

# Georgia prisoner died after being left for hours in smoke-filled cell

Case results in record \$5 million settlement by the state after a medical examiner ruled the death a homicide

[Link](#)



**Thomas Giles (left) died after being left for more than three hours in his cell as a smoldering fire filled it with dense smoke. The flap on his door was bolted shut most of the time, concentrating the smoke. His family's attorney said that smears on the door show where Giles, his hands covered with soot, tried to get someone to let him out. (Family photo; GDC case file)**

By [Danny Robbins](#) and [Carrie Teegardin](#)

Feb 1, 2024

Late one afternoon in the mental health unit at Augusta State Medical Prison, Thomas Henry Giles set his mattress on fire, apparently as some form of protest.

Two of the officers assigned to supervise him saw him do it. As smoke clogged the dorm, other prisoners were moved out. But nobody removed Giles from his locked, smoke-filled cell for more than three hours. There, he was left to die.

Giles' death was quickly ruled a homicide by a GBI medical examiner. The decision was based in part on the Georgia Department of Correction's own internal investigation, which determined that Giles died because of "the delay and negligence" of officers in removing him from his unventilated cell.

But none of those involved in the 2020 death have been held accountable, in yet another example of the failures of the state prison system. No criminal charges have been filed, nor were the officers disciplined by the Department of Corrections. In fact, one still works for the GDC in a supervisory role at the prison hospital.

Now, the state has agreed to pay Giles' family \$5 million to settle a lawsuit over his death. It's believed to be the largest amount paid to settle a claim against Georgia over a state prison inmate's death or injury.

"There were any number of opportunities to have prevented this in the first place or to have done something about it early on or later," said Zack Greenamyre, one of the lawyers who filed the lawsuit. "Those opportunities have continually gone lacking."

An examination of Giles' death by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, based on court records and other documents, reveals how GDC employees failed to respond as a prisoner with serious mental health issues died in a gruesome fashion. Overwhelmed by smoke from the smoldering mattress, Giles died desperately clawing at his cell door with his hands covered in soot.



**Lawyers for the family of Thomas Henry Giles say that Giles left handprints on the inside of his soot-covered cell door as he became overwhelmed by the smoke from the smoldering mattress. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

At the time of his death, Giles was in building 11B, a lockdown unit at the prison hospital that houses prisoners with severe mental health and behavioral problems. The cells are essentially small rooms with thick doors that have small windows and flaps for delivering food trays. The flaps can only be opened from the outside. Officers are expected to check on inmates every 15 minutes by looking through the windows.

Giles, apparently agitated because he wasn't allowed to see his counselor, started the fire by using a shank to expose the wires in a light fixture. That was about 2 in the afternoon of Oct. 28, 2020. The two officers who saw him start the fire didn't try to stop him, nor did they enter his cell when the smoke got so bad that two of the prisoners in the cells below Giles had to be moved. No one, in fact, opened Giles' cell until much later in the afternoon — sometime after 5 — and by then he was dead.

The autopsy found dense soot in Giles' mouth and nasal passages. His blood was found to have a carbon monoxide level of 76%. Carbon monoxide levels between 40 and 60% are generally considered fatal.

"While the decedent started the fire himself, based on the investigative reports, prison staff did not attempt to prevent or extinguish the fire and did not remove the decedent from his locked cell for several hours after the onset of the fire," the medical examiner's report states. "As such, manner of death is best classified as Homicide."

The GDC referred the matter to the Richmond County district attorney's office, which subsequently determined that Columbia County was the more appropriate venue. Augusta State Medical Prison, located in Grovetown, straddles the line between the two counties.

Columbia County District Attorney Bobby Christine told the AJC that his office reviewed the case and referred it to the U.S. Department of Justice in November 2021. He declined to provide additional details.

The DOJ's civil rights division has been investigating the Georgia prison system since September 2021. It's unclear whether Giles' death would figure into that investigation or be considered in a criminal case. The civil rights investigation has focused on prisoner-on-prisoner violence and typically would result in corrective measures, not criminal charges, if civil rights violations are found.

## **`There's really no excuse'**

The lawsuit stemming from Giles' death was filed by a team of attorneys from three Atlanta area firms on behalf of one of Giles' sisters.

The state initially balked at settling but shifted its position as depositions and other evidence made the facts of the case apparent, one of the attorneys, Natanya Brooks, said.

"I think they believed at the beginning they could get a discount on the case because probably that's what they always do," she said. "And I think as the case progressed, depositions were taken, they realized that if (the case) went to a jury, a jury was going to care that this is a real person, that this person was murdered, should have been taken out of his cell, and there's really no excuse from anyone."

The suit was settled through mediation in September after much of the discovery process had been completed. According to the settlement agreement, \$3 million will be paid by the Georgia Department of Administrative Services. An insurance carrier, Lexington Insurance Company, is responsible for the other \$2 million.

Although the GDC investigation determined that negligence played a role in Giles' death, it found no evidence of "foul play."

"There were any number of opportunities to have prevented this in the first place or to have done something about it early on or later. Those opportunities have continually gone lacking."

- Zack Greenamyre, one of the lawyers who filed the lawsuit on behalf of Giles

The building where Giles died is made up of two units, each with 25 cells arranged in two tiers, upper and lower. At the time, the prison was severely understaffed, and the officers overseeing 11B, Robert Roberson and Marcus Phillips, were each supervising a unit without the help of others. Neither had been with the GDC a full year.

No video of the fire was available, according to the GDC investigation. There were surveillance cameras in the building, but the system was being repaired that day and was inoperable at the time of the fire.

The AJC sent the Department of Corrections an email with questions regarding Giles' death and the settlement. A spokesperson, Lori Benoit, said the agency could not comment because the matter "remains under federal investigation."

## **A tragic upbringing**

Giles grew up in Atlanta's Pittsburgh neighborhood under tragic circumstances. As a child, he witnessed his mother shot to death, Greenamyre said. Not long after that, his father died, forcing him into homelessness, according to the attorney.

In 2016, Giles was arrested and charged with armed robbery for using a handgun to steal \$600 from an Atlanta grocery store that January. He also faced a burglary charge for breaking into the same store two weeks earlier, on Christmas Eve, and taking \$200 and five packs of cigarettes. In September 2017, he pleaded guilty to an armed robbery charge and was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

At the sentencing, Giles' attorney, Cameil Reddick, noted that her client suffered from mental health issues that required him to take Remeron, an antidepressant, and Risperdal, a drug used to treat schizophrenia and other mood disorders.

22	THE WITNESS: I invoke.	
23	Q. (By Mr. Greenamyre) You were aware that the	
24	orderlies would piss or put fecal matter in his trays	
25	before delivering them to him?	
		Page 49
1	MR. WILL: Object to the form of the	
2	question.	
3	THE WITNESS: I invoke.	
4	Q. (By Mr. Greenamyre) That they would put	
5	glass in the -- the food tray before delivering it to	
6	him?	
7	A. I invoke.	
8	Q. And that was something that was an open	
9	secret that everyone knew that the orderlies were	
10	messing with Mr. Giles' trays, right?	
11	A. I invoke.	
12	Q. And that's why you told the OPS	
13	investigators that, you know, sometimes you would	
14	specially show Mr. Giles his tray when you were	
15	delivering it to him, right?	
16	A. I invoke.	
17	MR. GREENAMYRE: Is it okay if we take a	
18	three minute break?	

**In this July 2023 deposition with guard Robert Roberson, Roberson takes the Fifth when asked whether inmate Thomas Henry Giles' food trays were routinely tampered with. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

Reddick also asked Superior Court Judge John J. Goger that Giles not be incarcerated at five specific GDC facilities, including Augusta State Medical Prison, because he had been at odds with gang members there. Goger replied that he could make a recommendation, but it would be up to the GDC where Giles would be housed.

Giles' mental health problems persisted inside the GDC, where he was classified as Level IV, the designation for inmates whose ability to function in the general population is "severely impaired" due to mental illness. According to a counselor interviewed as part of the GDC investigation, Giles suffered from PTSD, cocaine dependency and personality disorder.

Giles also didn't hesitate to object to things he thought were improper, attorneys said. Chief among his complaints was the belief that the orderlies delivering his food were tampering with it by adding glass and human waste. That complaint and others were well known to prison staff, who acknowledged in deposition testimony that Giles was difficult to handle.

“You know, one day he might talk to you and this and that and the next day he’s just, you know, totally different,” Clifford Brown, the unit manager who supervised Giles’ dorm, testified. “I mean, nobody could really just deal with him. . . . Mr. Giles, he was just a problem every day.”

### **Conflicting accounts**

Prisoners are known to frequently start fires to get attention. Like other prison systems around the country, the GDC has an elaborate set of fire-safety regulations, including a requirement that officers receive four hours of training every year. For those working in a facility with a “hospital component,” the requirement is six hours.

The regulations, in line with those recommended by the National Fire Protection Association, are essential because a fire in a small confined space such as a prison cell can quickly turn deadly, said Curt Floyd, a retired firefighter who serves as a fire protection specialist with the NFPA. Even a mattress made with fire retardant material will smolder for hours, creating a level of carbon monoxide that can kill within minutes, he said.

“You’ve got kind of a configuration of the worst conditions,” he said. “Small space. A smoldering fire with synthetics. And there’s no way to get away from it.”

That’s what happened as Giles’ mattress burned for hours.



**Correctional officers Robert Roberson (left) and Marcus Phillips were on duty when inmate Thomas Henry Giles died in a smoke-filled prison cell at Augusta State Medical Prison in October 2020. (POST files)**

In interviews for the GDC’s investigation, Roberson and Phillips acknowledged seeing Giles start the fire. But, they said, Phillips immediately reported the matter to Reggie Crite, the sergeant supervising them, and Brown, the unit manager.

Phillips told the investigator he mentioned the fire to the two higher-ranking officers several times during the day. “But they did nothing because they did not think it was serious enough.”

In their interviews with the investigator, Crite and Brown said they did not treat the situation as an emergency because they were told Giles had attempted to start a fire but had not actually done so.

“(Phillips) told me, sir, Giles was trying (to start a fire), which he does every day...,” Brown testified in his deposition. “I said, ‘Is there a fire?’ He said, ‘No. Everything is all right now.’ I said, ‘OK.’ ”



A critical element of the investigation was a description of the conditions inside building 11B that afternoon from Brittney Seals, an officer who had gone there to escort prisoners to counseling sessions.

Seals said smoke was visible, making the air cloudy. When two of the prisoners in the cells located below Giles' complained that they couldn't breathe, she moved them to a day room, she said. The men had bloodshot eyes and towels around their heads, she said. Even wearing a mask, she said, she was choked by the smoke billowing out of their cells. She said Roberson and Phillips were present when the men were moved yet made no effort to help Giles.

"She stated that neither of the officers went to check on IM Giles and that she did not check on him because she was unaware that Giles had started the fire," according to a summary of Seals' interview with the GDC investigator.

In her deposition for the lawsuit, Seals said Roberson questioned why she was moving people out of their cells. She explained it was because they couldn't breathe. She said Roberson was newer to the job and seemed to be in a situation he didn't have the experience to deal with.

According to the GDC investigation, Roberson said he told Seals that they were instructed not to open a cell door without a supervisor there for security reasons related to a weapon being found.

Roberson declined to answer questions about the incident when he was deposed for the lawsuit, repeatedly invoking his Fifth Amendment right against self incrimination. Phillips and Crite were not deposed after their attorneys said they would take the Fifth.

While the decedent started the fire himself, based on the investigative reports, prison staff did not attempt to prevent or extinguish the fire and did not remove the decedent from his locked cell for several hours after the onset of the fire. As such, manner of death is best classified as Homicide.

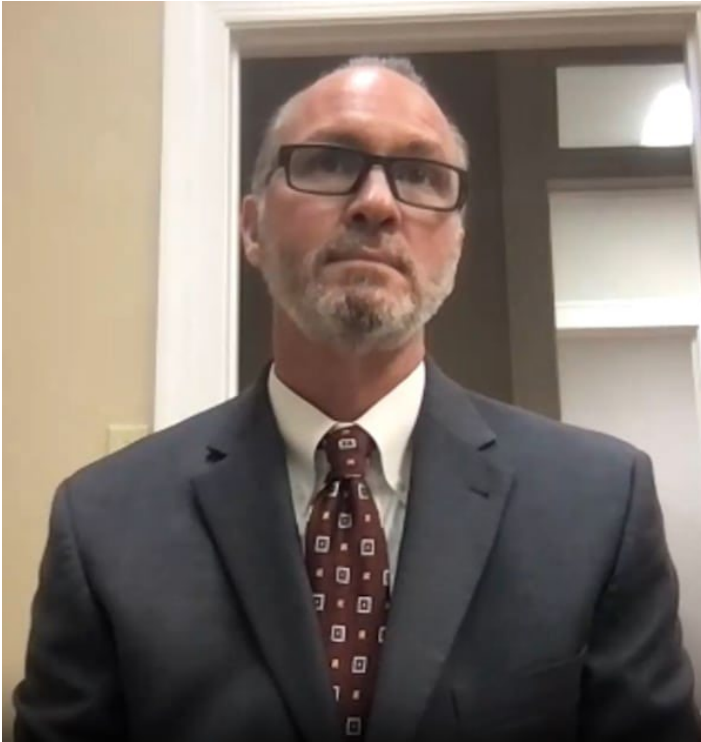
#### CAUSE OF DEATH

Inhalation of Products of Combustion

#### MANNER OF DEATH

Homicide

**A medical examiner for the GBI ruled the death of Thomas Henry Giles to be a homicide, based on the GDC's investigation that showed "delay and negligence" of officers in removing him from his unventilated cell. (Georgia Bureau of Investigation)**



**Edward Philbin, the former warden at Augusta State Medical Prison, acknowledged in a deposition in September 2023 that the incident that resulted in Thomas Henry Giles' death had been mishandled. Philbin retired in 2022. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

Records show that Phillips and Roberson voluntarily resigned in December 2020. Crite resigned two months later. Brown still works as a unit manager at the prison hospital. Attorneys for the officers did not respond to messages from the AJC.

Edward Philbin, the former warden at Augusta State Medical Prison, acknowledged in a deposition last September that the matter had been mishandled. Even the hint of a cell fire requires immediate action, he said.

“The fact of a cell fire should have initiated multiple responses, even at the beginning,” he said. “Just the response for anything on a fire ... One, you have to get the inmate out, and then you have to go to your notifications, medical check, mental health.”

Philbin, who retired in 2022, said he didn’t take disciplinary action against the officers who resigned because they left the GDC before the department’s investigation had been completed.

Without disciplinary action, the officers have maintained their state peace officer certifications, allowing them to continue to work in law enforcement.

In 2022, Phillips was hired as a correctional officer by the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. On his application, he was asked to describe his experience at the prison hospital. “Work lockdown unit as well as assuring the safety of offenders and keeping them safe,” he wrote.

*Data specialist Jennifer Peebles contributed to this report.*

# Prison system failures cost Georgia taxpayers millions

State settles claims involving deaths or injuries to incarcerated men and women

[Link](#)



**An undated photo from a prison video shows officers at Lee Arrendale State Prison trying to pull inmate Mollianne Fischer to her feet and get her to walk to an isolation cell. In 2014, Fischer was left in a vegetative state after she failed to receive adequate medical care at Pulaski State Prison. Her family was awarded \$1.5 million. (Contributed)**

By [Carrie Teegardin](#), [Danny Robbins](#) and [Jennifer Peebles](#)

Feb 1, 2024

Since 2018, the state has paid out nearly \$20 million to settle claims involving death or injury to prisoners in facilities operated by the Georgia Department of Corrections.

