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01.08.2020

NEWS

Mississippi Prison Killings: Five Factors Behind the Deadly Violence

Understaffing, powerful gangs and constant lockdowns brew tensions that exploded last week.

By JOSEPH NEFF and ALYSIA SANTO

Mississippi prisons erupted in violence last week: at least five prisoners were stabbed or beaten to death by other inmates. The Marshall Project has been reporting on prison conditions there for months. In June, we revealed how officials at the privately run Wilkinson County Correctional Facility allowed gangs to run the prison. Since then, current and former prison staff, as well as prisoners and their families, repeatedly warned us that violence could erupt any time. All it needed was a spark to set it off.

The spark came at Wilkinson on Sunday, Dec. 29 around noon, when members of the two main prison gangs got into a fight on the housing unit known as Romeo, according to an incarcerated witness, a current employee and two former officers who shared reports they received from current guards. Prisoners used cell phones to spread news of the dispute to other prisons. Here are five factors that help explain the mayhem that followed.

1. Mississippi prisons don't have nearly enough guards

Short staffing is probably the biggest problem facing prisons around the country, and it's especially acute in Mississippi. Between 44 and 50 percent of the jobs were vacant at the state's three big publicly run prisons in 2019, according to State Personnel Board data published by the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting. Management & Training Corporation, which runs the three large private prisons, reported to the Department of Corrections that the company's vacancy rates ranged from 8 percent to 31 percent in 2018.

Mississippi has the lowest starting pay for guards of any Southern state at \$26,300 per year. The private prisons pay even less: Wilkinson prison starts correctional officers at around \$23,400. The low pay and tough work environment have led to high staff turnover, resulting in inexperienced workers poorly equipped to manage prisoners in a volatile setting. The state reports a 36 percent annual turnover. At Wilkinson, the turnover rate was 89 percent in 2018, according to an internal audit.

Prolonged understaffing erodes the basic functions of a safe and secure prison. Guards become exhausted and demoralized by constant overtime. Prisoners miss out on programs, recreation and family visits. At Wilkinson, for example, an audit said short staffing forced the cancellation of 70 percent of medical visits in 2018.

State prison officials did not respond to a request for comment.

MTC spokesperson Issa Arnita said in an email that the company had raised pay for officers at Wilkinson. He also said the company recently launched an "effort to improve recruitment, increase staff retention and reduce vacancies at all of our correctional facilities—including the three in Mississippi."

Arnita declined to comment about the assertions that the recent violence began at Wilkinson, citing the state's ongoing investigation. "At this time, we have not seen any increase in incidents at our facilities as a result of the recent unrest at other prisons," he wrote.

2. Prisoners in Mississippi are being kept in conditions similar to solitary confinement

With constant short staffing, prison officials often respond with “lockdowns.” Prisoners are kept inside their cells almost 24 hours a day. Lockdowns can go on for months at a time, ratcheting up tensions among prisoners. Auditors said prison officials would tell gang leadership to “control their men,” and if they failed, the unit was placed on lockdown. That’s what occurred for most of 2018.

“The atmosphere at the institution was angry,” according to the audit. “The inmates were upset that the only reason they were getting out of their pods to eat their meal was due to our presence in the institution.”

Lockdowns were a constant at Southern Mississippi Correctional Institution, site of last week’s first killing. A lockdown barring visits was in place for most of 2019, according to the state. Former Corrections Commissioner Pelicia Hall acknowledged to the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting that as soon as lockdowns end, “rage is pouring out that door.” Hall resigned last week in the midst of the prison killing spree. All Mississippi prisons are currently on lockdown as officials investigate.

3. Mississippi’s prisons have long been awash in weapons and violence

Violence in Mississippi’s prisons has been common for years, according to data acquired by The Marshall Project. Over a three-year period ending last June, prison officials reported confiscating more than 4,600 weapons. Officials also reported nearly 7,900 inmate injuries, 265 inmate-on-inmate assaults that resulted in serious injury and 1,525 assaults without serious injury. These numbers are almost certainly an undercount because the state prison reports lacked data ranging from a few months to a few years.

The reports cover incidents at the state’s six largest prisons. Three are state run: Southern Mississippi Correctional Institute, Mississippi State Penitentiary (Parchman) and Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. The private company MTC runs Wilkinson County Correctional Facility, East Mississippi Central Facility, and Marshall County Correctional Facility. The state described the monthly reports as an “internal working document” that “has not been reconciled and/or verified for accuracy.” Given the incomplete state of the reports, it’s unclear if prison managers track or use the data. An attorney for the Department of Corrections said no final reports exist.

4. Some staff members have loyalties to particular gangs

Gang activity isn't limited to some of the people incarcerated in Mississippi, according to interviews with more than two dozen former and current state corrections officers. They say some prison employees, including some high ranking officers and managers, are affiliated with one of two gangs, the Vice Lords or Gangster Disciples. The reasons vary. Some staffers said gang loyalty gives some officers a measure of protection; since gangs have a lot of control, they can prevent certain attacks. Others say gang affiliation began before employment; according to lawsuits, testimony and interviews, gangs directly recruit women to apply for correctional officer jobs. The percentage of inmates affiliated with gangs last spring ranged from 22 percent at Central Mississippi to 67 percent at Wilkinson, state prison data shows.

5. Cell phones have broken down prison walls

Cell phones are extremely common contraband in Mississippi prisons, allowing incarcerated people to communicate with each other within a prison and between prisons, which some sources say is how the violence spread between different prisons last week. But prisoners also use their phones to call family members, friends and journalists. In the past week alone, prisoners have posted scores of photos and videos on social media that they say document the violence and conditions.

How do the phones get in? Some are stuffed into footballs and thrown over fences or dropped from drones. But in dozens of interviews, staff and prisoners agree that the vast majority are smuggled in by prison employees, who can be paid hundreds of dollars per phone. Over a three-year period, the state reported confiscating nearly 6,300 cell phones in the state's six largest prisons, a number which, again, is likely an undercount due to missing data. ■■