



H71 A Review of In-Custody Deaths in Mississippi

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The goal of this presentation is to review the history and structure of the prison system in Mississippi and to present various cases in which inmates have died while in custody.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the challenges in determining the cause and manner of deaths occurring while a person is in custody.

The first reported prison to be developed in Mississippi was in 1789 in the city of Natchez. The first centralized prison was not established until April 1840 and was designed to house 200 inmates. Overcrowding soon became an issue. Subsequently, the Governor released 40 inmates in order to increase the manpower of the Confederate Army. The prison was eventually overrun by Sherman's army on his march to Atlanta, GA. The current State Penitentiary in Parchman, MS, was built in 1901.

A federal mandate in 1972 ordered the state to develop a plan to address issues that included racial segregation, possession of weapons, drugs and alcohol, and the punishment of inmates. The Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) was established in July 1976. Under their jurisdiction, there are 3 state-run prisons, 11 regional prisons, 6 private prisons, and 4 restitution centers. In addition, each of the 82 counties has at least one county jail. The MDOC houses approximately 21,000 inmates, 47 of whom are currently on death row. The MDOC inmate population figure is the second-highest in the nation.

The investigation of in-custody deaths is a multidisciplinary team effort and presents challenges at all levels. The most recent data available at the time of this submission shows a total of 65 in-custody deaths reported in 2016. This presentation will provide photographic and video documentation of scene and autopsy evidence that illustrates the variability exhibited by in-custody deaths falling under the jurisdiction of the Mississippi State Medical Examiner's Office.

Establishing the correct cause of death and manner of death is the crux of the issue. Media coverage and reporting of the deaths in conjunction with social media is essentially instantaneous and may cause misrepresentation of the facts and result in premature public bias against law enforcement personnel. As an impartial entity able to perform medicolegal postmortem examinations that elucidate the presence or absence of non-accidental traumatic injury, the State Medical Examiner's Office is uniquely equipped to contribute its expertise in the interpretation of these findings to assist in the education of law enforcement individuals. Identification of in-custody drug deaths is another benefit for the Department of Corrections and the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics in tracking in-custody drug use.

In-Custody Deaths, Cause of Death, Mississippi