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Report: Violence increasing in crowded Alabama prisons as budget cuts loom

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Violence has increased at Alabama's prisons leading to fears that it could get worse as overcrowded jails endure budget cuts.

An analysis by The Birmingham News showed that three inmates have been killed in Alabama prisons since the start of the state's financial year in October. By comparison, the prison system had reported at most one homicide in the four previous years.

The Department of Corrections counted 1,397 fights and nonsexual assaults from 2010 to 2011, an increase of nearly 400 from the previous year. Besides that increase, assaults leading to serious injury doubled, rising from 47 to 95.

Prison officials told the newspaper that the rise in incidents is the result of better record keeping. But Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit that represents prisoners, said the situation has gotten worse in the past several years.

"I've been hearing from folks that it's gotten impossible to get into honors dorms because everybody and his cousin is trying to get in," Stevenson told the newspaper (<http://bit.ly/Lcfie3>).

Corrections Commissioner Kim Thomas said the department aims to prevent assaults and fights. He acknowledged that violence is an ongoing challenge made more difficult by housing too many prisoners with too few guards. The department's budget for the coming year has been cut \$16 million. It could see an additional \$35 million in funding reductions.

"We may have to put it very, very close to a line I'm not comfortable with," Thomas said.

Outside monitors question whether Alabama is fully reporting the incidents of violence. In 2009, the Southern Center for Human Rights filed a lawsuit claiming that inmates at Donaldson Correctional Facility were in danger because of crowding, too few prison staffers and violence. During the suit, the center found that

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the state's public reports undercounted violent attacks that were documented in internal reports.

From April 2008 to April 2009, the department publicly reported one assault with a serious injury at Donaldson. But internal records showed that 16 inmates were hospitalized for treatment of serious injuries and symptoms, including collapsed lungs, vomiting and urinating blood and a wound that blinded an eye.

State officials installed a new system in 2010 to better track assaults and fights.

"We do realize that we have to make sure that the figures we gather are validated and accurate," Thomas said. "We want to make sure we accurately report those to the public."

Information from: The Birmingham News,
<http://www.al.com/birminghamnews>



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