

Jay-Z, Yo Gotti follow through on lawsuit over Mississippi prisons. 'Lives are in peril'

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When Jay-Z and Yo Gotti told the governor of Mississippi they were considering suing over prison conditions, they weren't making an idle threat.

Attorneys working with the celebrities filed a lawsuit Tuesday against Mississippi prison officials on behalf of 29 inmates.

The federal lawsuit alleges inmates are being kept in unconstitutional and inhumane conditions.

Mississippi prisons: Jay-Z, Yo Gotti threaten to sue Mississippi over 'inhumane and unconstitutional' prisons (</story/news/politics/2020/01/10/jay-z-yo-gotti-threatens-sue-mississippi-over-prison-conditions/4438597002/>)

"Plaintiffs' lives are in peril," the lawsuit begins. "Individuals held in Mississippi's prisons are dying because Mississippi has failed to fund its prisons, resulting in prisons where violence reigns because prisons are understaffed. In the past two weeks alone, five men incarcerated in Mississippi have died as the result of prison violence. These deaths are a direct result of Mississippi's utter disregard for the people it has incarcerated and their constitutional rights."

Story continues below video

A recent outbreak of deadly violence that left five inmates dead and an unknown number of others wounded has thrown the brutal conditions at Mississippi prisons into the national spotlight.

Mississippi's troubled prisons

- ['Shut down MDOC': Here's why advocates are calling for federal intervention](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/mississippi-calling-feds-investigate-mississippi-prisons/2845650001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/mississippi-calling-feds-investigate-mississippi-prisons/2845650001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
- [Parchman reopens notorious, long-closed Unit 32](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/ms-prison-riots-inmates-moved-parchmans-closed-notorious-unit-32/2824615001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/ms-prison-riots-inmates-moved-parchmans-closed-notorious-unit-32/2824615001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
- [Violence brews at Parchman: Lack of funding, not enough guards and decrepit conditions](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/08/parchman-prison-riot-mississippi-violence-deterioration-underfunding/2824006001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/08/parchman-prison-riot-mississippi-violence-deterioration-underfunding/2824006001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
- [Inmates killed during Mississippi's prison violence: Who are they?](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/03/parchman-riot-ms-prison-violence-who-are-inmates-killed/2803405001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/03/parchman-riot-ms-prison-violence-who-are-inmates-killed/2803405001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
- [Parchman riot: 'Gangs are at war.' Fifth Mississippi prison death reported as violence continues](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/03/parchman-riot-fifth-inmate-killed-mississippi-violence-lockdown/2803056001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)
(https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/local/2020/01/03/parchman-riot-fifth-inmate-killed-mississippi-violence-lockdown/2803056001/?utm_source=oembed&utm_medium=onsite&utm_campaign=storylines&utm_content=news&utm_term=4439612002)



The Mississippi Department of Corrections has said the violence is gang-related. Prisoner rights advocates say long-running [systemic problems with over-incarceration and under-funding of the prison system](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/protectors-take-aim-mississippi-leaders-demand-prison-reform/2832122001/) ([/story/news/2020/01/07/protectors-take-aim-mississippi-leaders-demand-prison-reform/2832122001/](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2020/01/07/protectors-take-aim-mississippi-leaders-demand-prison-reform/2832122001/)) created an environment that breeds violence.

The lawsuit was filed against MDOC Commissioner Pelicia Hall, who is [stepping down this week](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2019/12/31/mdoc-head-pelicia-hall-resigns-head-troubled-state-prison-system/2786873001/) ([/story/news/politics/2019/12/31/mdoc-head-pelicia-hall-resigns-head-troubled-state-prison-system/2786873001/](https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/2019/12/31/mdoc-head-pelicia-hall-resigns-head-troubled-state-prison-system/2786873001/)) for a job in the private sector, and Superintendent of the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman Marshal Turner.



Pelicia Hall (Photo: Rogelio V. Solis, AP)

It claims the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, is violated when "prison officials fail to protect against prison-related violence and when prison conditions fail to meet basic human needs."

The prisons "are plagued with violence" because of a staffing shortage, the lawsuit states, and inmates are forced to "live in squalor, endangering their physical and mental health."