The cases involve a range of allegations, including improper medical care, the failure to protect prisoners from violent attacks and failure to monitor and care for prisoners who died by suicide in their cells.

Attorneys who have represented family members said the deaths are a symptom of widespread problems in Georgia's prison system.

"The state has to take a long, hard look at just a complete overhaul of the correctional system and look at everything it can do to make it safer, to actually fulfill the purpose of a prison," said Darl H. Champion, an



attorney who represented the family of Agnes Bohannon, whose family alleged she complained for days of illness but didn't get adequate care and died days later. The state paid \$1.5 million to settle the case.

The problems of violence, understaffing, lack of rehabilitation and poor medical care are all tied together, Champion said. If prisons are understaffed and violent, he said, those serving time aren't reformed, recruiting qualified staff becomes more difficult and healthcare providers simply don't want to take jobs in prisons, so health care suffers, too.

"If you compartmentalize these problems and look at them separately, it'll never get fixed," Champion said. "You've got to look at the whole thing and see how it's all related."

The AJC obtained data on payments reported as settlements of prison-related cases by the Georgia Department of Administrative Services. The state agency administers a self-funded liability insurance program that covers state entities and employees. In some cases, the AJC learned of additional amounts included in a settlement on top of what the state's insurance program paid, and the AJC included that amount in the settlement total listed below.

These are the largest settlements reported and the year the cases were finalized, according to DOAS records. The amounts do not include legal fees and other expenses incurred by the state.



Giles

Fischer

Bohannon

**\$5 million\* (2023):** Thomas Henry Giles was left for hours [in his smoke-filled prison cell](#) at Augusta State Medical Prison in October 2020, though officers moved inmates of nearby cells. He died of smoke inhalation, and the GBI medical examiner ruled his death a homicide.

**\$2.2 million\* (2021):** A young transgender inmate in solitary confinement took her own life in December 2017 after her threats of suicide were ignored at Valdosta State Prison. The prisoner, Jenna Mitchell, suffered from schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and other mental health issues, according to her family.

**\$1.5 million (2023):** Agnes Bohannon complained for days of cardiac and respiratory distress after being transferred to Lee Arrendale State Prison but her family said she didn't receive adequate evaluation or treatment. She died of cardiovascular disease in September 2019.

**\$1.5 million (2018):** Mollianne Fischer was left in a vegetative state in May 2014 after she failed to receive adequate medical care at Pulaski State Prison.

**\$1.375 million (2023):** Bobby Edward Lee Jr. pleaded for protection at Macon State Prison after officials placed him in a cell with another prisoner who had previously killed a fellow parolee. No officers responded until after Lee was strangled to death in July 2020.



Baldwin



Rocheleau



Wheeler

\$1 million (2019): Nicholas Baldwin, a teenager who twice before had attempted suicide, wasn't provided recommended emergency psychiatric care and used a bedsheet to hang himself in November 2014. He survived the suicide attempt but was left permanently disabled. In addition to the \$1 million state payout, the prison's private medical provider also reached a confidential settlement. ([Nicolas Baldwin](#), November 2014)

\$925,000 (2018): Bonnie Rocheleau, who had long suffered from COPD, failed to get adequate care at Pulaski State Prison when she developed pneumonia, leading to her death in March 2015.

\$750,000 (2023): Brandon Peters suffered for days from severe belly pain, fever and bowel problems then died in his cell at Georgia State Prison in November 2020. A claim filed with the state alleged that officials had failed to intervene and provide proper medical care to the gravely ill man.

\$750,000 (2023): After repeated attacks by his cellmate, Coty Silvers was brutally tortured and murdered in May 2020, according to the law firm representing his survivors. The claim filed with the state said that Silvers hadn't been provided with appropriate medical care after a fight and died of suffocation.

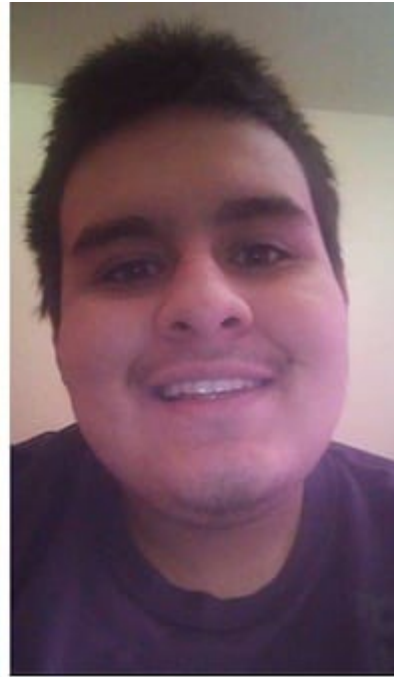
\$750,000 (2021): Despite his previous history of self-harm, a claim alleged that officials at Wilcox State Prison failed to recognize James Wheeler's mental health disease and placed him in solitary confinement. He was found hanging in his cell in October 2017.



Carter



Geberyesus



Lucero

\$700,000 (2023): After suffering for months from uncontrolled diabetes at Dooly State Prison, James Yarbrough died in August 2020 of ketoacidosis, in a case alleging medical malpractice.

\$700,000 (2021): After multiple previous suicide attempts, Demetri Carter took his own life at Phillips State Prison in October 2017.

\$700,000 (2018): A woman at Lee Arrendale State Prison died in May 2015 after allegedly failing to receive adequate medical treatment. Her death certificate shows that 57-year-old Avis McNeil died of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

\$650,000 (2021): At Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison, Charles Lee Broady Jr. asked to be moved to another dorm because gang members in his dorm were threatening to kill him. Shortly after he was moved, six gang members with razor blades slashed his face, nearly killing him, according to a lawsuit he filed. While that suit was pending, he was moved to Hays State Prison. In an isolated area of the prison, he reportedly attempted suicide and died in November 2017. The claim his survivors filed alleged medical malpractice.

\$600,000 (2022): Hancock State Prison inmate [Amanuel Selassie Geberyesus](#), serving a one-year sentence on a burglary conviction, was placed in solitary confinement after being repeatedly attacked by gang members. He told counselors that he had thoughts of suicide but contrary to a counselor's advice prison officials placed him in a regular cell, where he hung himself in March 2019.

\$550,000 (2019): Jimmy Lucero, age 19, was suffering from hallucinations and deteriorating mental health but wasn't provided mental health services at Wilcox State Prison, a lawsuit alleged. After he stopped eating, he was transferred to Augusta State Medical Prison. There, after being placed in solitary confinement and not receiving required medical checks, he fell into a catatonic state and starved, the lawsuit said. His death certificate shows he died in June 2016 of a pulmonary embolism due to deep vein thrombosis. That can be caused by prolonged fasting.

\* These cases include the amount paid by the Department of Administrative Services and additional amounts from other sources that were part of the settlement.



# Georgia officials won't release information on how prisoners are dying

AJC finds Georgia stands out in South for prison homicide figures as troubled state system faces scrutiny

[Link](#)



**Jeremy Edward Price died on March 2, 2024, at Hays State Prison in what the GDC's incident report calls a homicide. However, the manner of his death was omitted from the agency's March mortality report. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

By [Danny Robbins](#) and [Carrie Teegardin](#)

May 23, 2024

With Georgia prisons on pace to set yet another grim record for homicides, the Department of Corrections has decided to no longer issue reports on how its inmates are dying.

After years of providing monthly mortality reports that often included the initial manner of death, the GDC abruptly decided to withhold that information, starting with the March report. Instead, GDC said it will release the manner of death for prisoners only after local medical examiners make those determinations— a process that can take a year or more.

The GDC's decision to stop including manner of death information in its monthly reports came as the prison system had at least nine homicides in the first quarter of 2024, according to an examination by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. That compares to five for the first three months of last year, which ended with a [record 36 prisoners and one correctional officer slain](#). The 2024 toll may be the highest the system has ever recorded for the first quarter, topping homicide counts back to at least 2015.

Coupled with the troubling rise in homicides, the GDC's decision offers yet another snapshot of an agency that has reacted to mounting scrutiny by shutting off what many see as crucial public information.

"People should not be dying inside prisons and jails, and when they are (dying), we need to know that, because this is something that has happened under our government's watch," said Michele Deitch, a distinguished senior lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin who directs the Prison and Jail Innovation Lab at the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

In an interview with the AJC last month, GDC Commissioner Tyrone Oliver said listing manner of death on the monthly reports was "just speculation" on the agency's part. Waiting for the medical examiner findings will lead to more accurate information, he said.

However, the agency recently denied an AJC request for all updated manner of death determinations for recent years.

The AJC is contesting the GDC's refusal to disclose death information, arguing that it is subject to release under the Georgia Open Records Act.



**Tammy Price, shown here with her son, Jeremy, told the AJC she was informed by the Hays State Prison warden just hours after Jeremy's death that he died from multiple stab wounds. Yet the manner of death**



isn't listed on the GDC's mortality report. “They don’t want people to know that people are losing their lives in that prison and others,” she said. (Contributed)

The GDC’s January and February mortality reports list the manner of death of 35 prisoners as unknown, five as natural, seven as suicides and seven as homicides. The March report lists 18 deaths — including that of Willie Pye, who was executed — without details other than the prisoners’ names, GDC numbers, the dates of their deaths, the facilities where they died and their years of birth.

Yet the GDC’s own incident reports, prepared by correctional officers in real time at the facilities where the deaths occurred, labeled two March deaths as homicides. The incident reports were obtained by the AJC in response to requests under the Georgia Open Records Act.

One prisoner listed as a homicide victim was 36-year-old Jeremy Price, who died March 2 at Hays State Prison. The incident report describes the killing as an “inmate to inmate assault” and says a “handmade weapon” was used.

Price’s mother, Tammy Price, told the AJC she was informed by the prison warden just hours after her son’s death that he died from multiple stab wounds. Omitting the manner of his death from the March mortality report only serves as further evidence that the GDC is trying to hide its inability to protect prisoners from harm, she said.

“They don’t want people to know that people are losing their lives in that prison and others,” she said. “I know things happen. My son was a grown man. But he was in (the GDC’s) care. It’s their responsibility to keep him safe. And there’s zero accountability or responsibility. Zero.”

Death Date	GDC ID	Offender Name	Facility	Year of Birth
March 2, 2024	1000392058	PRICE, JEREMY EDWARD	HAYS STATE PRISON	1987
March 3, 2024	76259	WAGGY, EARL FRANKLIN	JENKINS CORR FACILITY	1958
March 3, 2024	1003321011	MISCHONEY, JONATHAN LEE	BURDESS CORRECTIONAL TRAINING CTR	1979

Did incident result in serious injury?	YES	Inmate
Nature of Incident:	INMATE TO INMATE ASSAULT, DEATH HOMICIDE, INMATE SPECIAL TRANSPORT	Wireless Devices Found: 0
Incident Video Taped By:	INCIDENT NOT VIDEO TAPED	
Use Of Force:	NO	Type of Force Used:
Offender Weapon:	YES	Weapon Description: homemade weapon

Jeremy Price died on March 2, 2024, at Hays State Prison, but the GDC's mortality report for March (top) doesn't disclose that the agency considers his death a homicide, as indicated in the incident report (highlighted at bottom). (Georgia Department of Corrections)

The GDC’s March list doesn’t include at least one additional death, that of 26-year-old Raquon Tucker, who was incarcerated at Dooly State Prison when he died March 22 after being transported to an Albany hospital. The cause of Tucker’s death is pending a toxicology report and completion of an investigation by the Department of Corrections, according to Brett Walls, the county’s deputy coroner.

By the numbers

The Georgia prison system appears to be in a class by itself when it comes to killings, the AJC found.

GDC facilities had eight homicides for the entirety of 2017 and nine for all of 2018. Since then, the numbers have increased each year to the point where Georgia is now virtually an outlier among state prison systems in the South.

From 2021 through 2023, 98 Georgia prison deaths were classified as homicides. During the same period, 37 prison deaths were classified as homicides in Texas, which has more than twice the prison population.

The number of prison homicides in Georgia in 2022 — 31 — was twice what was reported in Florida, where the prison population is almost twice as large, and far greater than what was reported in South Carolina, Louisiana and North Carolina.

Of nearby states, in recent years only Alabama appears to be surpassing Georgia's prison homicide rate.

The U.S. Department of Justice sued Alabama in 2020, accusing the state of failing to protect prisoners from violence and sexual abuse, in a case that is still pending. The DOJ could potentially make a similar case against Georgia when it completes an investigation initiated in 2021.

Escalating violence in Georgia's prisons has also brought scrutiny from [a state Senate panel aimed at making changes](#) to protect prisoners and staff, as well as from local officials who believe prisons are no longer desirable in their communities, despite the jobs they bring, because of the spillover in violence and other illegal activities.

The GDC has explained its high rate of violence by suggesting that the people sentenced to prison in Georgia are more prone to violence than those in other states across the South.

"You'll find that Georgia has a more violent population than any of these other states," Oliver told the AJC, noting that a majority of Georgia inmates are gang-affiliated and many are both gang members and have mental health diagnoses.

But others say high levels of violence in a prison system suggests a problem with the system itself.



**GDC Commissioner Tyrone Oliver, shown here in 2020, recently told the AJC that listing the manner of death in the monthly mortality reports was “just speculation” on the agency’s part. (Ryon Horne/2020 AJC file photo)**

“People are not sent to prison as a death sentence,” said Deitch, an attorney who works on criminal justice policy issues and has special expertise on correctional oversight and prison conditions. “They are supposed to be getting out. They’re supposed to be kept safe and healthy while they’re inside. No one should be in fear of their lives while they’re incarcerated.”

If prisons are violent, she said, it not only risks lives, it risks public safety, because prisons are supposed to address addiction, trauma, mental health issues or other problems brought to them by prisoners in the first place.

“If we want people to be coming out not worse than when they went in, we need to give them a safe environment in which they can work on themselves,” she said.

### **Limiting disclosure**

The GDC’s decision to stop listing manner of death on the monthly mortality reports stands in sharp contrast to most Georgia law enforcement agencies, which routinely release such information, along with basic details, in their initial incident reports.

It also differs markedly from how several other prison systems disclose information about inmate deaths .

In Texas, state law requires agencies to file detailed public reports for all deaths of individuals who are incarcerated or in the custody of law enforcement. Florida publishes on its website detailed death information for every prison. The Arkansas Department of Corrections issues media advisories on suspected homicides or suicides.

Oliver, in explaining the department’s new policy regarding the monthly reports, said waiting for an official determination can lead to more accurate information, since a coroner could reverse an initial finding. A death that might seem like a homicide or suicide could in fact be something else, he said.

“Even a person hanging in a cell could be covering up a homicide,” he said.

Even if a person is found dead with multiple stab wounds, the GDC will wait for a medical examiner’s findings before releasing the information, Oliver said.

