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## **Civil Rights Advocates Ask U.S. Department of Justice to Immediately Investigate Violence in Mississippi's Prison System**

*Groups argue more lives will be lost absent immediate intervention and decarceration*

**JACKSON, Mississippi** — In a letter sent to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), a U.S. Congressman and Mississippi civil rights advocates called on the agency to begin an immediate investigation into the Mississippi Department of Corrections' (MDOC) practice of incarcerating more people than it employs guards to keep people safe. The [letter](#) cites the outbreak of violence, the deaths of five men in the last ten days, escapes, and dozens of injuries as just the most recent evidence that MDOC has overincarcerated and understaffed its prison system for years.

In its letter, the advocates argue that Mississippi is experiencing a prison crisis of its own making: by locking up too many Mississippians for too long and paying too little to keep safe the population that the state incarcerates. Mississippi has the nation's third highest rate of incarceration, a staff vacancy rate of nearly 50%, and the average hourly wage of correctional officers in Mississippi is the lowest in the nation. Recent data indicates the prison system has and a vacancy rate between 42-48% at some facilities.

"More lives will be lost absent immediate intervention and swift, safe, and sensible decarceration," said Lisa Graybill, deputy legal director for the Southern Poverty Law Center. "Immediate federal intervention is necessary to protect the lives of the men and women incarcerated in Mississippi's prison system and those who work there."

The groups request that DOJ investigate whether Mississippi is violating the constitutional rights of the approximately 20,000 men and women in MDOC's custody pursuant to DOJ's authority under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act ("CRIPA"). The letter is signed by U.S. Congressman Bennie G. Thompson; the Southern Poverty Law Center; MacArthur Justice Center; Mississippi State Conference of the NAACP; Disability Rights Mississippi; Black With No Chaser; Mississippi Center for Justice; Rech Foundation; Clergy for Prison Reform; ACLU of Mississippi; People's Advocacy Institute; and MS Poor People's Campaign.

"Mississippi's prison system has a long and bloody history of brutality," said Corey Wiggins, executive director of the Mississippi State Conference NAACP. "The horrific violence that occurred last week was preventable had Mississippi taken action to reduce its prison population

to an appropriate size. Now lives have been lost, the system is in chaos, and parents are living in terror waiting to hear whether their incarcerated children are among the dozens who have been injured.”

In 2014, Mississippi passed sentencing reforms intended to reduce its prison population, but the progress has since been offset by budget reductions that outpace the rate of population reduction. In the last five years Mississippi’s correctional spending has decreased by nearly \$185 million, and the Mississippi state’s budget committee has recommended additional budget cuts between 2.9 and 6.6 percent from fiscal year 2020 to 2021.

“The circumstances before us today were never a matter of ‘*if*’ but ‘*when*,’ said C.J. Lawrence, CEO of Black With No Chaser. “It is the cumulative effect of years of neglect—not violence precipitated by organizations—but violence in the form of leadership that has failed to lead for decades, resulting in a prison environment rampant with danger zones and health hazards, wherein people are left suffer in overcrowded spaces in undermanned facilities, forced to drink contaminated water, walk through and sleep in raw sewage, and have their mental and physical health neglected, in rat, roach, and mold infested facilities.”

Deaths in Mississippi prisons have been rising. Between 2001 and 2014 there was an average of about 51 deaths a year. That number has increased to 85 in fiscal year 2018 and 80 in fiscal year 2019. It is impossible to determine how many of these deaths were due to preventable harm because the department has not conducted investigations into many of these deaths, which is one of the multiple reasons federal intervention is needed.

“Horrible living conditions, significant violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and failures to fulfill basic human needs such as food and medical care have long since been a problem at MDOC,” said Greta Martin, litigation director of Disability Rights Mississippi. “We are seeing individuals fighting for their lives in overpopulated and understaffed facilities, and those with disabilities—physical, intellectual, and with serious mental illnesses—are among our state’s most vulnerable population; emergent intervention during the upcoming 2020 legislative session or by federal intervention is needed.”

In January 2019 the staff vacancy rate at South Mississippi Correctional Institute was 48 percent, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility was at 46 percent, and the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman was at 42 percent. From July 2017 to October 2019 the number of corrections officers in Mississippi fell from 905 to 593.

“It took decades of bad legislation driven by racism, fear, and misguided notions of justice to get us into this over-incarceration mess, but the good news is that our current elected officials have the opportunity to make substantial strides toward fixing Mississippi’s broken system during the 2020 legislative session,” said Cliff Johnson, director of the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi School of Law. “We can dramatically reduce our prison population without sacrificing public safety by making simple possession of drugs a misdemeanor, expanding parole eligibility so good behavior is incentivized and rewarded, and thoughtfully dealing with mental illness and drug addiction rather than criminalizing those root causes of undesirable behavior.”

This request follows another advocacy group, Families Against Mandatory Minimums, calling for a federal investigation twice, in May 2019 and November 2019.

A copy of the Mississippi civil rights advocates' letter can be read [here](#).