

234 inmates have died in Kentucky jails since 2020, most while awaiting trial

Milo Stevens
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On November 4, 2021, Terri Beth Mays, a 32-year-old inmate at the Whitley County Detention Center located in Williamsburg, Kentucky, died after being held at the facility for a period of eight days. She had yet to have her first court hearing concerning her arrest.

Surveillance footage from the jail showed Mays' breathing becoming ragged and harsh, until she exhibited a delirious state before collapsing and striking her head on the toilet in her cell and coming to rest on the floor.

Though the incident was caught on a surveillance camera within the jail, it took an estimated 30 minutes before a guard entered her cell and found Mays unresponsive on the floor. This delayed response was further exacerbated by the guard leaving the cell to call for help, despite having a radio clipped to their belt.

It is not known whether Mays received first aid within the key moments before she was transported to the local hospital where she would later be pronounced dead as the “result of cardiac dysrhythmia due to dehydration.”

In response, a wrongful death lawsuit was filed by her mother, Tammy Webb, in September 2023. The lawsuit cites that for the eight days she was in custody, Mays was not given her prescribed medication for seizures. This was not an unknown condition to the Whitley County Detention Center, because upon her arrest Mays informed jail staff of her seizure disorder. Furthermore, she had been held at the facility several times before and has a documented history of seizures that required her hospitalization.

Despite the claim on her death certificate that her passing was the result of an “accident,” the entire incident is a case of systemic medical neglect by the state institution. If Mays' death was just an accident,

how is it that hundreds of other inmates died in Kentucky jails over the past four years?

Between 2020 to 2024, 234 inmates have died while in custody according to a report by the *Lexington Herald Leader*. Of the 234 inmates, 165 were being held in jail without being convicted of the alleged crime for which they were arrested—meaning they were still legally innocent. Inmate death rates are an escalating trend throughout the United States, not just within the state of Kentucky.

Higher death rates from 2020 to 2022 in Kentucky have largely been attributed to COVID-19, peaking at 63 in 2022.

Though the exact toll of COVID-19 within the US prisons and jails are largely undetermined, a report by the National Library of Medicine estimates that deaths due to the virus in correctional facilities were six times higher than deaths in the general population. At the start of the pandemic, the structures of jails and prisons, along with record rates of overcrowding, made it impossible to implement protective measures to ensure the health of both inmates and staff.

Though inmate death rates in Kentucky have been on the decline in recent years, they have once again started to increase. In 2024 alone, 34 people died while being held in custody, higher than any year between 2008 to 2020.

The seven county jails that have reported the most deaths since 2020 are Jefferson County—the most populous in the state and location of Louisville—with 20; Madison County with 12; Fayette County with 8; and Christian County with 7. Meanwhile Laurel, Hardin, and Whitley Counties have all reported 6.

Autopsy records for the inmate deaths reveal that 40 percent were attributed to natural deaths; 31 percent were deemed “accidental”; and 20 percent were ruled

as suicides. Only one homicide and one “undetermined” death was recorded.

Jails consistently underreport deaths nationwide. In some cases, jails seek to circumvent their legal obligation to report deaths to state officials by releasing people from custody just before they die. The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) requires only that data be collected, but not that it be shared publicly. In 2020, Reuters was able to estimate that jail deaths had surged by 35 percent between 2009 and 2019, despite the decline in jail populations.

The classification of “natural” and “accidental” are problematic labels that serve to obscure the conditions that contributed to people dying while in their custody. The ruling of a natural death means that the person’s death was caused through a natural process such as a disease or health condition and not due to external factors.

It is quite perverse to say that a death is natural or accidental if it is known that the person has a preexisting health condition and does not receive medical treatment, like in the case of Mays.

Prior to Mays’ death the Kentucky Department of Corrections had conducted an inspection of the Whitley County Detention Center that found eight violations. Later inspections revealed an additional 21 violations which included overcrowding, lack of medical training for staff and failure to conduct observation checks.

The Kentucky Department of Corrections places the blame on the inmates themselves for the growing trend in inmate deaths. They cite, “transient conditions, unsanitary drug habits, general lifestyle dangers,” and a rise in highly potent substances in the illicit drug supply. Despite their claim to be “committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all individuals who fall under the department’s oversight” they exhibit a blatant disregard for inmates’ health and disavow any responsibility for setting medical standards in local jails.

Despite the calls for reform made by advocacy groups and the mounting wrongful death lawsuits, Republicans and Democrats alike have responded by pursuing harsher policies targeting the most vulnerable portions of the working class using “tough on crime laws.”

The “Safer Kentucky Act” sought not only to implement harsher penalties for petty crimes like loitering and trespassing, but also criminalized

homelessness. Other states like California, Georgia, Louisiana, Oregon, Tennessee and Vermont have proposed bills that would stiffen retail theft charges, re-criminalize certain street drugs, keep more suspects behind bars in lieu of bail and expand the powers of law enforcement.

It is not the first time that government officials have sought to increase the penalties for crime, as local governments, starved by low business taxes, seek to offset their budget deficits with predatory jailing practices. Tough on crime laws only exacerbate overcrowding issues which lead to higher rates of inadequate medical care and inmate death.

The only social force that can achieve the systemic change necessary to reduce overcrowding and that proper medical treatment be provided for preexisting health conditions of inmates is the working class. Only the working class has the power to confront a prison system designed to make life insufferable, serving only the interests of the capitalist system. The working class fighting to build a socialist system that can serve the needs and rights of all individuals, is the only way to overturn the entire social and economic structure that drives workers and the most vulnerable into prison and allows for the deaths of inmates to go unheard.



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