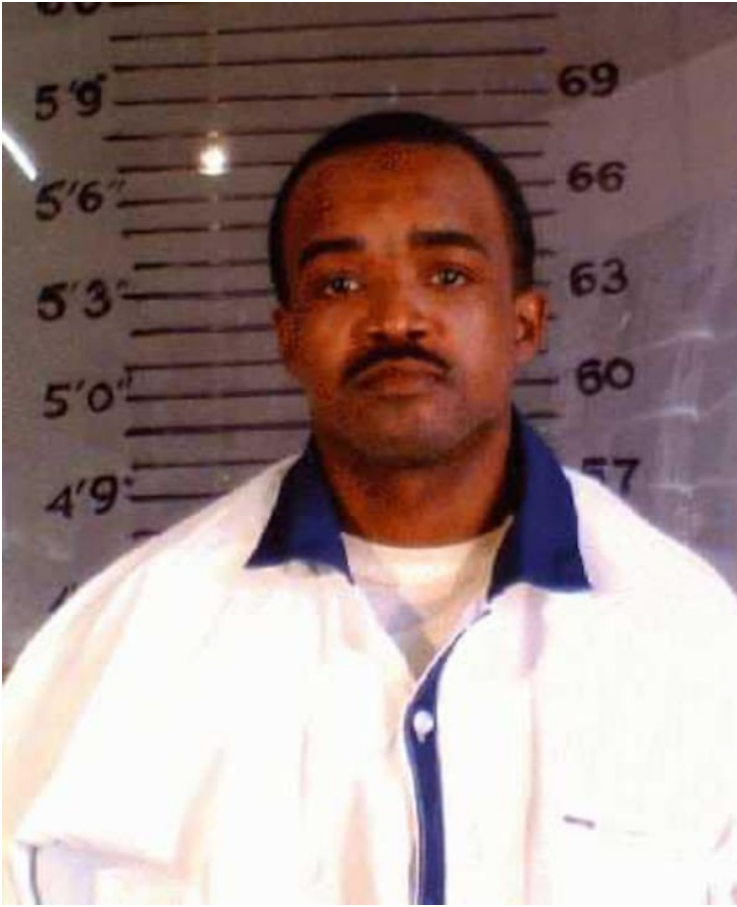
Medical examiner findings are not yet available for 72 of the 73 prisoners who have died this year, nor for more than 50 of the prisoners who died in 2023, the AJC found.

The change in the mortality reports follows other attempts by the GDC to clamp down on public information, including its decision in 2020 to [stop issuing news releases on deaths](#) believed to be suicides or homicides.

Georgia prison reform advocate Susan Sparks Burns said she began requesting the monthly mortality reports from the GDC in 2017 and has used them to prepare spreadsheets detailing prison deaths. Failing to disclose the manner of death as part of the reports is a major roadblock to learning what’s going on inside the state’s prisons, she said.

“It’s very hard to get this information unless you know a family member or someone at the facility,” said Burns, whose Facebook group, They Have No Voice, has become an important clearinghouse of news and information for families with loved ones in the prison system.

### **Entire pages blacked out**



**Reginald Ginn was killed March 13 at Macon State Prison. The GDC's mortality report doesn't say how he died. However, the GDC incident report lists his death as a homicide. (Photo courtesy of Human and Civil Rights Coalition of Georgia)**

The incident reports for the March deaths obtained by the AJC through the Georgia Open Records Act revealed scant information. Most were simply listed as “deaths,” and any details about the circumstances were removed, with entire pages blacked out in most cases.

In addition to Price’s death being noted as a homicide, the death of Reginald Ginn at Macon State Prison on March 13 was labeled a homicide as well. Ginn, 31, was apparently beaten to death by an inmate wielding a fan motor tied to a belt, according to the incident report.

Tammy Price, who lives in Rantoul, Ill., said she knows little about her son’s death other than what’s in the incident report, which the AJC shared with her, and on the death certificate, which she received from the funeral home on May 3. The death certificate confirms that Jeremy Price’s death was a homicide and that he died from stab wounds to the neck and chest.

Jeremy moved to the Atlanta area in 2010 with hopes of making it as a rapper but was sentenced to prison after he robbed a cab driver in Gwinnett County. He was due to complete his sentence for armed robbery next February and was excited about meeting a 14-year-old son born while he was in prison, his mother said.

March 13, 2024	384813	MOORE, WILLIAM T	RALEIGH STATE PRISON	1947
March 13, 2024	1000390667	GINN, REGINALD LAMAR	MACON STATE PRISON	1992
March 14, 2024	1235048	HAMMOND, TIMOTHY JACKSON	AUGUSTA STATE MED. PRISON	1960
March 18, 2024	1157380	TYSON, DASHAWN ADRI	MACON STATE PRISON	1987

Did incident result in serious injury? YES  
 Nature of Incident: INMATE TO INMATE ASSAULT, DEATH, INJURY, HOMICIDE, INMATE SPECIAL TRANSPORT  
 Incident Video Taped By: INCIDENT NOT VIDEO TAPED  
 Use Of Force: NO  
 Offender Weapon: YES  
 Inmate Wireless Devices Found: 0  
 Type of Force Used:  
 Weapon Description: fan motor tied to a state belt

**The GDC's mortality roster (top) lists Reginald Lamar Ginn, who died on March 13, 2024, at Macon State Prison. The incident report regarding his death (highlighted at bottom) shows that the agency reported his death as a homicide. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

Tammy Price said she hasn't heard from the warden at Hays since his initial phone call. She said her follow-up calls have been returned by a chaplain who, she said, told her she should at least be "glad" that her son's killing is being investigated by an "outside agency."

She said she wasn't given more information. Most deaths inside GDC facilities are investigated by the agency's Office of Professional Standards, although the GBI is occasionally involved as well.

Since her son's death, Tammy Price said, she spends sleepless nights on the couch, hoping not to bother her husband in their bedroom, as she deals with grief and frustration.

"I just want some answers," she said. "Tell me what happened to my child. Just tell me what happened."

*AJC investigations editor Lois Norder contributed to this report*



# South Georgia prison becomes deadlier amid corruption, extreme staffing shortage

Valdosta State Prison has brought the state's prison crisis to a new level, with four verified inmate killings in six months.

[Link](#)



**Valdosta State Prison has seen four homicides in the first half of 2024: from left, Rufus Lane (killed in January); Ricky Harris (February); Melvin Towns (April); and Shane Griffith (May). (Contributed and Georgia Department of Corrections)**

By [Carrie Teegardin](#) and [Danny Robbins](#)  
Aug 15, 2024

The beating started after 11 on the night of May 29 and may have lasted until 5:30 the next morning, arrest warrants say.

Wedge between two bunks, Shane Griffith had nowhere to run and no one to turn to for help as 11 other inmates at Valdosta State Prison assaulted him. He was punched, kicked, stomped on, beaten with poles and shoes, whipped with a belt and burned. Eleven against one, possibly for hours.

The beating left Griffith with “blunt force trauma throughout his body” and made him at least the fourth prisoner killed this year at Valdosta State Prison, putting it among the state’s deadliest in a system that is on track to have its deadliest year ever.

The realities at Valdosta State Prison — including allegations of widespread corruption and a stunning lack of officers — reveal how Georgia’s troubled prison system is now spiraling out of control.

Since the first of the year at Valdosta, the warden has been fired for misconduct and other officers have been fired or arrested on charges of corruption on the job. Moreover, as of April, 80% of the correctional officer positions were vacant at a prison that houses the GDC’s highest percentages of prisoners who are both gang members and have mental health issues, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution found.

While violence and gross understaffing plague the entire Georgia prison system, the events this year at Valdosta have taken the crisis to a new level.

The four killings so far this year that the AJC could verify come after the prison experienced just two homicides in all of 2023, two in 2022 and none in 2021, according to death certificate data and GDC records. The 2024 victims, in addition to Griffith, are Rufus Lane, strangled to death in January; Ricky Harris, stabbed at least 30 times in the neck and face with ink pens in February; and Melvin Towns, stabbed to death with a homemade weapon in April.

Only one other Georgia Department of Corrections facility — Macon State Prison — appears to have had four homicides in the first six months of the year, according to the cases the AJC has been able to confirm.

Lane's sister, Denise Robinson, told the AJC that her brother, who had been locked up for decades, repeatedly spoke to her about how Valdosta State Prison had few officers keeping watch and was particularly dangerous.

“He said it was horrible,” she said. “Something up every day.”

Personally came Inv. Laura Porter , who on oath says that to the best of his/her knowledge and belief [REDACTED] (hereinafter called the accused) between 05/29/2024 at 11:00 PM and 05/30/2024 at 5:30 AM , at 3259 Val Tech Road, VALDOSTA in LOWNDES county aforesaid, did commit the offense of Murder during the commission of a felony - Felony 16-5-1(c) in that Said accused did knowingly and intentionally during the commission of a felony cause the death of another by committing an assault upon the person of Shane Dillon Griffith at Valdosta State Prison Annex in West 3 dorm, on the date of May 29, 2024, to May 30, 2024, with an object: a white pole and a burning object, said accused is observed going between the beds where Shane Dillon Griffith was restrained and the white pole is observed on camera moving up and down in a striking motion. Said accused is also observed with a burning object placing it on Shane Dillon Griffith. This assault resulted in the death of Shane Dillon Griffith due to blunt force trauma throughout his body. this deponent makes this affidavit that a warrant may issue for his/her arrest.

**An arrest warrant for one of the 11 men charged with murder in the killing of Shane Griffith describes how that attacker allegedly used a pole and a burning object. Griffith was killed overnight in a barracks-style dorm at Valdosta State Prison on May 29 and 30. (Magistrate Court of Lowndes County)**

In Griffith's case, all 11 of the men who allegedly took part in the attack have been charged with murder, making it one of the most disturbing incidents inside the GDC in recent years.

Arrest warrants and other documents describe how Griffith, in prison for a probation violation and just months away from being released, was unmercifully attacked in an open, barracks-style dorm. One of his attackers is alleged to have used a wooden pole and a burning object. Another used both shoes and his fists. At times during the attack, men stood or sat on Griffith's chest as the beating went on, according to the warrants that cite video surveillance.



**Shane Griffith was incarcerated for a probation violation at Valdosta State Prison when he was brutally killed on the night of May 29-30. (Family photo)**

It is unclear whether anyone saw the violence on camera in real time. GDC spokeswoman Joan Heath said she couldn't comment on any details about Griffith's killing because the case is under investigation, pending final autopsy and toxicology findings.

"Warrants were taken on 11 individuals because all were involved in some manner, but it is not possible to determine which one — or more — individuals were ultimately responsible for the death," Heath wrote in an email.

Speaking generally, Heath said the GDC has worked hard to manage its most difficult offenders.

"Individuals who come into our system with violent offenses rarely give up their criminal activities," she wrote. As a result, GDC staffers "work diligently each and every day in these facilities, ensuring our commitment to safe and secure operations remains at the forefront of our daily duties," she wrote.

### **'Misconduct' and corruption**

Even in the Georgia prison system, where hundreds of correctional officers and other employees have faced criminal charges for contraband and other offenses, Valdosta stands out for its disorder and corruption.

At least a dozen officers at Valdosta have been fired or arrested since January, including the warden, Ralph Shropshire.

Shropshire was named warden in March 2023, taking over the job after serving as a deputy warden the previous four years. Since his firing in July, the GDC has declined to reveal the reasons behind it. The ex-warden's personnel file, obtained by the AJC, states only that he was terminated due to "misconduct."

Heath, in her email, said the GDC is unable to elaborate on Shropshire's dismissal because "those details remain part of an open investigation." Efforts by the AJC to contact Shropshire were unsuccessful.

Shropshire's firing came after the arrests earlier this year of five Valdosta State Prison employees who were accused of helping an inmate move drugs and money as part of a massive contraband scheme. The arrests were made following a large multiprison investigation by the GDC dubbed "Operation Skyhawk" that implicated another Valdosta inmate who authorities allege was coordinating a scheme to use drones to deliver contraband to prisons in Georgia.

Another officer at Valdosta, Lyric Oliver, resigned in March and now faces criminal charges. Oliver, who held the rank of lieutenant, was arrested in June after an investigation by the GDC found she had improper dealings with an inmate, Alfred Jones, described in the arrest warrants as a “validated gang member.”

Oliver is charged with two crimes — violating her oath as an officer and trading with inmates — after allegedly receiving three payments totaling \$1,880 from Jones and sending him videos of herself committing sexual acts.

Oliver could not be reached for comment.

The arrests and firings at Valdosta have diminished and tainted a workforce that already was operating at staffing levels that make it virtually impossible to supervise the inmate population. As of April, GDC data show that only 43 of 222 correctional officer positions were filled at the prison, which houses more than 1,100 men.

Although Valdosta has the highest correctional officer vacancy rate in the system, the majority of the state’s highest-security facilities have similar issues, with at least 60% of their correctional officer jobs unfilled.

### **He wanted protection**

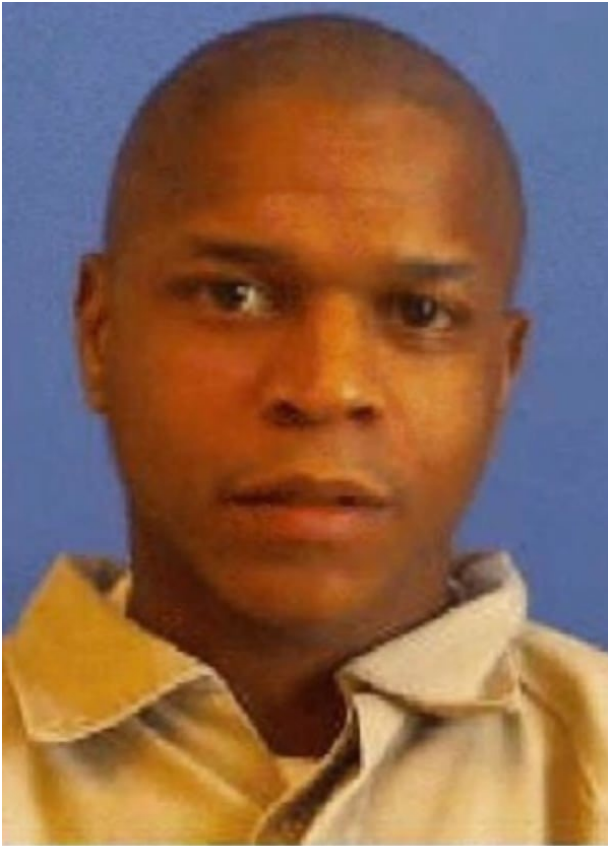
Griffith entered the prison system in December 2022 to serve 23 months for a series of probation violations. His probation stemmed from a case in which he and a girlfriend allowed minors to be present when they had sex.

The 32-year-old resident of Jasper County, an avid hunter and fisherman and fan of the Georgia Bulldogs, was just six months from his release date when he was killed.

Griffith’s mother, Tonya Herndon, said her son died a day after moving to Valdosta from Rutledge State Prison in Columbus, where he was in protective custody. He wanted to be in protective custody instead of general population because of concerns about his safety, she said.

“The system should listen to the inmates if they’re being threatened, and the nonviolent ones on probation violations should not be sent to a maximum-security prison where stuff like this happens,” Herndon said.

Heath declined to answer specific questions from the AJC seeking to know how such an egregious situation — a large-scale attack that went on for hours — could unfold. What was the staffing that night? Has anyone been disciplined or fired? How can the prison operate when 80% of its officer positions aren’t filled?



**Melvin Towns was stabbed to death on April 21 at Valdosta State Prison. Six other prisoners were implicated in his death, according to the incident report. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

In response, Heath wrote this: “We have worked tirelessly to address correctional staffing challenges, eradicate weapons and contraband in our facilities, employ new technology and resources to help keep our staff and inmates safe and set offenders on paths to success upon their release.”

Griffith’s death occurred six weeks after Towns was killed under similar circumstances in a similar barracks-type dorm. Six prisoners received disciplinary reports for their roles in that killing, according to the incident report. Two have since been charged with murder.

Towns, 37, was serving a six-month sentence for violating his probation for a drug conviction in Fulton County, and he was killed just 12 days before he was due to be released. When his probation was revoked last November, it was noted on the court order that his time could be served in the Fulton County jail “if permissible.” However, he spent only three weeks in the county’s custody before he was turned over to the GDC.

