisis woven into this awful situation. In all three of the cases mentioned here, the victims were known to have been struggling with addiction of some sort. Officially, over 100,000 people die of a drug overdose every year, a drastic undercounting. Hundreds of thousands more battle addiction everyday with little to no publicly funded resources for help.

Many of the victims were well known to the police department, having spent time behind bars before. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, in 2023 almost 2 million people were held in 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 in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the US territories.

The violence and callousness present in society seeps into nearly every aspect of life with horrific consequences. The lives and struggles of the victims buried at Hinds County Penal Farm are not unique. They are a snapshot of conditions that face millions of workers and their families throughout the US in 2024.

There have already been attempts by various groups to paint this largely as a racial issue but early signs show that this narrative is not being accepted by the public as easily as in previous events. Activist Arthur Reed, for example, has noted multiple times to the press that the

issue extends “beyond race,” as the dead buried in the pauper’s field are both black and white alike.

Common among all of the victims is that they are working class and



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