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'No One Feels Safe Here': Life in Alabama's Prisons

Four men inside diagnose a hellscape the Department of Justice called cruel and unusual.

No one feels safe here. Not the inmates, nor the officers. We all knew we were in trouble when they moved the population shift office to a barricaded, secure admin area. No one feels safe here when supervisors up to the warden level stand behind the fence of the barricaded, secure area and tell inmates who have fled there looking for protection that they need to go get a knife. No one feels safe here when there are hundreds of inmates roaming around and not an officer in sight. No one

In handwritten letters, four men who together with [REDACTED] years told us what it's like inside.

By The New York Times

April 29, 2019

On April 2, the Department of Justice issued a [horrifying report](#) on Alabama's prisons, with graphic accounts of prisoners who were tortured, burned, raped, sodomized, stabbed and murdered in largely unsupervised dorms. (In hundreds of reports of sexual abuse, for example, the investigators did not find a single instance of a guard intervening. Officers are so outnumbered, the report said, that they stay in a secure area rather than patrol.)

The report underscored the conditions depicted in more than [2,000 photographs](#), sent to The New York Times, of violent incidents and contraband inside St. Clair prison northeast of Birmingham.

Not only are the prisons bad, the Department of Justice report said, but Alabama has known for years that they are bad, and has made only marginal attempts to improve them. It is not that the prisoners are particularly violent, but that the prisons are understaffed and overcrowded, with some holding two or three times the number of people they were designed for. They are also, the report said, lousy with corruption and rife with drugs, cellphones and large,

sharp knives, which many prisoners consider necessary for self-protection. In 2017, inspectors found that not a single building had a working fire alarm.

[\[Read more about the Department of Justice's findings of "flagrant disregard" for the rights of people in Alabama prisons.\]](#)

In a matter of days, the Alabama Department of Corrections, now under threat of a federal lawsuit, plans to unveil a new strategic plan. Since the report was issued, three correction officers have been attacked and at least one prisoner has been stabbed.

We asked three men sentenced to life without parole — two for murder and one for robbery — and one serving a 28-year sentence for murder to tell us what it was like inside. Together they have served more than 100 years. They asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution. In their letters, which were handwritten because in Alabama, prisoners do not have access to email, they focused on the root causes of the mayhem and expressed skepticism that the department could restore a culture of integrity on its own.

Here are excerpts, condensed for length and clarity:

“A Fatal Combination of Indifference and Incompetence”

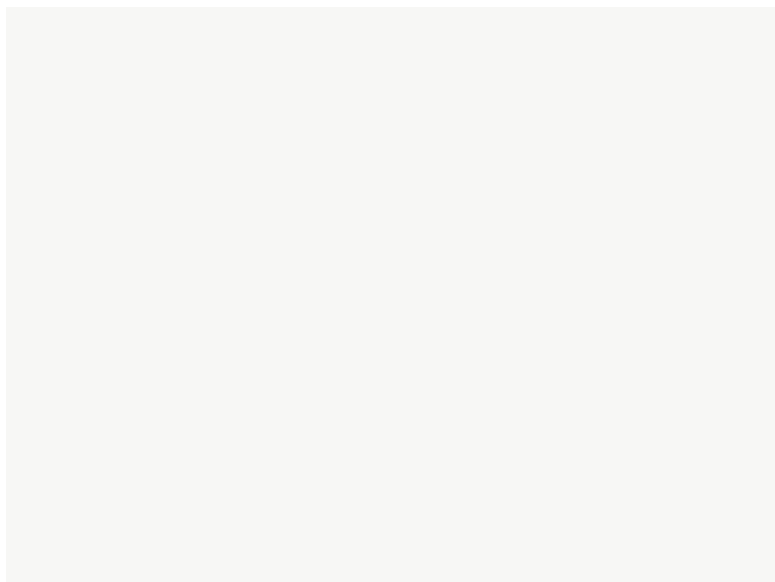
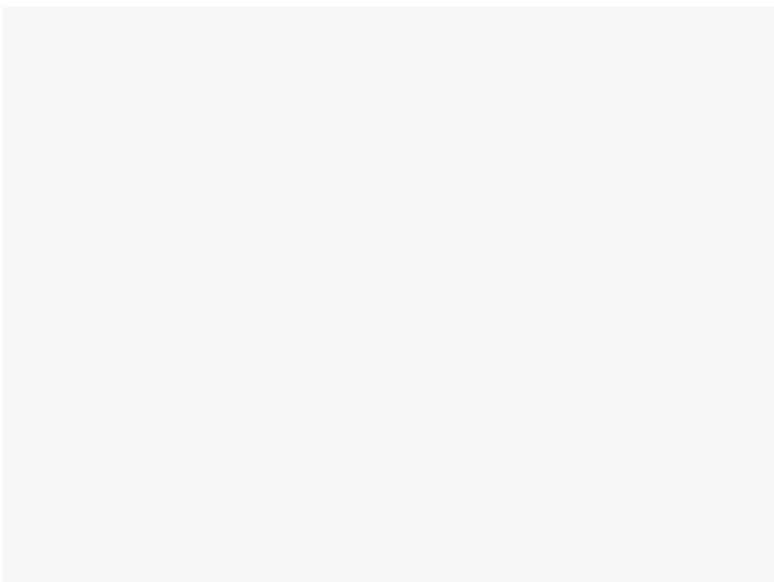
St. Clair Correctional Facility

While it's easy to understand and champion the Alabama Department of Corrections' mandate to protect the public from us, it seems people have a harder time accepting that they have an equally important mandate to protect us from each other. And when they habitually fail to do so because of a fatal combination of indifference and incompetence, that becomes criminal.