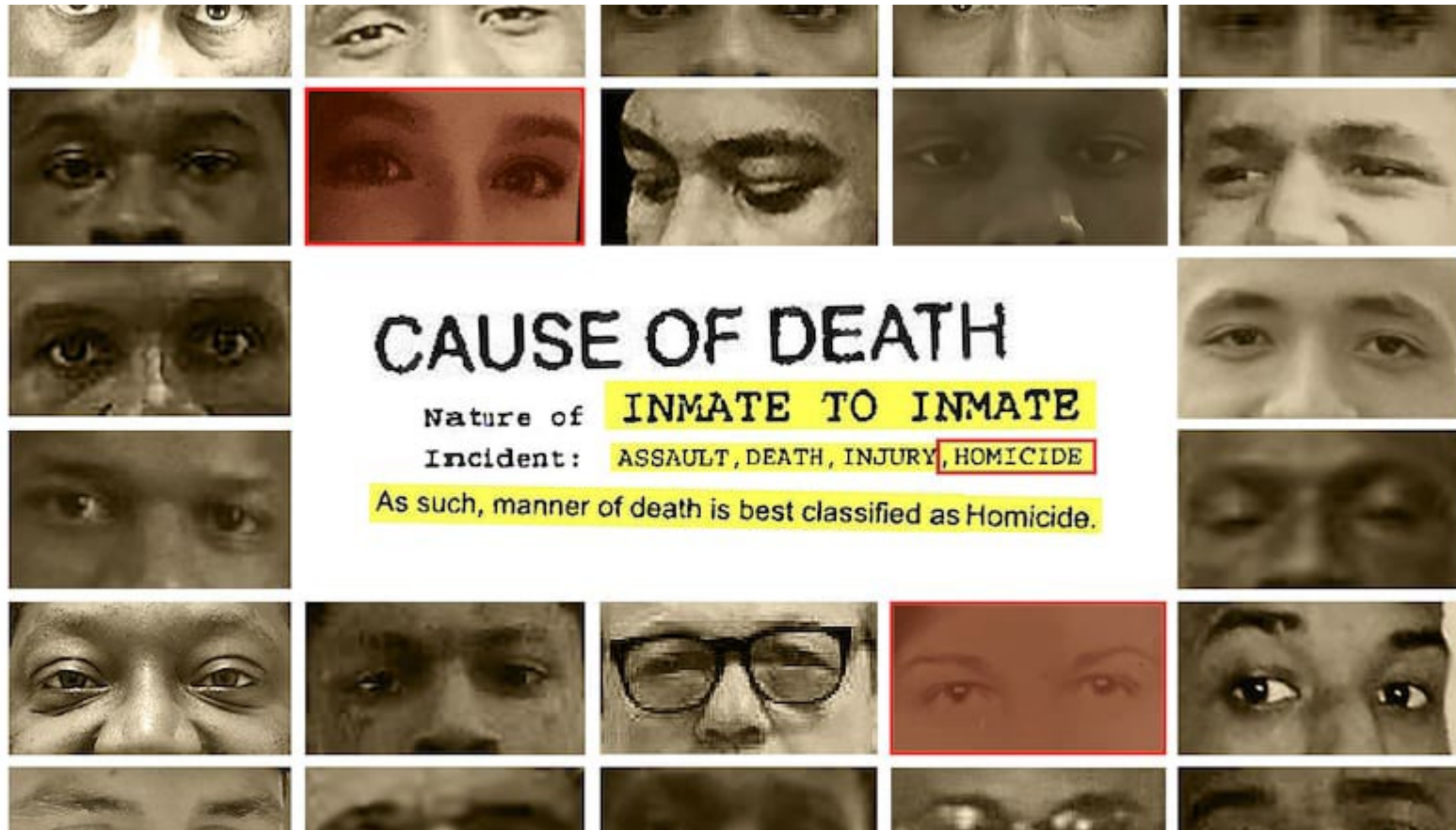
That Towns wound up in the GDC’s most understaffed and potentially most dangerous prison when he was serving a six-month sentence for a probation violation — and by court order could have served it in a county lockup — still gnaws at members of his extended family in Atlanta.

“There are a lot of questions we have that haven’t been answered,” said Towns’ uncle, Darrell Stone. “And when we do reach out to people, we end up with nothing. We just know that we buried him.”



# Death behind bars: Here's how Georgia prisoners are being killed

Homicides have already topped last year's stunning number; two workers among those slain since 2020



Georgia prisons saw an unprecedented 38 homicides in 2023, topping the previous record of 31 the year before. Illustration by ArLuther Lee | AJC

By [Lois Norder](#), [Carrie Teegardin](#) and [Danny Robbins](#)

Oct 17, 2024

Georgia prisons saw an unprecedented 38 homicides in 2023, topping the previous record of 31 the year before. This year's death toll has already set another horrific record.

At least 44 people have been homicide victims so far in 2024.

Among the recent homicides is that of Mariol Rawls, 41, at Wilcox State Prison in late August. At least eight men, described as “validated gang members,” have been charged with murder for allegedly entering Rawls’ cell, stabbing him repeatedly with a 12-inch blade, walking him to the shower and back and then placing him in his bunk, where the staff found him, according to arrest warrants.

Rawls’ killing comes on the heels of a similar case, that of Shane Griffith, who was allegedly [punched, kicked, stomped on](#), whipped with a belt and burned by 11 inmates, apparently over several hours, before the staff noticed he was dead at Valdosta State Prison in May. All 11 of those men have been charged with murder.

Among the other 2024 victims verified by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution are a 23-year-old woman and a 61-year-old woman incarcerated at Lee Arrendale State Prison. Both were strangled, and authorities have charged another prisoner with murdering both of the women.

The carnage may be much worse.

In March, the Georgia Department of Corrections said it would no longer provide information on how prisoners are dying. That forced the AJC to seek out other sources to try to identify homicides. Ultimately, death certificates will be the definitive record, but autopsy findings can take months, even years, to be reported.

Death certificate findings are still missing for several 2022 prison deaths. For 2023, coroners have said that findings on how nine prisoners died are still pending investigation.

These are the known homicides since 2020, as reported in official records. When records from the GDC conflicted with death certificate findings on names, ages and dates, the information from the death data was used.

## **Augusta State Medical Prison: 11 homicides**

**Eddie Gosier**, 39, (died May 2, 2020) ligature strangulation. He died just hours after an inmate with a particularly violent history was moved by guards into Gosier’s cell. The killer, Daniel Luke Ferguson, had previously strangled to death an inmate at Hays State Prison after being sentenced to life in prison when he was 18 for the shooting death of a neighbor in Walton County.

**Thomas Henry Giles**, 31: (Oct. 28, 2020) inhalation of products of combustion. He was left in his smoke-filled cell for hours. The state agreed to pay his family \$5 million to settle a lawsuit over his death.

**Terry Lee Bennett II**, 43: (Jan. 10, 2021) blunt impact to head.

**Ali Lamont Tanner**, 45: (July 2, 2021) stabbed in neck.

**William Taylor Bodge**, 61: (Feb. 5, 2022) delayed complications of blunt force injuries of the head suffered weeks earlier. The incident date is listed in the death data as Jan. 20, 2022.

**Raphael Zachery Milligan**, 41: (July 21, 2022) blunt force injuries and strangulation. Another prisoner was charged with his murder.

**Amos Bennett Huff Jr.**, 60: (March 30, 2023) strangled. His 26-year-old cellmate was charged with Huff’s murder.

**Randall Joey Futch**, 61: (June 8, 2023) delayed complications of blunt force head trauma.

**Thomas Preston Johnson, 56:** *(April 12, 2024)* incident report shows homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Rodarick Lee Hayes, 29:** *(May 25, 2024)* sharp force injury of the torso. Two prisoners and a correctional officer have been charged with murder in his stabbing death. Hayes and the other prisoners were allegedly attacking another prisoner, who stabbed Hayes. The officer is accused of aiding in the attack, according to court records. The Department of Justice investigation of Georgia prisons found that the victim had been attacked on multiple occasions before his death.

**Lamar Wesson Phillips, 39:** *(June 8, 2024)* Incident report data shows a murder on this date. The incident report shows an inmate-to-inmate assault, homicide. Death certificate not in.

## **Baldwin State Prison: 8 homicides**

**Joshua Emanuel Williams, 22:** *(died July 3, 2020)* multiple sharp force injuries. A lawsuit by his mother alleges he was placed in a cell with an inmate who had stabbed other inmates.

**Jose Martin Ibarra Garcia, 41:** *(June 15, 2021)* multiple stab wounds to head, torso and extremities.

**Edward Jamar McCloud, 40:** *(July 23, 2021)* sharp force injury to neck.

**Jamari McClinton, 21:** *(Aug. 11, 2021)* stabbed. He was slain five days after being transferred from Phillips State Prison, where he had been in protective custody after threats from gang members. Protection was removed when he was transferred.

**Bedarius Clark, 26:** *(Aug. 21, 2021)* homicide. Death certificate not in. He was found unresponsive in the prison's segregation unit. The GDC described the death as an assault.

**Fredrick Louis Spears Jr., 27:** *(May 2, 2023)* stab wound to torso.

**Johnny Lee Vaughn, 39:** *(Oct. 4, 2023)* stab wound to torso. The GDC said he died after a fight involving multiple inmates.

**Vincent Reshad Dyer, 50:** *(Aug. 21, 2024)* sharp force chest trauma; stabbed by others with sharp instruments. Incident report data shows a homicide, fight and contraband.

## **Calhoun State Prison: 4 homicides**

**DaQuavious Cachone Lackey, 21:** *(died May 16, 2022)* stab wound of the neck and multiple blunt force injuries. The DOJ report said he was killed after staff moved the assailant out of segregation to general population and then back to segregation without following procedures. There, he was housed in a cell with another prisoner. That prisoner asked to be moved because the two weren't getting along. The next day, an orderly saw the victim being beaten by his cellmate with a fan motor in a net bag, the DOJ reported.

**Martel Dorsey, 34:** *(Oct. 4, 2023)* stabbed by other or others with sharp instruments. The GDC told a TV station that several witnesses saw Dorsey run out of a dorm as he was chased by other prisoners.

**Kenneth Piper, 37:** *(May 4, 2024)* Incident report shows a murder on this date, inmate-to-inmate assault. Death certificate not in.

**Gonzalo Colmenero, 54:** *(July 17, 2024)* Incident report data show an inmate-to-inmate assault, death. Death certificate not in.

## **Central State Prison: 3 homicides**

**Joshua Carl-Haynes Lester, 34:** *(died July 28, 2021)* stab wound to chest.

**Hollis Alan Bryant, 28:** *(Dec. 17, 2023)* sharp force trauma to left femoral artery. The DOJ report says he was stabbed to death and that three other prisoners were criminally charged.

**Marquis L. Johnson, 26:** *(Dec. 18, 2023)* stab wound to chest. The DOJ report of a murder on this date said the victim was stabbed in the prison barbershop on Dec. 8 and hospitalized. When he returned to the prison, he died after going into cardiac arrest secondary to the stabbing.

## **Coastal State Prison: 5 homicides**

**Kion E. Parks, 31:** (*died Sept. 14, 2021*) stabbed. Incident report shows five other prisoners were involved, and a lawsuit alleges five inmates stabbed Parks to death.

**Rufus Ramon Lee, 27:** (*Dec. 14, 2021*) stab wound to chest. Incident report shows four other prisoners were involved in the incident. A lawsuit by Lee's mother alleges that the lock on his cell didn't work, allowing assailants from other cells and dorms to reach him. The suit also says that four inmates were indicted in his death.

**Salomon Andres Ramirez, 43:** (*Oct. 20, 2023*) apparent homicide, according to the GDC. Cause not stated. Death certificate not available.

**Ryan Chase Archer, 25:** (*Dec. 13, 2023*) stab wound to chest. The DOJ report says he died after a fight with other prisoners. He was due to be released in 2024.

**Raymond Littles, 49:** (*April 16, 2024*) incident report shows homicide, with another prisoner disciplined. Death certificate not in.

## **Coffee Correctional Facility: 2 homicides**

**Kendall Ja'Mal Cromer, 31:** (*died Nov. 30, 2020*) stab wound to neck and chest. Incident report shows four other inmates were involved.

**Hendricks Riley Gunn, 42:** (*Jan. 1, 2022*) blunt force injuries to head and neck.

## **Dodge State Prison: 2 homicides**

**Douglas Anthony Forts, 57:** (*died June 2, 2022*) acute traumatic amputation of finger during fight.

**Hezekiah Sha'Nard Cuyler, 21:** (*Sept. 14, 2022*) blunt force trauma to head.

## **Dooly State Prison: 6 homicides**

**Dimitri Merci Jackson, 36:** (*died Jan. 3, 2023*) stab wound to chest.

**Chad Taylor Roadifer, 45:** (*Oct. 27, 2023*) delayed complications of blunt force head trauma, interval months.

**Brian Lee Wainwright, 59:** (*Jan. 4, 2024*) homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Raquon Ja'Veyonte Tucker, 26:** (*March 22, 2024*) complications of blunt force head trauma

**Carlos Omar Soldiew-Acosta, 38:** (*June 22, 2024*) complications due to blunt force trauma. The coroner told a TV station that he may have been dead for more than 24 hours before his body was found.

**Zeary Davis, 31:** (*Sept. 26, 2024*) A county coroner told a TV station he was stabbed to death. Death certificate not in.

## **Georgia Diagnostic and Classification State Prison: 5 homicides**

**Daniel Charriez, 46:** (*died Feb. 23, 2022*) delayed complications of traumatic brain injury, four-month interval.

**Boyd Henry Williams, 64:** (*Oct. 3, 2022*) manual strangulation, blunt force trauma to head.

**Elmer W. Pless, 65:** (*May 15, 2023*) strangulation.

**Carrell Beontae Johnson, 32:** (*June 6, 2023*) chopping injuries to head and sharp force injuries to torso.

**Brandon Trace Burrell, 31:** (*Jan. 28, 2024*) methamphetamine intoxication complicated by physical altercation. Assaulted by another inmate while he was under the effects of methamphetamine. A TV station reported he had suffered numerous stab wounds.

## **Georgia State Prison\*: 7 homicides**

**Raul Garcia Bailon**, 39: *(died April 21, 2020)* positional asphyxia and suffocation due to assault, blunt trauma to soft tissues.

**Jocavious Artez Newsome**, 25: *(Nov. 4, 2020)* stab wound.

**Demetrius Stubbins**, 38: *(Dec. 21, 2020)* stab wound to chest.

**Christopher Dewayne Mathis**, 37: *(Feb. 26, 2021)* blunt force trauma to head.

**Christopher D'Corro Ward**, 29: *(May 25, 2021)* carbon monoxide poisoning due to smoke inhalation/methamphetamine toxicity. Incident report shows fire.

**Fabian Garcia-Mata**, 27: *(Sept. 10, 2021)* multiple stab wounds.

**Troy Donald Harvey**, 34: *(Sept. 12, 2021)* stab wound to chest.

*\* Prison was closed in early 2022.*

## **Hancock State Prison: 8 homicides**

**Cesar Arnold Pastrana Morales**, 33: *(died March 13, 2020)* stab wound to chest. Incident report shows five other inmates involved in the incident.

**Rashad Bolton**, 29: *(Jan. 4, 2021)* puncture wound to chest with sharp object. In a lawsuit, his parents claim he was stabbed to death.

**Dwayne Zackery Jr.**, 22: *(Feb. 12, 2021)* stab wound to chest with homemade knife. Death data states he was stabbed by cellmate.

**Charles 'Tristen' James McKee**, 24: *(May 23, 2022)* Death data show he was stabbed 13 times in the back and head. Incident report shows five other inmates directly involved. A lawsuit alleges he was placed in a dorm with known gang members who were hostile to LGBTQ inmates. The U.S. Department of Justice investigation found that McKee tried to escape gang members who were beating and stabbing him by jumping through stair railings to the floor below. But the gang members continued to stab him there. Another prisoner trying to stop the attack was seriously wounded, DOJ reported.