"In Parchman, the units are subject to flooding. Black mold festers. Rats and mice infest the prison. Units lack running water and electricity for days at a time," the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit asks a judge to order MDOC officials to develop and implement a plan to protect inmates from "prison violence and failure to timely respond to emergency conditions by ... assuring an adequate level of properly trained staff." It asks the judge to order the system to provide "safe and clean conditions free from filth and vermin and with adequate access to exercise, outdoor recreation, showers, lighting sanitation, plumbing, ventilation and other basic human needs."

It also asks for damages, the exact amount to be determined at trial.

MDOC officials say agency is critically understaffed, ask for funding

The details alleged in the lawsuit aren't anything new. It appears to draw from media reports, inspection documents and even news releases from MDOC.

MDOC spokeswoman Grace Fisher said the agency does not comment on pending litigation.

In the past, the agency has repeatedly warned of the dangers that come with deteriorating prison infrastructure and staffing shortages.

Even as the prison population has stayed roughly the same, lawmakers have severely cut MDOC's budget in recent years.

The agency is asking the legislature for \$419 million for fiscal year 2021, which amounts to a 23% increase, according to a recent MDOC news release. That would include \$22.5 million to renovate a housing unit in Parchman, raise the starting salary for correctional officers and fill 800 vacant positions.

"The agency is experiencing critical understaffing at its three state prisons and needs at least 1,000 more officers for its current facilities," said a recent MDOC news release. "The number of officers has continued to dwindle as the agency's pay has not kept pace with industry salaries and other professions."

'We lock these people up and forget about them,' attorney says

New York-based attorney Alex Spiro represents Team Roc, the philanthropic arm of Jay-Z and Yo Gotti's company, Roc Nation.

Spiro told the Clarion Ledger Tuesday the plaintiffs are locked up at Parchman, where much of the recent violence has taken place.

"They share the common injustice of being in a facility that's inhumane," Spiro said. "We lock these people up and forget about them. I'm hopeful that these sorts of actions give them hope and give oversight to a prison system that desperately needed it."

On Thursday, Jay-Z and Yo Gotti wrote a letter to then-Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant and Hall, demanding change and threatening a lawsuit.

The letter mentioned frequent prison lockdowns, violence, a staffing shortage and inmates who "are forced to live in squalor, with rats that crawl over them as they sleep on the floor, having been denied even a mattress for a cot."

In a statement, Yo Gotti called the conditions inside Mississippi prisons "absolutely inhumane and unconstitutional."



"To see this happen so close to my hometown of Memphis is truly devastating," the rapper's statement said. "That's why we're calling on Mississippi state leaders to take immediate action and rectify this issue."

On Tuesday, Yo Gotti added, "The lives of countless individuals in Mississippi are at stake and we will not stop until this is fixed."

Spiro, whose name is on the letter, said he wrote it in collaboration with the celebrities.

"I just think its troubling where you have people, predominantly African American, who are locked inside cages where they don't have a voice to be heard and are essentially the forgotten," Spiro said. "It strikes us that there has to be a spotlight on this, otherwise we might not even be scratching the surface of the horror going on inside these prisons."

Read the full lawsuit here:

[Jay-Z, Yo Gotti lawsuit aga... \(https://www.scribd.com/document/442948686/Jay-Z-Yo-Gotti-lawsuit-against-top-Mississippi-prison-official#from_embed\)](https://www.scribd.com/document/442948686/Jay-Z-Yo-Gotti-lawsuit-against-top-Mississippi-prison-official#from_embed) by [UploadedbyHaroldGater](https://www.scribd.com/user/252915588/UploadedbyHaroldGater) (https://www.scribd.com/user/252915588/UploadedbyHaroldGater#from_embed) on Scribd

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Spiro said Jay-Z and Yo Gotti have been involved with other social justice and civil rights cases in the past. They do not want to "remain idle spectators with something this inhumane," he said.

The lawsuit was filed by Spiro, Elyde R. Thompson and Joshua Stanton with New York law firm of Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan LLP, as well as Canton attorney Lawrence Blackmon.

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