No one feels safe here. Not the inmates, nor the officers. No one feels safe here when supervisors up to the warden level stand behind the fence of the barricaded, secure area and tell inmates who have fled there looking for

protection that they need to go get a knife. No one feels safe here when there are hundreds of inmates roaming around and not an officer in sight. No one can or will answer the uncomfortable questions of why all the veteran officers quit or why the new ones don't stay.

There are many assumptions you could make about who is the least safe here. Young white men are at extreme risk for sexual assault, and white men of all ages are targets to be assaulted and robbed or to have their property stolen. But when it comes to who is least safe, the facts speak for themselves. Time and time again, young black men are the victims of the most violent assaults. Young black men are the most likely to die. The prevailing attitude seems to be that, as they say in the South, when young black men kill young black men it's just the trash taking out the trash.



A raid on Feb. 28 at the St. Clair prison found 167 makeshift weapons.

“This is Alabama”

Donaldson Correctional Facility

I've never seen so many guys on drugs — I mean cheap drugs that have them falling out and throwing up everywhere, stealing everything they can get their hands on and selling everything they own, and in too many cases it's their body.

Officers allow other inmates to deal with those that wig out because it happens far too often.

This has always been the case in prison, it's only now that people are beginning to pay attention. We didn't just start dying and getting hurt in prison, there were far, far more rapes 20, 30 and 40 years ago, and the prison administration was well aware of it and society didn't care. Prison graveyards are filled with bodies buried on top of bodies of men that have been murdered or died of old age or lack of proper medical care since the late 1800s. This is Alabama.

Too often you would have to stab, beat down or kill someone to get the point across that you're not to be [expletive] with, sometimes more than once.

The reason I've avoided getting stabbed or raped was God, because I wasn't a killer, not all that smart, and I've never been so lucky. Somebody must have really prayed for me, because I didn't have sense enough to pray for myself as much as I should've.

Pick out your friends slowly and wisely. Seek out educational programs. Borrow nothing from no one. Don't make the officers your friends nor enemies. Never overspend on the commissary.

“The Embezzlement Economy”

Limestone Correctional Facility

Living in prison is expensive. The contracted companies control the phone prices, shoe prices, hygiene and food package prices, medical co-pay and the supply of goods sold at the prison stores and canteens. Most of those prices range from inflated to ridiculous. There is no competition, no other options, no consumer protection. Montgomery is responsible for all economic policy decisions.

The only prisoners who get paid here make \$3 a day. Institutional job assignments become hustles. Kitchen workers are “paid” in leftovers from meals or in ingredients from stock. Yes, them getting paid in leftovers does create a

conflict of interest which results in the population often receiving small food portions.

I don't have time to get into the details of the embezzlement economy, but most workers work to "get paid" out of whatever it is they work with. Tutors and clerks hustle office supplies, dorm cleaners sell cleaning supplies, garbage men get lucky sometimes. It's not all stealing; most of the goods are "given" by the staff who supervises the workers. It's part of the prison culture in Alabama.

Every prison I've been in makes other compromises that would certainly have evangelicals marching in the streets if local Alabama governments were to condone, encourage, and even promote these activities like Alabama prisons do. Without question gambling, sexual relationships and money lending are the biggest hotspots for violence in prison. They all have a connection to the high expense to live in prison and the absence of paying jobs.

I see overcrowding as an amplifier and exacerbation of the foundational economic and cultural sources of violence in the prisons. More people means more transactions. More people means less space and more competition for shared resources like TVs, phones, exercise equipment and ice in the summertime.

At Limestone in each cell block there are 44 beds in day-space areas that were not designed for people to live. That area is now called "the parking lot." The difference between living in a cell with one roommate and one toilet and in the parking lot with 43 roommates and three toilets is so great that admin and staff move guys from cells out to the parking lot as punishment for petty offenses like not having your bed properly made. This is just an example of D.O.C. using poor conditions of their own making as a tool.

Most of the prison system could be green zones if Montgomery would change its views on a few things like rehabilitation over punishment, human potential over human weakness, and dignity over exploitation.

“Depression Set In Like Never Before”

Donaldson Correctional Facility

I have both committed assaults against others and have been assaulted. I have behaved outside of rules and within compliance. I have also been stationed at nine different facilities.

In my early years of incarceration, the focus of serving time was centered around hard labor and self-help programs with sincere instructors who were not just financially motivated. Both were for the purpose of rehabilitation and building character so that the ex-con can find greater self-worth and develop work habits which enable him to return to society as a productive member. These activities, naturally, became motivation for inmates to behave.

These outlets were taken away. Over a short period of time, things that inmates used for years to abate stress and depression were confiscated, visitation privileges were decreased and discouraged, and a different method of behavior modification was implemented. With the subtraction of activities, depression set in like never before.

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