**Terry Lee Bishop**, 49: *(Oct. 18, 2022)* blunt force trauma, acute toxicity of methamphetamine, acute toxicity of cannabinoids. The death data show he was beaten to death by another prisoner.

**Norman Samples**, 59: *(Dec. 27, 2022)* blunt force injuries to head and torso.

**Roland Lamont Phillips**, 33: *(June 28, 2023)* multiple sharp force injuries. An incident report shows he suffered 11 puncture wounds to his front torso and one puncture wound to his neck. A murder warrant was served against his cellmate.

**Francisco Zaldivar Melgar-Saldivar**, 26: *(Aug. 12, 2023)* strangulation and blunt force injuries. A claim filed against the state alleges that he wasn't provided appropriate medical care after being attacked by another prisoner.

## **Hays State Prison: 6 homicides**

**Anthony L. McGhee Jr.**, 34: *(died March 29, 2020)* complications of blunt force head trauma and sharp force trauma of torso and extremities.

**Jorge Renberto Ventura-Cabrera**, 35: *(June 5, 2021)* stab wounds to neck, torso and upper extremities. Incident report shows two other inmates involved.

**Quintez Smith**, 25: *(Aug. 29, 2022)* multiple sharp force injuries.

**Talore Stihles Blackford**, 31: *(Oct. 28, 2023)* multiple stab wounds to neck.

**Jeremy Edward Price**, 36: *(March 2, 2024)* stab wounds to neck and chest.

**Freddie Lee Talley**, 31: *(May 6, 2024)* stab wound to chest. Incident report shows a murder; weapons used include 22-inch, 20-inch, 12-inch, 14-inch, 10.5-inch and 21.5-inch sharpened weapons. Four other prisoners were involved.



## Johnson State Prison: 5 homicides

**Jerry Lee Brown, 61:** (died Nov. 12, 2020) stab wounds to head, blunt force injury to face

**David Lamar Henegar, 44:** (Oct. 16, 2021) Manual strangulation, blunt force trauma to head. A lawsuit alleges that Henegar — who had a disability, according to the death data — was choked over the course of hours by his cellmate, who also stomped on his chest and strangled him. Neighboring prisoners allegedly heard his screams and called for officers to intervene, but none did, the lawsuit alleges. The suit also alleges that Henegar was in a cell with a mentally ill inmate who had previously attacked him.

**Michael Page, 53:** (June 29, 2023) homicide. Cause not stated. Death certificate not in.

**Donald Prescott Lee, 41:** (Nov. 16, 2023) blunt force trauma to head, neck and torso.

**Kenneth Adam Robinson, 50:** (Aug. 10, 2024) Incident report data shows a homicide. Death certificate not in.

## Lee Arrendale State Prison: 3 homicides

**Angela Denise Anderson, 39:** (died Sept. 11, 2022) asphyxia due to neck and chest compression.

**Sherry Elaine Joyce, 61:** (April 27, 2024) strangled. In October 2024, another prisoner was charged in her death and the death of Hallie Marie Reed.

**Hallie Marie Reed, 23:** (May 5, 2024) strangled. Another prisoner was charged in her death and the death of Sherry Joyce.

## Macon State Prison: 24 homicides

**Johnny Eugene Young, 24:** (died Jan. 27, 2020) sharp force injury to mouth/tongue.

**Rafael Blas Becerra, 36:** (March 7, 2020) stab wounds to upper torso. Incident report shows seven other inmates involved, with six injured.

**Carrington Juwon Frye, 23:** (March 20, 2020) stab wounds to neck and chest. Incident report shows two other inmates involved. Frye's mother told Georgia lawmakers that he was stabbed and bled for more than half an hour before help arrived.

**David Travis Alexander Dennis, 35:** (May 13, 2020) multiple sharp force injuries.

**Coty Dustin Silvers, 39:** (May 23, 2020) asphyxia.

**Bobby Edward Lee Jr., 38:** (July 13, 2020) ligature strangulation. A federal lawsuit alleges he was strangled by his cellmate, a convicted murderer. The suit blames his death on understaffing and indifference by prison officials.

**Robbie B. Brower, 58:** (Oct. 4, 2020) blunt and sharp force injuries to head and neck.

**Raul Villegas, 37:** (Dec. 13, 2020) stab wound to torso. Incident report shows three other inmates involved.

**Carlos Maurice Fisher Jr., 30:** (May 10, 2021) multiple sharp force injuries.

**Ryan Weston Darville, 37:** (Dec. 29, 2021) stab wounds to chest.

**Joseph Walter Brown, 36:** (July 26, 2022) multiple stab wounds.

**Dan Brooks Jr., 50:** (Aug. 21, 2022) stab wound to neck.

**Kendrick Malik Brown, 25:** (Oct. 16, 2022) blunt force head injury. His mother told a TV station that her son was due to be released in a month but was placed in a cell with a prisoner known to be dangerous.

**James Cornelius McLeroy III, 26:** (Dec. 19, 2022) stab wounds to torso. Incident report shows two other prisoners involved were gang members.

**Sabino Carlos Ramos, 34:** (March 22, 2023) multiple stab wounds. The DOJ report of the homicide says four gang members ran past an officer to the kitchen area and fatally stabbed a prisoner working there. A GDC lieutenant then saw prisoners in an adjacent housing unit getting weapons and beginning to fight. The intensity of the fighting led officers to deploy munitions to try to control the dorms. Eleven prisoners were stabbed, with six of them needing transport to hospitals.

**Kevin Deshawn Lamar, 44:** (Aug. 10, 2023) sharp force chest trauma. His cellmate was charged with murder and other crimes in Lamar's death.

**Taurean Hardy, 41, (Dec. 10, 2023)** homicide. Death certificate not in. The DOJ report says a prisoner died on this date after an altercation with his cellmate.

**Kenneth Keith Malcom, 38: (Feb. 12, 2024)** sharp force trauma to head, neck, torso and upper extremities.

**Reginald Lamonte Ginn, 31: (March 13, 2024)** blunt force head trauma.

**Devontae Marquez Young, 28: (May 10, 2024)** cardiac arrest; sharp force chest trauma; assaulted by another with sharp instrument.

**Mathis Lee Ward, 37: (June 8, 2024)** sharp force chest trauma; sharp force neck, upper and lower extremity trauma; assaulted with homemade sharp instrument. Incident report lists weapon used was two pieces of metal sharpened to a point.

**Jarraad Quayshawn Williams, 32: (July 17, 2024)** Incident report data shows inmate-to-inmate assault, homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Shannon Pickett, 49: (July 21, 2024)** Exsanguination (bleeding to death); sharp force trauma. Incident report data shows an inmate-to-inmate assault.

**Keith Antwone Green, 44: (Aug. 30, 2024)** Incident report data shows an inmate-to-inmate assault, homicide. Death certificate not in.

### **Phillips State Prison: 8 homicides**

**Dave Stone, 61: (died Nov. 20, 2021)** closed head trauma, delayed effects. His sister told the AJC that he was in a mental health ward when he was assaulted, apparently with two pipes wrapped in a cloth. After the attack, his brain was no longer functioning and he was taken off life support, she said.

**Jamal Cymonne Johnson, 32: (June 11, 2022)** stab wounds to head, injuring brain, delayed effects.

**Sidney Sanchez Nealey, 22: (July 18, 2022)** stab wounds to torso.

**Jacob Kendall Daniels, 19: (Aug. 13, 2022)** stab wound to neck, shoulder and arm.

**Quafabian Melik McBride, 19: (Sept. 30, 2022)** stab wound to chest, injuring heart: sharp force injuries to head, torso and upper extremities.

Stabbing occurred during a gang-related fight in the lockdown unit. McBride was housed elsewhere in the prison and had been brought to lockdown that day through the arrangements of officers. The DOJ report says that following the homicide, a gang war erupted at multiple other GDC prisons, with Bloods attacking Crips in the several days that followed. The gang-related violence led to 20 prisoners being hospitalized, the DOJ found.

**Alim Rasheed Lovett, 33: (Dec. 8, 2022)** stab wounds to back, injuring right lung. Also sharp force injuries to head, torso and right thigh. Incident report shows four other prisoners involved.

**Arthur James Wimbush Jr., 46: (April 2, 2023)** Blunt force trauma with fracture of thyroid cartilage.

**David Fambro, 69: (July 24, 2024)** complications of facial fractures — interval 26 days. Incident report data shows a homicide.

### **Rutledge State Prison: 3 homicides**

**Curtis Mincey, 74: (died July 22, 2021)** blunt force trauma to head, neck, torso and extremities. In a lawsuit, his sister alleged that he suffered from a mental illness but didn't receive appropriate medical or psychological assistance.

**Daniel Tyler Nichols, 26: (April 23, 2023)** asphyxia, neck compression.

**Leon Venteris Hobson, 58: (July 7, 2024)** incident report database shows inmate-to-inmate assault, homicide. A coroner told a TV station that he was found dead in his cell after a fight with his cellmate. Death certificate not in.

### **Smith State Prison: 19 homicides**

**Taylor Harrison Brooks, 26: (died April 10, 2020)** multiple stab wounds.

**John Bretleir Reyes Cardona, 24: (April 20, 2020)** exsanguination (severe loss of blood) from stab wound to neck.

**Justin Nathaniel Wilkerson, 25:** (*Jan. 5, 2021*) asphyxia, neck compression. During a hearing at the Georgia Legislature, his mother testified he had mental health diagnoses of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder and previously had been attacked in prison.

**Desmond Hill, 35:** (*April 9, 2021*) strangulation. According to a family member, the day before his death he call his mother and reported that he was in “the hole” with a cellmate who said he was going to kill him.

**Hiwatha Abdulcah Hakeem Jr., 26:** (*April 12, 2021*) multiple stab wounds. Incident report shows four other prisoners involved. A lawsuit alleges the four who attacked him had a history of violence toward others and that when he sought medical help after the assault, prison officials failed to provide timely and adequate care.

**Derrick Dione Deshun Harvey, 26:** (*June 25, 2021*) stab wound to chest.

**Christopher Ray Reynolds, 38:** (*July 1, 2021*) blunt and sharp force injuries to head and neck.

**Christopher Michael Redwine, 45:** (*Sept. 27, 2021*) asphyxia due to manual strangulation.

**Nathan Michael Mahan, 37:** (*Oct. 23, 2022*) stab wounds.

**Randy O’Neal Wynn, 54:** (*March 2, 2023*) homicide. Death certificate says pending investigation.

**Anthony Joseph Zino III, 71:** (*April 5, 2023*) asphyxia, neck compression inflicted by other. The local coroner noted that the body was badly decomposed and the man likely had been dead for days before being discovered.

**Calvin Darrell Denson Jr., 31:** (*April 26, 2023*) stab wound to chest. The GDC said seven inmates were involved in a fight.

**Shaquan Jahrel Boykins, 31:** (*May 11, 2023*) blunt impact injuries to head

**Justin Tyler Smith, 37:** (*July 28, 2023*) epidural hematoma (bleeding between the brain membrane and the skull), blunt force injury to head. The medical examiner said Smith was punched and fell to the ground, striking his head.

**Quenton G. Mayo, 30:** (*Aug. 14, 2023*) stab wounds to neck. Incident report data shows four prisoners involved.

Correctional Officer **Robert Danford Clark, 42:** (*Oct. 1, 2023*) multiple stab wounds. He was attacked by an inmate.

**James Adams Jr., 72:** (*Nov. 8, 2023*) blunt force trauma to head and neck.

**Donquerius Lamonte Mahone, 37:** (*Feb. 3, 2024*) Homicide. Death certificate not in.

Food service worker **Aureon Shavea Grace, 24:** (*May 25, 2024*) gunshot wound to head. Grace was fatally shot by an inmate who was working in the kitchen.

## **Telfair State Prison: 13 homicides**

**Cedric La’Troy Johnson Sr., 35:** (*died March 13, 2020*) strangulation.

**Aldrich Norval Cain, 26:** (*April 23, 2020*) multiple stab wounds. Incident report shows four other inmates involved.

**Marcus Derrelle Pearson Jr., 28** (*May 29, 2020*) multiple stab wounds. Incident report shows two other inmates involved.

**Luis Garcia Palacio, 41:** (*July 28, 2020*) blunt impact injuries to head.

**Juan Carlos Arguelles-Reveles, 37:** (*May 7, 2021*) stabbing. Incident report shows 11 other inmates involved.

**Xavier LaMar Warren, 32:** (*Dec. 28, 2022*) stab wound to torso. Incident report shows four other inmates involved.

**De’ahmoz Oshmic Floyd, 29:** (*April 18, 2023*) exsanguination (severe bleeding): stab wound to side of neck. A claim filed against the state said he was stabbed by several other prisoners at a time when no prison staff were in the dorm. The claim also says he had renounced his gang affiliation while in prison, which made him a target of previous attacks.

**Kwesi Jamal Stultz, 24:** (*Dec. 22, 2023*) multiple injuries to head.

**Joey Lebron Kilgore, 46:** (*Feb. 29, 2024*) homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Lamar Wilson, 32:** (*June 1, 2024*) GDC said he died of injuries suffered during a fight. Death certificate not in.

**Zoumana Madiou Sarre, 23:** (*July 5, 2024*) multiple sharp force injuries to neck and torso

**Henry Crump**, age not available: (Sept. 2, 2024) Incident report data shows a homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Eric Whitehead**, age not available: (Sept. 18, 2024) The GDC told a TV station that Whitehead died after a fight with another inmate. Death certificate not in.

## **Terrell County Correctional Institution: 1 homicide**

**Logan Todd Peterson**, 27: (died Dec. 27, 2021) post-traumatic subarachnoid hemorrhage (bleeding in the space around the brain), assault

## **Valdosta State Prison: 11 homicides**

**Prince Leonard Blige**, 54: (died Feb. 12, 2020) stab wound to torso.

**Orvonta Tillman**, 36: (June 16, 2020) multiple sharp force penetrating trauma to thorax.

**Bobby Carpenter**, 31: (Sept. 9, 2020) stab wound to the chest.

**Hakeem Olajuwon Williams**, 27: (Feb. 28, 2022) stab wound to chest. A claim filed against the state alleged that an officer placed him in a cell while handcuffed and Williams was attacked by a cellmate.

**Dexter Jarrod Burnett**, 35: (Sept. 16, 2022) stab wound to torso. In February 2024, a prisoner was indicted on a charge of killing Burnett with a homemade knife.

**DyLance Montex Lampkin**, 41: (July 30, 2023) multiple stab wounds to torso.

**Quoesent Lamont Bostwick**, 35: (July 31, 2023) homicide. Death certificate not in.

**Rufus Shawn Lane**, 55: (Jan. 13, 2024) ligature strangulation, found dead in cell. GDC incident data shows gang member involved.

**Ricky Bernard Harris**, 39: (Feb. 20, 2024) sharp force face and neck trauma.

**Melvin Towns**, 37: (April 21, 2024) GDC incident report shows a homicide on this date during a disruptive event and that six inmates were disciplined in connection with it. Warrants show he was stabbed with homemade knives. Death certificate not in.

**Shane Griffith**, 32: (May 30, 2024) blunt force trauma to head, torso and extremities. Warrants show that he was attacked by 11 other prisoners, who beat him with their fists and a pole, kicked him, stood on his chest and placed a burning object on his body.

## **Ware State Prison: 10 homicides**

**Robert Lee Wilson III**, 31: (died July 17, 2020) multiple stab wounds. Incident report shows 16 other inmates involved, seven of whom were injured.

