

The Costs of Inaction: How Mississippi Can Learn From Alabama's Experience

If Mississippi lawmakers don't act quickly, the state may lose control of its prison system to federal authorities, costing taxpayers untold sums while people continue to suffer and die behind bars. Neighboring Alabama provides a cautionary tale of the costs of inaction. After several lawsuits and a federal investigation into its prison conditions, Alabama is slated to spend nearly \$1 billion addressing its crisis. It's not too late for Mississippi to avoid this fate, but lawmakers must take immediate steps to reduce the state's dangerously high prison population.

What happened in Alabama?

In 2014, Alabama's prison system was rocked by a spate of illness and death behind bars. Lives were lost to unsanitary conditions, preventable and treatable diseases, and suicide. As a result, the Alabama Department of Corrections was sued in federal court for failing to provide adequate medical and mental health care to individuals in its custody. As that lawsuit slowly unfolded in court, Alabama's prison population remained stubbornly high and conditions worsened behind bars, with record high-levels of violence and suicide. In 2016, the United States Department of Justice launched an investigation into the state's prison system. When they released their findings three years later, DOJ officials stated that they "found reasonable cause to believe that Alabama fails to provide constitutionally adequate conditions and that prisoners experience serious harm, including deadly harm, as a result." Both the federal lawsuit and investigation lay the blame for this harm on overcrowded and understaffed prisons as well as dangerously deteriorated facilities. Lawmakers peg the expected cost to remedy these issues at roughly \$1 billion, between construction and staff costs.

What does this have to do with Mississippi?

Mississippi's prison system has followed a tragically similar trajectory to Alabama's. The state has faced multiple lawsuits about unconstitutional conditions at East Mississippi Correctional Facility and Walnut Grove Correctional Facility in recent years. In 2019 and 2020, already high rates of illness and death behind bars skyrocketed. More than 70 people have died in Mississippi prisons since December 2019, many from preventable or treatable illness, suicide, or violence. Multiple class action lawsuits have been filed against the Department of Corrections in response to these deaths, and the United States Department of Justice recently announced it is launching an investigation into Mississippi's prison system. Like Alabama, Mississippi's prisons are understaffed and seriously dilapidated. Given the striking similarity of the problems faced by the two states' prison system, which are of roughly equal size, it is very likely that the remedies will be similar as well: \$1 billion spent to rebuild and adequately staff prisons that hold far too many people for far too long.

Alabama

2014: Alabama Department of Corrections is sued for failing to provide adequate medical and mental health care to individuals in its custody.

2015: Preventable illnesses and deaths continue to occur behind bars.

2016: United States Department of Justice launches an investigation into Alabama's prison conditions.

2020: Alabama lawmakers estimate that the steps to meet the requirements from the lawsuit rulings and DOJ investigation will cost roughly \$1 billion.

PREVENTABLE ILLNESSES AND DEATHS BEHIND BARS LEAD TO LAWSUITS

INVESTIGATION LAUNCHED BY UNITED STATES DOJ

\$1 BILLION IS ESTIMATED TO FIX THE CRISIS.

Mississippi

December 2019: Series of deaths begins to rock Mississippi prisons, leading to statewide lockdowns.

January 2020: Preventable illnesses and deaths, including COVID-19 related fatalities, continue to occur behind bars

January-May 2020: Three class action lawsuits are filed against the Mississippi Department of Corrections for dangerous living conditions and failure to provide adequate healthcare.

February 2020: United States Department of Justice launches an investigation into Mississippi's prison conditions.

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What will those costs mean for Mississippi?

Mississippi is facing an economic shortfall, and the state does not have \$1 billion to spare on unnecessary prison spending.

One billion dollars is equal to:



2.5x

THE ANNUAL
PUBLIC HEALTH
BUDGET



3x

THE ANNUAL
CORRECTIONS
BUDGET



21x

THE ANNUAL
VETERANS AFFAIRS
BUDGET



23x

THE ANNUAL
STUDENT FINANCIAL
AID BUDGET FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION



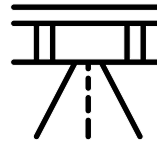
31x

THE ANNUAL
LEGISLATIVE
OPERATIONS
BUDGET

One billion dollars is enough to:



BUY EVERY STUDENT IN
K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS
A LAPTOP AND A
CONNECTIVITY DEVICE,
4 TIMES OVER.



DOUBLE THE STATE'S ANNUAL
ROAD AND BRIDGE PROJECT
AND REPAIR BUDGET



FUND REPAIRS TO THE
STATE'S DRINKING WATER
INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE
NEXT 4 YEARS

How can this be prevented?

After months of deliberation, the state legislature took action and passed SB 2123, a bill that would help downsize the state's dangerously high prison population, reducing both the likelihood of a federal takeover and the need for additional prison facilities and correctional officers. Unfortunately, the Governor vetoed this bill, leaving no legislative pathways to reduce the prison population at a moment of dire need. When the legislature reconvenes later this year, lawmakers have the opportunity to override this veto and ensure that action is taken to address this crisis and prevent a billion dollars of wasteful and unnecessary spending.