

Licking, Missouri prison saw 19 deaths last year and another in the first days of 2025

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On Saturday December 28, 35 year-old Robert Wallace was pronounced dead around 3 a.m. at the South Central Correctional Center (SCCC) in Licking, Missouri. Wallace was the 19th inmate to die in 2024 at the facility located in the rural southern Ozarks region of the state. Reports indicate that local authorities are expected to conduct an autopsy.

On January 12, another inmate was reported dead, 34-year-old Blake Selby, the first known death in the prison in 2025. The last three inmates to die in that prison were in their 30s.

According to the *Missouri Independent*, the state's prison system saw 139 deaths in 2024, which is two more than the 137 recorded by the state's Department of Corrections in 2023 and 2022. It is the fourth year where prison deaths have averaged 10 or more a month.

Earlier this month, the SCCC warden and a supervisor were removed from their positions in the facility, ostensibly due to allowing in contraband.

The Missouri Department of Corrections reports that the 19 inmate deaths in 2024 at Licking broke down into the following: four accidental deaths, nine natural deaths, one suicide, and five "pending autopsy results," which can take up to 100 days to be released. Facing increased scrutiny, the department sought to blame inmates themselves in a recent statement, claiming that in-custody fatalities are mainly due to natural causes among an aging, sicker prison population.

The state of Missouri executed four inmates in 2024, including Marcellus "Khaliifah" Williams, a man known to be innocent of the crime of which he was convicted. The WWS reported at that time that the

Missouri Attorney General's Office is notorious for its zeal in executing inmates. In 2003, Attorney General Jay Nixon argued that Joseph Amrine, a death row inmate fighting to prove his innocence, should be executed in the face of exonerating evidence. Amrine was eventually exonerated and released.

Conditions in the state's prisons are hellish. Reports indicate that inmates are routinely denied access to needed medications. In addition to violence, inmates are also subjected to unbearable heat in at least half of the state's 20 prisons, which have no central air conditioning.

A warden was forced to resign and multiple corrections officers at the Jefferson City Correctional Center were charged in the 2023 murder of Othel Moore, who was restrained and pepper-sprayed by several officers and left in a hood to die over a period of about 30 minutes.

Coinciding with the dramatic increase in prisoner deaths in recent years at the SCCC facility has been a number of overdoses, facilitated at least in part by staff members bringing drugs into the facility. Former corrections officer Paige Cook, fired for allegedly attempting to bring drugs into the prison, said, "[T]here are most definitely other officers bringing the stuff in there."

While employees bringing in drugs to prisons is not unusual, the presence of potent narcotics in the toxicology reports of deceased inmates with no history of such substance use has raised questions for inmates' families.

"He did tell me. He called me one day and was like ma, there's a lot of guys in here passing away. They're dying," Mary Harris, whose son, 39 year-old Alan Lancaster, was found unresponsive in solitary confinement early in 2023, told KY3. He was serving a

20-year sentence for burglary, robbery, assault and kidnapping.

According to Harris, she reassured her worried son by telling him, “I said, well, you don’t have that long. You don’t affiliate with them.” Harris’ simple yet poignant words notwithstanding, the medical examiner closed Lancaster’s case as overdose by fentanyl and xylazine.

“If they told me he died from somebody stabbing him, okay,” said Harris, reflecting the trauma of a person who has come to expect a measure of brutality from society that even allows room for the hypothetical, horrific stabbing death of her son in prison. “But for him to have this type of drug in his system? Alan didn’t do drugs,” said Harris.

Harris’ attempts to get more information so that she can try to make sense of it all have been frustrated. “They say they don’t know. Nobody’s talking,” explained Harris. Even so, Lancaster’s death was ruled a homicide, so his mother has a point when she concluded, “Somebody’s responsible.”

A 2019 report from the Prison Policy Initiative identified Missouri’s prisons as among the most dangerous in the US: “The lack of air conditioning in Southernprisonscreatesunsafe—evenlethal—conditions. Prolonged exposure to extreme heat can cause dehydration and heat stroke, both of which can be fatal. It can also affect people’s kidneys, liver, heart, brain, and lungs, which can lead to renal failure, heart attack, and stroke. ... States and counties that deny air conditioning to incarcerated people should understand that, far from withholding a ‘luxury,’ they are subjecting people to cruel and unusual punishments, and even handing out death sentences.”



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