**Christopher Arnett Rawls**, 32: (Sept. 5, 2020) strangulation.

**Christopher Eli Gresham**, 39: (Sept. 30, 2021) stab wounds to back and lower extremities. A Sept. 30, 2021, incident report of a homicide says three other inmates were involved.

**Kyle Anthony Strother**, 31: (June 5, 2022) stab wound to chest.

**Va'Darian LaVianta Carr**, 26: (Sept. 18, 2022) stab wound to chest and back.

**Alfonso Marquez Moore**, 30: (June 19, 2023) blunt impact injuries to head.

**Thomas Jerome McCoy**, 38: (Oct. 7, 2023) stab wound to chest. Three other prisoners were involved in the incident, GDC data show.

**Leonardo Lamonte Anderson**, 49: (April 20, 2024) multiple stab wounds; assault by other with sharp object.

**Christopher Michael Drake Taylor**, 33: (May 28, 2024) stab wound to torso.

**Samuel Keith Ellis**, 31: (Aug. 1, 2024) multiple sharp force injuries. Incident report data shows a homicide with three inmates involved.

## **Washington State Prison: 4 homicides**

**Marquis Reshawn Jefferson, 26:** *(died May 12, 2022)* stab wounds to torso and arm. A May 11, 2022, incident report of a homicide says four other inmates were involved.

**Michael Lee Jackson, 60:** *(Aug. 17, 2022)* multiple blunt force injuries in the setting of hypertensive cardiovascular disease. Incident report shows two other inmates were involved.

**Jacob Cole Henson, 31:** *(April 23, 2024)* multiple gunshot wounds. He was fatally shot after getting into a fight with a GDC officer who had taken him to a hospital to be treated for injuries he suffered in a stabbing incident earlier that day, according to police.

**Devonte Tiger Williams, 26:** *(Aug. 9, 2024)* multiple sharp force injuries to torso, head and neck

## **Wheeler Correctional Facility: 1 homicide**

**LaParrish Dawayne London, 30:** *(died March 21, 2023)* stab wound to chest.

## **Wilcox State Prison: 3 homicides**

**James Forest Williams, 43:** *(died Oct. 3, 2022)* blunt and sharp force injuries to head, torso and extremities.

**Arthur Williams, 55:** *(July 18, 2024)* Incident report data shows a homicide with two inmates involved. Death certificate not in.

**Mariol Juante Rawls, 41:** *(Aug. 27, 2024)* Incident report data shows nine offenders involved and a homemade weapon. Death certificate not in.



# Rare killings of women come to light as Georgia prisons set homicide record

Female prisoners in mental health unit were strangled to death; in men's prisons, others died this year from stabbings, strangulation, beatings

[Link](#)



**At least 43 people have been homicide victims in Georgia prisons so far in 2024. Among the victims verified by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution are a 23-year-old woman and a 61-year-old woman incarcerated at Lee Arrendale State Prison. Sherry Joyce and Hallie Reed were strangled, and authorities have charged another prisoner, Jeanni Geuea with murdering both of the women. Illustration by ArLuther Lee | AJC**

By [Danny Robbins](#) and [Carrie Teegardin](#)

Oct 17, 2024

When a prisoner at Lee Arrendale State Prison was found dead in her cell this spring, Hallie Reed called her mother in a panic. Reed was in the same mental health unit as the dead woman, Sherry Joyce, and she told her mother that she'd asked to be placed in protective custody and been turned down.

Reed then abruptly ended the call, leaving her mother, Samantha Reed, to wonder just what had made her 23-year-old daughter so fearful.

Within days, Samantha had another call, this one from the warden. Hallie, too, was dead.

Months passed with no explanation from the Georgia Department of Corrections about what happened to Reed and Joyce, but recently filed arrest warrants reveal a stunning explanation. The warrants allege that both women were strangled to death by the same person, a 22-year-old prisoner, Jeanni Geuea, who had only recently arrived in the mental health unit.

According to the warrants, Reed and Joyce were killed eight days apart in late April and early May, raising concerns that the GDC failed to take the necessary steps to protect the most vulnerable women in its care — those with significant mental health issues confined to a unit that's supposed to be closely monitored.

“I have a bigger problem with the GDC than I do with the girl who may actually have done this,” Samantha Reed said. “They didn’t do their job. The people there to protect Hallie failed miserably.”

Homicides inside women’s prisons are extraordinarily rare, and the killings at Lee Arrendale, the largest of the state’s four facilities for women, add an alarming twist to an unprecedented year of violent deaths within the Department of Corrections. Already in 2024, there have been at least 43 homicides in Georgia prisons, surpassing the 2023 total of 38, then a record for the state, according to an analysis by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

The new homicide numbers show once again how stabbings, beatings and strangulations play out with alarming frequency in [facilities that are so understaffed](#) that often no correctional officers are around to intervene.

“Prisons do not have to be violent places — they should not be, and these numbers far exceed anything else going on in the country, anywhere, with the possible exception of [Alabama](#),” said Michele Deitch, director of the [Prison and Jail Innovation Lab](#) at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. “This is not normal. This is not acceptable. And this is indicative of a very toxic, dysfunctional culture and management of this agency.”

In response to questions from the AJC about the record number of homicides, the GDC said prison system staff members have worked diligently to run safe facilities and blamed the deaths on the violent nature, gang affiliations and mental health issues of those in custody.

“Individuals who come into our system with violent offenses rarely give up their criminal activities,” GDC spokesperson Lori Benoit said in a statement.

The AJC also asked the GDC for information about the circumstances of the deaths and why steps weren’t taken to prevent Geuea from allegedly killing twice within days at the Alto facility. It also sought an answer for what may have gone wrong at Lee Arrendale, especially as it pertains to the protocols in a mental health unit.

Benoit didn’t respond to those questions, nor did she provide an explanation as to why the questions weren’t answered.

The GDC’s lack of transparency on the killings has been particularly frustrating for Reed and Joyce’s families, both of whom were in the dark for months about how their loved ones had died.

Samantha Reed didn’t know until August, when the agency’s chief legal officer, Jennifer Ammons, responded to an email Reed sent. Ammons acknowledged that Hallie Reed’s death was being investigated as a homicide and that the GDC was investigating whether Joyce’s death was connected.

Members of Joyce’s family had no idea what was going on until they were contacted by an AJC reporter working on this story in late August, and they still hadn’t heard from the GDC when Geuea was arrested in late September. After being told by Lee Arrendale’s warden, Carmon Edwards, that Joyce, 61, had “passed,” they assumed she died peacefully from a heart attack. Learning otherwise — and learning it from someone outside the GDC — has left them shocked and angry.

“You would think since they put those warrants out they would contact the family and say, ‘We’ve got a different story to tell you now,’” said Joyce’s brother, Dean Joyce. “But they haven’t.”

Dean Joyce is himself a former GDC employee, having worked 25 years for the agency as a construction supervisor and manager before retiring in April. That the GDC failed to keep his family apprised of developments in the investigation of his sister’s death isn’t a surprise, he said.

“You don’t know how [corrupt](#) the Department of Corrections is until you’re there,” he said. “You don’t understand that nobody cares.” The attitude within the agency, he said, is “just let me get through this day here and we’ll worry about everything else tomorrow.”

The surprising deaths of the women came amid a deadly summer in which by the end of August the state had exceeded last year’s record of 38 homicides. At least 20 prisoners and a [kitchen worker](#) were killed from June through September, the AJC found.

In March, [the GDC stopped releasing initial manner](#) of death findings in its monthly mortality reports and will no longer reveal whether individual deaths are homicides. But using death certificates, arrest warrants, coroner information, GDC incident data and family accounts, the AJC has continued to identify how inmates have died.

While the agency won’t reveal names, Benoit said in her statement that the GDC had investigated 46 prisoners’ deaths this year as possible homicides as of Oct. 11.

The killings of Reed and Joyce represent another grim milestone: Georgia now has had three women prisoners killed in two years, and all three were killed in Lee Arrendale’s mental health dorm. The three killings push the state into an extraordinary spotlight that suggests deep lapses in security protocols and the approach to handling people with significant mental health issues.

The mental health unit at Lee Arrendale, known as A Unit, is the only one maintained by the GDC for incarcerated women classified as Level III or Level IV, meaning their impairment prevents them from being housed with the general population and requires special treatment.

The other woman killed in A Unit, Angela Anderson, 39, was also strangled to death. A 41-year-old inmate, Leticia Land, has been arrested but court records show she had not yet been indicted for the killing, which occurred in September 2022.

The last available data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that only nine women died as a result of homicides in state prisons across the country between 2001 and 2019. As for Georgia’s prisons, the data compiled by the AJC, covering 2015 to present, shows that no women were killed until Anderson’s death in September 2022.

“Homicides in women’s prisons are extremely rare, and the thought that the same person could have allegedly killed two different fellow prisoners in a span of days is mind boggling, and it really speaks to a failure of appropriate management of the situation,” said Deitch, of the University of Texas.

GDC withholds most details on deaths

Separated in age by nearly 40 years, Joyce and Reed had little in common beyond both having mental health issues that put them in A Unit and the circumstances that now surround their deaths.

Joyce grew up in Mount Vernon, spent four years in the Air Force and then descended into a life dominated by drugs, according to her family. She was sentenced to life in prison at 28 for taking part in an armed robbery in Toombs County that left a man dead, and she was eventually found to be suffering from schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder, family members said.

Reed, raised on military bases and later in Fort Oglethorpe, was a teen when she was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, according to her mother. She had been incarcerated since 2022 when a series of incidents, including an altercation in the Catoosa County jail, resulted in a five-year sentence for violating her probation from a traffic offense.

The warrants for Geuea's arrest contain few details. They simply allege that she strangled Joyce to death on April 27 and did the same to Reed on May 5. In both cases, Geuea is charged with felony murder, aggravated assault and riot in a penal institution.

At the time of the killings, Geuea had only served two months of a two-year prison sentence for violating probation in Clinch County. The sentence was imposed after Geuea was arrested for new offenses while on probation for making terroristic threats, an incident stemming from an argument with another woman.

Geuea's mother, Tammy Palmer, said she was shocked to learn of her daughter's arrest for the prison killings. "This is not our Jeanni," Palmer said, adding that her daughter has mental health issues but never did anything to indicate she was capable of murder.

Palmer said learning of her daughter's arrest has raised all sorts of questions, such as what exactly happened, how her daughter's care was being managed and what the system did in response to the first death. "I feel like they failed all three of them," she said.

The GDC's publicly released incident reports for the two deaths, provided to the AJC by the agency in response to requests under the Georgia Open Records Act, are also short on details. As the GDC has done with all such reports, it redacted entire pages, citing a statute that allows the agency to withhold details from open investigations.

The incident reports identify certain "involved" staff, but it's unclear who, if anyone, was on duty and if the prison was adequately staffed when the killings occurred. GDC staffing records show that 44% of the correctional officer positions at Lee Arrendale were vacant in April. Joyce was killed on a Saturday and Reed on a Sunday, and several people with direct knowledge of the prison say staffing is stretched even thinner on weekends.

"That was the main thing about being in the mental health unit, that Sherry would get 24-7 care and observation," said Sheila Clark, one of Joyce's sisters. "Somebody's not doing their job."

Hallie Reed's last sequence of calls to her mother provide some measure of insight.

Samantha Reed said Hallie called her on the day of Joyce's death to say she was afraid she'd be blamed for it. Samantha said she asked Hallie who would possibly blame her. According to Samantha, Hallie replied, "guards," and then ended the call.

Because Hallie often got off the phone that way, Samantha said she put the matter out of her mind, just as she eventually dismissed Hallie's comment about wanting to be placed in protective custody.

Now she believes her troubled daughter was, in her own way, signaling that she knew her life was in danger and nobody at the prison wanted to do anything about it.

"They'd put her in protective custody before," Samantha Reed said. "Why not this time? They either should have moved her or (Geuea). You don't leave a situation like that alone until you find the truth."

# Georgia prison system engages in deception as crisis builds

**Pattern of misinformation emerges from GDC officials in supermax prison lawsuit and DOJ report.**

[Link](#)



**A prisoner looks out of his cell in the Special Management Unit at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison in this 2015 file photo. In a damning ruling, U.S. District Judge Marc Treadwell wrote in April that state prison officials showed no desire or intention to make the required changes to SMU's solitary confinement practices. (David Goldman/AP 2015 file)**

By [Danny Robbins](#) and [Carrie Teegardin](#)

Dec 12, 2024

U.S. District Judge Marc T. Treadwell had seen enough. The defendants in a long-running civil case had come into his courtroom and repeatedly claimed to have lived up to the terms of a settlement when they clearly had not. He did not mince words.

“The Court has long passed the point where it can assume that even sworn statements from the defendants are truthful,” the judge wrote in an August order.

The target of his frustration: the Georgia Department of Corrections.

Questions about honesty and transparency aren’t new for the state’s largest law enforcement agency. But amid increased scrutiny due to record homicides and other criminal activities in its prisons, GDC officials have taken the lack of candor to a new level. They have repeatedly presented false or misleading information to federal investigators, state lawmakers and even a federal judge, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation has found.



Falsified and backdated documents, false statements and flawed data are some of the tactics the agency has employed in attempting to hide its dysfunction, the AJC found. The GDC also has moved to block access to potentially damaging information.

Through it all, GDC officials have denied that the prison system is in crisis, with Commissioner Tyrone Oliver going so far as to tell state lawmakers that news accounts of undisclosed homicides and record deaths were “propaganda.”

“Is the Department of Corrections being fully transparent with everything that’s going on?” state Sen. Randy Robertson, R-Cataula, asked during an August hearing.

“Absolutely,” Oliver responded.

But evidence suggests that the GDC has played games with the truth.



**Members of the Georgia State Senate's Department of Corrections Facilities Study Committee met in August as part of a series of meetings held to study Georgia's prison system. The committee was created by the General Assembly to study the GDC's ability to operate secure and safe facilities and recommend any legislation needed to protect the department's employees and about 50,000 people in GDC custody. (Courtesy of Georgia Senate)**

The most glaring example is when the GDC in March stopped including the preliminary cause of death in its monthly mortality reports identifying each prisoner who had died. That made it difficult to know how many prisoners were being killed and how many had committed suicide. Even in cases in which prisoners have clearly been beaten or stabbed to death, the GDC now lists no initial finding for how those prisoners died — information it had routinely provided for years.

Misinformation was also a theme of a U.S. Department of Justice [report](#) on conditions inside the state's prisons. The report, issued in October, says the GDC refused to release some records and put restrictions on how and when federal investigators could visit prisons. As a result, the investigation became “unnecessarily contentious and lengthy,” the report says. The DOJ also described how in the days before federal investigators visited prisons, the GDC hurriedly fixed buildings that had languished in disrepair.

An even stronger rebuke came from Treadwell, of the U.S. District Court in Macon, when in April he [issued a contempt order](#) citing the GDC for [making false statements or misrepresentations](#) about its efforts to comply with the 2019 settlement of a lawsuit over conditions in the agency's supermax prison, the Special

Management Unit in Jackson. The GDC's defiance went on for more than four years, while agency officials were thumbing their noses at the court and never making the changes they had agreed to, the judge wrote.

"As the end of the injunction's term neared, it became clear to the Court that the defendants, in effect, were running a four-corner offense and had no desire or intention to comply with the Court's injunction; they would stall until the injunction expired," Treadwell wrote in his contempt order.

With the contempt order, Treadwell was ending that game. He'd given Georgia the benefit of the doubt for years. That was now over.

Yet even after Treadwell issued his order, the attorneys representing the prisoners in the case obtained documents that again raised serious questions about the GDC's credibility.



Apart from the concern that the defendants didn't seem to grasp that cancelling out-of-cell time for mental health evaluations was a violation of the injunction, the Court was concerned that Holt blamed staffing issues for the improper cancellation of out-of-cell time. Recall the exchange with Holt at the February 2023 status conference:

**THE COURT:** Well, let's just pose the question directly to Mr. Holt.... Are staffing issues preventing compliance or interfering or making compliance difficult?  
**MR. HOLT:** They are not.

Doc. 384 at 23:11-15.<sup>52</sup> When Holt gave the Court that assurance, the defendants, as the Court had just learned, had a "practice" of cancelling out-of-cell time because of staffing issues. The Court has long suspected that the defendants', particularly Holts', assurances of adequate staff were based not on fact but on the knowledge that the injunction mandates sufficient staffing and, thus, the admission that the SMU was short-staffed was tantamount to an admission that the defendants were violating the injunction.

**In his April contempt order, U.S. District Judge Marc T. Treadwell writes that claims made by GDC Assistant Commissioner Ahmed Holt (left) about the agency having adequate staffing amounts to a false statement. Credit: U.S. District Court filing**

Looking into the unexpected death of the suit's lead plaintiff, Ricardo Daughtry, the attorneys found records showing that he had attended "table time" outside his cell, a requirement of the settlement for prisoners to spend time in a common room at a restraint table. But, in fact, by then he had already been pronounced dead.

"To state the obvious: there is no way R.D. could have participated in out-of-cell time after his death," the attorneys wrote in a court filing.

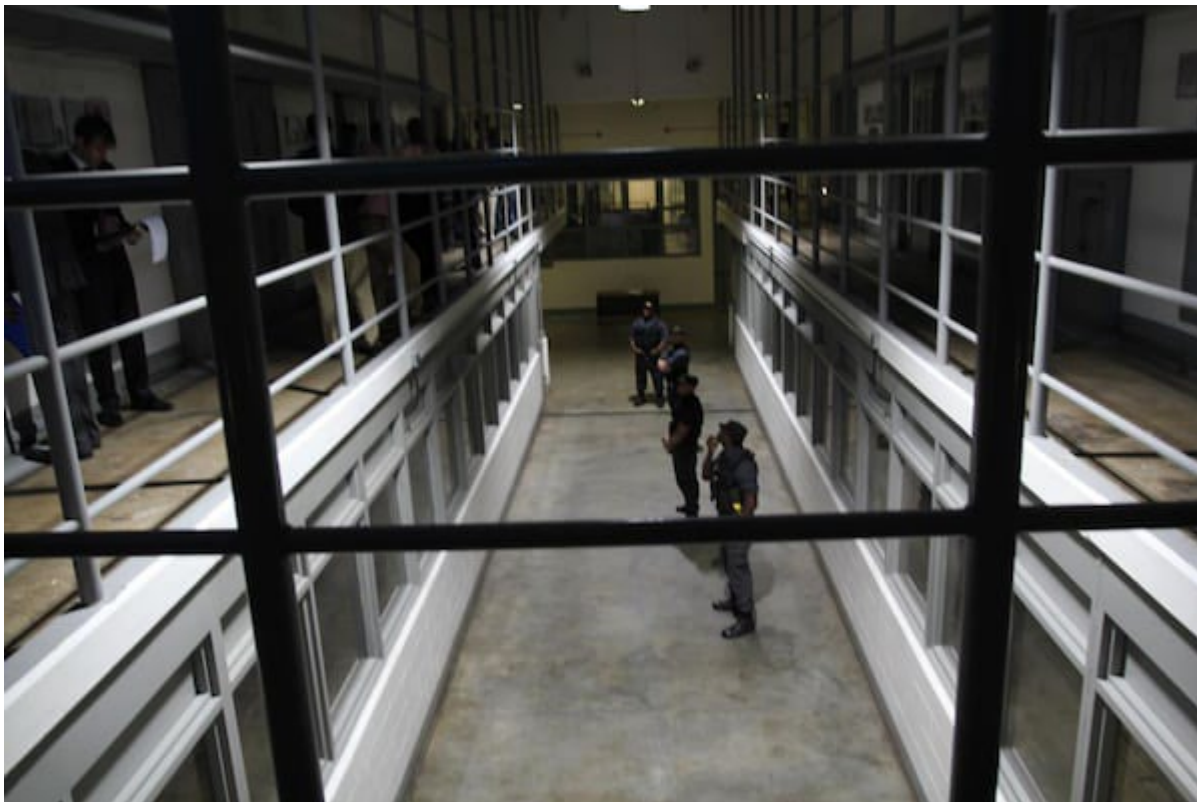
### **'Failure to comply'**

The Special Management Unit case began in 2015 when a prisoner filed a handwritten lawsuit challenging his placement in one of the unit's solitary-confinement cells. The unit, commonly known as the SMU, is where the GDC houses some of its toughest prisoners, many of whom are there because they committed new crimes while serving their sentences.

The prisoner who filed the lawsuit, Timothy Gumm, lived in a cell the size of a parking space for five years, with almost no time outside, after he was accused of being part of an escape attempt. Gumm denied the allegations, and a disciplinary report related to the incident was overturned after the case was reviewed by higher-level prison officials. Even so, Gumm remained locked away in the SMU, losing 50 pounds from not getting proper food and suffering physical, mental and emotional anguish and psychological trauma, he wrote in his initial legal claim.

A magistrate judge felt Gumm's arguments had merit and appointed highly regarded attorneys from the Southern Center for Human Rights to represent him and others in the unit.

A leading expert on prison conditions and solitary confinement, Craig Haney, was brought in to study the unit, and he described the SMU as "one of the harshest and [most draconian](#)" solitary confinement facilities he had ever seen. He described conversations with those held in the unit, took pictures and included chilling accounts in his report.



**In his expert report about the Special Management Unit, Craig Haney says the "atmosphere inside E Wing was bedlam-like, as chaotic and out-of-control as any such unit I have seen in decades of conducting such evaluations." (U.S. District Court filing)**

"The atmosphere inside E Wing was bedlam-like, as chaotic and out-of-control as any such unit I have seen in decades of conducting such evaluations," Haney, a psychology professor at the University of California-Santa Cruz, wrote. "When I entered this housing unit I was met with a cacophony of prisoner screams and cries for help. The noise was deafening."

The findings [resulted in a settlement](#) that called for sweeping changes. But what emerged exposed the willingness of the GDC to mislead a judge, make false statements in court and falsify documents.

Ahmed Holt, an assistant commissioner and former warden who has spent 23 years with the GDC, provided much of the testimony the agency used to make the case that it had complied with the settlement. In his 100-page contempt order, Treadwell made clear he found little of it believable.





**Haney noted that the outdoor exercise areas "are barren and restrictive; they consist of concrete-floored enclosed cages." (U.S. District Court filing)**



**Dr. Craig Haney noted in his report on the SMU that "The interiors of many of the cells were dirty and disheveled and reflect the desperate conditions of the men who lived inside them." (U.S. District Court filing)**

Holt swore in 2022 that prisoners were getting time out of their cells at tables. Evidence showed they were not. Holt said required educational programming was provided via televisions in cells. In fact, two entire wings of the unit had no TVs. Holt claimed that the unit had adequate staffing. Evidence strongly suggested otherwise.

“Even if Holt were a credible witness, and he is not, his vague excuses, with no supporting evidence, do not excuse the defendants’ failure to comply with the injunction,” the judge wrote in the order.

Treadwell also came down hard on the GDC for falsifying records purporting to show that prisoners were receiving regular reviews to chart their progress toward leaving the SMU.

The contempt order cited the testimony of a counselor who said she refused to sign review forms because she was asked to sign for prisoners who weren’t present. The counselor, Kendra McBurnie, testified that other counselors signed for inmates on her caseload when she wouldn’t do it.

Holt, with some understatement, admitted at the show cause hearing that “[t]here were some challenges with staffing as it related to education.” Doc. 344 at 49:12-13. But he claimed that the GDC “came up with a way to provide education via satellite” to the SMU on a “weekly” basis. *Id.* at 49:14-18. Perhaps Holt was the source for this representation in the defendants’ brief filed before the show cause hearing: “While there have been occasions when there have not been instructors available to offer out-of-cell programming, in-cell programming has continuously been offered to class members.” Docs. 325 at 16. That representation was not true—the evidence established that there was virtually no out-of-cell programming and that inmates in E- and F-Wings still did not have television access. See Docs. 340-11 at 109:5-20, 110:1-7; 340-16 at 91:8-14; 344 at 34:7-19, 34:23-35:4. Yet, there was evidence that door sheets for inmates in those wings falsely documented that programming was provided by television. Doc. 340-3 at

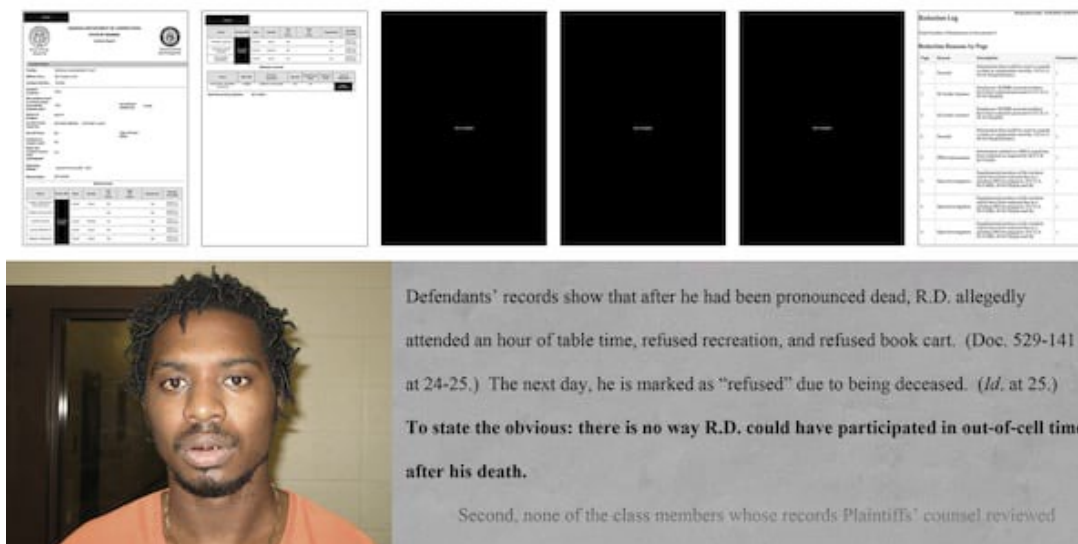
**U.S. District Judge Marc T. Treadwell, in a contempt order issued in April, expressed frustration over misrepresentations by GDC Assistant Commissioner Ahmed Holt and false documentation by the agency.**

Prisoners testified that they were instructed to sign the forms but not date them, “apparently,” Treadwell wrote, “to allow backdating so that it would appear that a review hearing was timely held.”

The case is still pending, and the judge appointed an independent monitor to report on compliance.

Asked by the AJC about Holt’s conduct in the case, the GDC said it believed he had testified accurately about one facet of the settlement — computer tablets that were supposed to be provided to prisoners but never were. The GDC’s response to the AJC’s questions did not address the many other issues that caused the judge to castigate Holt, one of the agency’s highest-ranking officials, for his misrepresentations.

In spite of the contempt order and its repeated examples of the GDC’s failure to comply with the settlement, an agency spokesperson asserted that the GDC was in compliance.



**The GDC's incident report regarding the death of inmate Ricardo Daughtry is heavily redacted of relevant details (top), including full pages that are blacked out. Attorneys from the Southern Center for Human Rights noted in a court filing that prison records claim that Daughtry was participating in "table time" outside his cell after he had been pronounced dead (bottom, emphasis theirs).**

“GDC continues to maintain that it has complied and continues to comply with almost every provision of the Settlement Agreement,” the spokesperson, Lori Benoit, wrote in an email.

Less than two months after Treadwell issued his blistering contempt order, Daughtry, 40, was found dead in his cell. Although GDC policy required that he be checked every 30 minutes, records obtained by his attorneys show that no one looked in on him for nearly seven hours before his body was discovered.

Moreover, not only do prison records show Daughtry attending “table time” after he was dead, they also show him refusing to take part in recreation or the book cart.

The GDC has released almost no information on Daughtry’s death, even to his attorneys, citing a pending autopsy and ongoing investigation. Six months later, his death remains a mystery.

## Shaping the narrative

Throughout 2023, the AJC exposed deep failures within the Department of Corrections. Widespread corruption has plagued the prison system, the AJC found, with hundreds of GDC employees arrested and fired for smuggling in drugs and other forms of contraband. The AJC also detailed [extreme understaffing](#), extensive [illicit drug use](#) by inmates, record numbers of [homicides and suicides](#) and large [criminal enterprises run by prisoners](#) that victimized people on the outside — even ordering that some be killed.

The AJC has continued to expose failures within the GDC throughout 2024, including findings of extreme violence, [stunning homicides](#) that suggest a complete breakdown in security and lawsuits over wrongful deaths that have [cost Georgia taxpayers millions](#).

GDC officials have repeatedly brushed off suggestions that the prison system is in crisis. But in the wake of the coverage, members of the Georgia General Assembly began asking questions.

The state Senate in March appointed a study committee to explore every aspect of the system and come up with recommendations for consideration in the legislative session that begins in January. In July, House Speaker Jon Burns, R-Newington, created a special subcommittee to be prepared to act on prison recommendations.



Appearing before the Senate committee in August, Oliver, the GDC commissioner, repeatedly described critical news articles as propaganda, including coverage of his decision to stop releasing initial cause of death information in monthly mortality reports.

Oliver testified that the decision was driven by a desire for accuracy and wasn't an effort to hide information.



**During hearings with the Georgia Senate study committee, GDC Commissioner Tyrone Oliver (center, with microphone) repeatedly described critical news articles as propaganda. Sitting with Oliver is Chief of Staff Alan Watson (in glasses) and Assistant Commissioner of Facilities Ahmed Holt (bottom left). (Georgia Senate)**

In defending his decision to the AJC earlier in the year, Oliver said the GDC's public reports would be updated once coroners made the official determinations for prisoners' causes of death, which can take as long as a year. However, when the AJC asked for the final death determinations from 2022 and 2023, GDC General Counsel Jennifer Ammons declined the request, saying the agency doesn't compile such a report and therefore didn't have to create one for the public.

Additionally, when the AJC and others request incident reports for prisoner deaths, the GDC [routinely blacks out entire pages](#), citing a variety of exemptions in the Georgia Open Records Act. In that way, the reports contain vastly less information than those routinely released by other law enforcement agencies and earlier GDC administrations.

At the August hearing, Oliver told lawmakers that the overall number of deaths within the prison system this year had been fairly typical. While he acknowledged that there were more homicides in 2024 than in prior years, he pushed back on the idea of a crisis.

"The propaganda out there that, you know, it's out of control and it's been, you know, we're hitting all these record highs," he said. "When you look at the total number of deaths, it's been remaining pretty consistent."

The numbers tell a different story. Deaths in the prison system are up across the board. By the end of October, more prisoners had died — 270 — than in each of the previous three years, according to an AJC analysis of the GDC's mortality reports. Georgia prisons are even on track to see more deaths in 2024 than in even the worst

year of the pandemic, 2020, when COVID was responsible for 72 of the 281 inmate deaths listed by the GDC, according to an AJC analysis of mortality reports and public death records.

The AJC has also determined — using coroner reports, other public records and information from families — the identities of at least 51 prisoners so far in 2024 who have been victims of homicides. The total could be significantly higher, with many suspicious deaths still under investigation. The 2024 homicide total to date tops last year's record of 39, which was itself a big jump over prior years. GDC facilities had only eight homicides for the entirety of 2017 and nine for all of 2018.

### **Georgia's Special Management Unit**

The 192-bed unit known as the SMU is Georgia's supermax prison. The unit is located in Jackson on the same prison complex as the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison, which is the first stop for most male prisoners entering the system. The GDCP complex also includes Georgia's Death Row.

The SMU is the state's most restrictive prison. At all times, prisoners are locked inside their cells, outdoor cages, shower stalls or visitation booths. Or, they are handcuffed to tables or placed in cuffs and leg irons to be moved around.

Everyone in the unit is in solitary confinement. The unit has six wings with 32 single-man cells in each wing. An incentive-based program is supposed to allow those who meet goals to leave the unit, but plaintiffs in a long-running lawsuit over conditions at the SMU say the program often doesn't work as described.

"Nobody expects that there should be a death rate of zero. Everyone understands that prisons are hard places to run and house a lot of people, so there will be mortality that the administration has to grapple with," said Aaron Littman, an assistant professor at the UCLA School of Law and the faculty director of UCLA's Prisoners' Rights Clinic. "But what we have (in Georgia) is a stunning level of it accompanied by a stunning refusal to pull back the curtain. That's pretty concerning."

In its response to this story, the GDC pushed back on the notion that it was covering up anything related to in-custody deaths. Although it doesn't identify which prisoners are believed to be victims of homicides or name prisons where the deaths occurred, GDC said it has released the number of cases so far this year being investigated as homicides, including in August to the Senate committee studying the system. "How can you assert that we are not transparent when we presented those numbers in an open, public meeting?" agency spokesperson Benoit said in her email, referring to legislative testimony.

She went on to say that the GDC had provided voluminous amounts of information to the AJC over the past two years and had demonstrated that the agency and its leadership are transparent about what's happening inside the prison system.

### **Unfounded and unsubstantiated**

In its October report, the Department of Justice described conditions in Georgia's prisons as horrific and inhumane.

"People are assaulted, stabbed, raped and killed or left to languish inside facilities that are woefully understaffed. Inmates are maimed and tortured, relegated to an existence of fear, filth and not so benign neglect," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke in announcing the findings.

The DOJ was particularly pointed in its criticism of how the GDC deals with allegations of sexual assault, which are supposed to be investigated in accordance with the federal Prisoner Rape Elimination Act, commonly known as PREA. "Defective at every level" is how the DOJ described the GDC's investigations.

Among the cases cited by the DOJ was the attempted rape of a transgender woman. It was ruled unfounded due to a lack of penetration even though the perpetrator entered the victim's cell with his penis in his hand. Another was the case of a prisoner who claimed to have been raped at knifepoint by his cellmate. It was ruled unsubstantiated even though the victim was found to have bruising and seminal fluid in his anal area.

That didn't stop GDC leaders from touting their PREA procedures when state Rep. Scott Holcomb brought up the subject at the first meeting of the special House subcommittee on state prisons on Nov. 13.

Holcomb, D-Atlanta, wanted to know more about the GDC's data for 2023, which showed that only 7% of the 819 PREA allegations it investigated that year had been substantiated. How, he wondered, were so many cases unfounded and unsubstantiated?

Holt, the assistant GDC commissioner whose credibility was questioned by a federal judge, quickly explained that all GDC facilities undergo an assessment for PREA "from the federal level each year" and all had "passed successfully." Many, in fact, have received "high ratings or accolades," he said.

Oliver then noted that the GDC investigates all alleged PREA offenses and that its agents receive the same training as those who work for the GBI.

Neither mentioned the data or any concerns about the investigations behind it.

In fact, GDC officials learned that their PREA investigations were flawed in May 2022 — more than two years before the DOJ issued its report — when consultants retained by the agency made that very point.

The consultants, PREA Auditors of America, said they examined 388 of the agency's investigative files and determined that none met the law's standards. The "discrepancies" cited in the report, recently obtained by the AJC from the GDC in response to an open records request, included instances in which witnesses were identified but not interviewed and cases in which the final outcomes were decided on the investigators' opinions and not the evidence.

**Total Allegations**

During calendar year 2023, there were 819 PREA allegations reported at our GDC operated and contracted facilities. Of those 819 allegations, 369 (45%) were unsubstantiated; 330 (40%) were unfounded; 63 (8%) were deemed not PREA; 57 (7%) were substantiated; and none are pending investigation.

**Key Findings – PREA Compliance**

After an extensive review of 388 investigative files, it was determined that none of GDC investigation files met all of the standards on the two checklists, which is a requirement for a successful PREA audit.

**Credit: GDC and PREA Auditors of America**

**The GDC's data on sexual assault allegations in 2023 found that only 7% of allegations that year were substantiated (top). However, a group of consultants in 2022 reviewed 388 GDC investigation files and found that not a single one of them met the law's standards (bottom).**

Brenda Smith, a law professor at American University in Washington, D.C., who was one of the members of the commission that developed the law's language, said 7% is a "very, very low" percentage of substantiated cases. But if a prison system relies on flawed investigations, it will have flawed data and a false picture of how it deals with sexual misconduct, she said.

“People are trying to keep their jobs, so if I’m the commissioner of corrections, I’m really not out there trying to put out that I’m having all these incidents,” she said. “But what you can do is say, ‘We have discovered things,’ in the same way you talk about graft, in the same way you talk about people being honest in the hours they claim to be working. It’s all about integrity, and this is another breach of integrity — maybe the greatest one, which is harming people for whom you have legal responsibility.”

In response to the DOJ’s investigation, GDC officials said the prisons operate in a manner that exceeds constitutional requirements. The DOJ’s findings, the GDC said, “reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the current challenges of operating any prison system.”

## **Moving ahead**

When the General Assembly convenes in January, lawmakers must decide what portrait of the Department of Corrections they see. Will they believe an agency that says it’s on the right path and brush off reports of crisis as propaganda? Or will they act as if it’s a failing agency that leaves prisoners and the public at risk?

If lawmakers look at the most troubled part of the system, they will learn that at most of Georgia’s high-security prisons two-thirds of the correctional officer positions are unfilled. The AJC has reported on fatal beatings that go on for hours, criminal enterprises that continue to run unchecked and mental health units where suicides and homicides are frequent and kept hidden or unexplained to both the public and the families of those who died.

Advocates say lawmakers should insist on honesty and transparency from an agency that spends more than \$1.4 billion a year, especially when it comes to the record levels of deaths.

“The GDC has gone from publicizing deaths — as they should as a state agency — to shielding the public from the unprecedented amount of death in our prisons,” said Atteeyah Hollie, deputy director of the Southern Center for Human Rights and one of the attorneys working on the SMU case. “Having abandoned its previous commitment to openness and transparency, Georgia now conceals the fact that its prisons are incapable of providing for people’s basic needs. We should not allow state agencies to hide in the shadows.”

She said transparency is particularly important now, given what’s going on inside the prison walls.

“I don’t think I’ve seen during my time at the Southern Center — and I’ve been here for almost two decades — this level of suffering in Georgia’s prisons or this level of indifference by the agency charged with their care,” Hollie said.

Haney, the expert who initially evaluated the SMU, said it’s disheartening and frustrating that the GDC didn’t improve the shocking and deplorable conditions he saw in the unit and then wasn’t truthful in court.

“You would think public officials ought to have some allegiance to the truth,” he said. “If they’re not doing things that they’re supposed to do, they can offer explanations for why they’re not, but they at least need to be honest about what’s happening. And instead, apparently, the memo is ‘Just lie until you get caught.’”

# Georgia prisons: A look back at the AJC's investigation of corruption, dysfunction, criminal rings and violence

[Link](#)



**Over the last year and a half, an investigation by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has revealed stories about corruption and negligence within Georgia Department of Corrections facilities. (Stephen B. Morton for the AJC 2023)**

By [Carrie Teegardin](#) and [Danny Robbins](#)

Dec 12, 2024

A disgraced warden accused of helping prisoners run a criminal scheme. Hundreds of corrupt guards fired for smuggling contraband. Multimillion-dollar heists run from Georgia's most secure prison. Massive prison-based drug rings. High-security prisons run routinely with a third of the correctional staff they need. Record homicides. A blistering contempt order. A damning federal report.

Over the last year and a half, [an investigation by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) has revealed these stories — and many more — about the Georgia Department of Corrections.



## Corruption on the inside



Credit: HYOSUB SHIN / AJC

The Georgia Diagnostic and Classification State Prison in Jackson was featured in the AJC's "Inside Job" investigative project. (Hyosub Shin/AJC)

Wave after wave of Georgia prison employees have become criminals themselves — smuggling in contraband or allowing others to do it and at times pocketing payoffs in the thousands, [the AJC found in an investigation](#) that identified more than 350 dirty guards, nurses, cooks and even high-ranking officers. The widespread corruption has fueled violence inside the prisons and at times enabled stunning crimes victimizing people on the outside. Among those arrested was Smith State Prison warden [Brian Adams](#). Warrants allege that the ex-warden was paid for being part of a massive contraband scheme run by the Yves Saint Laurent Squad, headed by a prisoner named [Nathan Weekes](#). Weekes has been charged with calling for the hits that resulted in [three killings](#), including the deaths of a beloved 88-year-old resident of Glennville and of a former correctional officer, [Jessica Gerling](#), whose journey from Iowa farm girl to murder victim was detailed by the AJC.



## Negligence and incompetence



**Brian Dennis Adams, former Smith State Prison warden, faces charges in a GBI corruption investigation into the prison. (Channel 2 Action News)**

An AJC investigation revealed in 2023 that a Georgia prison inmate [lay dead in his bunk for five days](#) in early April — his body stuffed inside a mattress and decomposing — before anyone on the prison staff responded. The circumstances surrounding the death of 71-year-old Anthony Zino at Smith State Prison represented a dramatic example of the negligence and incompetence that have gripped the Georgia Department of Corrections in recent years. When the Tattnall County coroner finally was called to the prison, Zino's body was so badly decomposed that it was leaking fluid and emitting a powerful smell, and two body bags were needed to remove it.

## The prisoner who stole millions



**While he was an inmate at Georgia's most secure facility, Arthur Lee Cofield Jr. stole \$11 million from the Charles Schwab account of billionaire movie producer Sidney Kimmel. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

The AJC broke the story of Arthur Lee Cofield Jr., who [entered prison](#) for his role in a bungled bank robbery in Douglasville when he was still a teenager. Within the Georgia Department of Corrections, he became an [astonishingly adept scammer](#) who, from inside Georgia's most secure facility, stole \$11 million from the Charles Schwab account of billionaire movie producer Sidney Kimmel, turned the money into gold coins, hired a private plane to fly the treasure to Atlanta and used a portion to buy a \$4.4 million mansion in Buckhead.

## Drug trafficking operations



**A Georgia Department of Corrections investigation discovered a Valdosta inmate was using drones to deliver contraband, including drugs and guns, to prisons. (Georgia Department of Corrections)**

[Overdose deaths spiked](#) in Georgia prisons — places that are supposed to be drug-free zones — the AJC found in 2023. The AJC investigation discovered that drugs are plentiful, in part, because prisoners can run massive drug rings within the Georgia Department of Corrections. From 2015 to 2024, the AJC found, prosecutors have filed [28 major cases](#) involving drug trafficking operations run from inside more than two dozen Georgia prisons. The drug operations can empower prisoners, who get rich from the schemes and can bribe officers to either bring in phones or drugs or become part of the operations that often have ties to violence or fatal overdoses inside and outside state prisons. The cases underscore the pervasive gang activity in the state's prisons.

## A record number of homicides



**Pallbearers carry the casket of Marquis Jefferson. He was killed at Washington State Prison in May 2022 during a fight that involved multiple inmates. (Courtesy)**

The AJC tracked a record-breaking number of prison homicides in 2023, combined with a stunning lack of staff at Georgia's high-security prisons. As of August 2023, 70% or more of the correctional officer jobs were vacant at eight of the prisons the GDC operates. With so few staff, and with so many prisoners affiliated with gangs, almost anything can happen, especially in prisons overflowing with drugs, cellphones and weapons. The homicides included a correctional officer, Robert Clark, who was stabbed to death in October 2023 at Smith State Prison. Not long after his brother's murder at Washington State Prison in 2022, Riheem Jefferson received an Instagram message with a video shot by someone on the inside. It showed four prisoners carrying [Marquis Jefferson's bloodied body](#), like pallbearers, from a cell to the door of their dorm, trying to get someone's attention. No guards were around to stop the violence — or even notice that a large, deadly brawl

had broken out. “My brother had no chance,” Riheem said. The AJC has identified the prisoners [killed in homicides](#), with details, from 2020 through 2023, and [revealed graphic video](#), shot by prisoners, of some of the violence.

## The AJC reveals obscured homicides



**Shane Dillon Griffith was killed on May 30, 2024, at Valdosta State Prison where he was incarcerated on a probation violation. (Courtesy)**

In early 2024, with Georgia prisons on pace to set yet another grim record for homicides, the Department of Corrections decided to [stop issuing reports](#) on how inmates are dying. The GDC took the step after including the initial cause of death information in its monthly mortality reports for years. But the AJC worked to [continue to track homicides](#), resorting to a variety of other records and sources. The AJC documented a stunning increase in homicides throughout 2024, including the death of a [kitchen worker who was shot and killed](#) by an inmate and a [series of deaths at Valdosta State Prison](#), where the warden had been fired, a group of officers had been arrested and 80% of correctional officer positions were vacant. [Shane Dillon Griffith](#) was among those killed. The AJC found that Griffith’s beating started after 11 on the night of May 29 and may have lasted until 5:30 the next morning. He had nowhere to run and no one to turn to for help as he was punched, kicked, stomped, beaten with poles and shoes, whipped with a belt and burned. Eleven inmates have been charged in his death. The AJC also revealed [two homicides](#), just days apart, allegedly carried out by the same prisoner within a mental health unit at a women’s prison. “This is not normal. This is not acceptable. And this is indicative of a very toxic, dysfunctional culture and management of this agency,” a national expert on prisons told the AJC.

## 'Flagrant violations,' dire warnings



**A federal judge found that state prison officials willfully disregarded requirements to improve deplorable conditions inside the high-security Special Management Unit prison. (U.S. District Court filing)**

Throughout 2024, the AJC reported that the Georgia Department of Corrections started attracting new scrutiny from officials as even more troubles were revealed. In April, a frustrated federal judge issued a [blistering 100-page contempt order](#) finding that state prison officials willfully disregarded requirements to improve deplorable conditions inside the high-security Special Management Unit prison. “Because of the defendants’ longstanding and flagrant violations of the Court’s injunction, the Court finds that coercive sanctions are necessary to compel compliance,” the judge wrote as he imposed fines and installed an independent monitor. Lawmakers expressed concerns about a lack of security in the prisons and took action by [increasing spending](#) and appointing a special [study committee](#). Gov. Brian Kemp [hired consultants](#) to conduct a deep study of the prison system. A district attorney warned that prison conditions [threaten public safety](#) in Georgia. In October, a long-awaited [report from the U.S. Department of Justice](#) found excessive violence, rampant sexual assaults, gang-run facilities and other startling conditions in an out-of-control Georgia state prison system. “People are assaulted, stabbed, raped and killed or left to languish inside facilities that are woefully understaffed,” said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division when announcing the findings, during an afternoon news conference.

### The prison system’s perspective

The Georgia Department of Corrections has attributed violence within the prison system to a significant proportion of the prison population having violent offense convictions, gang affiliations and mental health conditions. The agency has also repeatedly said corrupt staff members account for only a fraction of the contraband problem. Drone drops and items thrown over prison walls, officials say, are responsible for the majority of the phones, drugs, weapons and other types of contraband that make it into Georgia’s prisons.

*This story has been updated to reflect responses from the Georgia Department of Corrections.*