



Powered by Clickability

# Suit claims abuse, filth at juvenile detention center

- Story Highlights
- Two groups suing county over privately run juvenile detention center in Mississippi
- Children at the facility assaulted by guards, forced to sleep in filth, the suit alleges
- Harrison County pays \$1.6 million a year to private company to run the center
- Attorney for the company says center seem clean, he's heard no reports of abuse

By Ashley Broughton  
CNN

**(CNN)** -- Juveniles held in a Mississippi detention center are subject to "horrific physical and mental abuse" at an insect-ridden, filthy facility, alleges a federal lawsuit filed Monday.

The suit, filed by the Mississippi Youth Justice Project and Mississippi Protection and Advocacy Inc., accuses staff at the privately-managed Harrison County Juvenile Detention Center of "punitive shackling, staff-on-youth assaults, 23-hour-a-day lock-down in filthy jail cells, unsanitary conditions resulting in widespread contraction of scabies and staph infections, dangerous overcrowding that forces many youth to sleep on the concrete floor, and inadequate mental health care."

The facility is is operated by Mississippi Security Police, a private security corporation based in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The company is paid \$1.6 million yearly by Harrison County to manage the juvenile center, according to the lawsuit, which names the county as a defendant.

Tim Holleman, attorney for Mississippi Security Police, told CNN he has not seen a copy of the lawsuit but was trying to obtain one Monday. He said he has personally been in the facility while representing juveniles being held there, and "it appears to be clean." He said none of the juveniles he has represented has ever alleged any abuse took place there.

As far as staph and scabies, Holleman said those are typical issues for any facility where large numbers of people are housed and people are routinely moved in and out, including hospitals. "It's very difficult to control," he said.

A call from CNN to the Harrison County administrator's office was not immediately returned.

"This lawsuit demands that Harrison County ensure the safety of children in its custody," said Sheila Bedi, regional juvenile justice attorney for the Mississippi Youth Justice Project, a division of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), in a statement. "But this lawsuit also gives the county a chance to reconsider investing \$1.6 million a year in a private, for-profit prison company at the expense of our children."

The lawsuit was filed against Harrison County on behalf of a 17-year-old male at the facility, identified in the suit as D.W.

D.W. is housed at the facility while awaiting his disposition in [juvenile court](#). He has been assaulted by guards at the center and forced to sleep on the floor of his overcrowded cell, with only a thin mat that smells of urine, the suit alleges.

"Unsurprisingly, during D.W.'s imprisonment, his mental health has deteriorated rapidly," the suit says. "He tried to commit suicide by hanging himself in his cell, yet he has received no mental health treatment or counseling."

D.W.'s allegations are echoed by more than 30 young people interviewed by attorneys, according to the suit. "All of these children uniformly describe the Juvenile Detention Center as a squalid, overcrowded facility that is infested with insects, where jail officials frequently resort to violence and the inappropriate use of restraints."

The lawsuit alleges the facility is built to house 48 juveniles, but at times houses as many as 60. Holleman acknowledged the facility stays close to capacity, and sometimes goes over. "What do we do?" he said. "It's like any jail. A court brings us a court order and tells us to put them in jail. We don't have a whole lot of choice in that."

On March 23, D.W. was assaulted in his cell by two guards, the suit alleges. "Guard 1 placed D.W. in a chokehold, slammed him to the ground and placed him in handcuffs. Once D.W. was lying on the ground restrained with handcuffs, Guard 2 joined in the assault."

One of the guards pressed his knee into D.W.'s back while the other guard pushed on his neck, pushing D.W.'s face into the concrete floor and restricting his breathing, according to the suit. D.W. sought medical attention after the incident, the suit says, and while visiting him his mother noticed bruising around his wrists from the tightened handcuffs.

D.W. attempted suicide after his first week in detention, tying a sheet around his neck and hanging himself from a light fixture in his cell, the suit says. A staff member intervened and stopped him, but D.W. has been given no access to mental health treatment, attorneys allege.

Instead, staffers have taunted D.W. by telling him his mother does not care about him and will no longer visit him -- and "that without his mother around, they could do anything to him and get away with it," the suit says.

Inside the facility, the suit says, "toilets and walls are covered with mold, rust and excrement. Insects have infested the facility, and D.W. frequently wakes up covered by bug bites."

The place smells of human excrement, the suit says, and D.W. and other children are forced to sleep on thin, moldy mats. Personal hygiene items are not provided to the children, the suit alleges, and juveniles frequently are locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, without regular exercise or recreation.

"Staff frequently resort to physical violence and respond to youths' request for help or assistance with taunts, profanity and indifference," according to the suit.

Holleman told CNN he has been corresponding with Mississippi Protection and Advocacy Inc., "on looking at wanting to do various things," but the group never raised any allegation with him before filing the suit, although he has received numerous letters.

He said he understood the plaintiffs had been in the center's parking lot over the last week, "soliciting" parents as they left from visiting juveniles there.

The suit asks that [Mississippi](#) Protection and Advocacy Inc., a non-profit organization aimed at assisting people with disabilities, be given access to the facility. It also seeks a court injunction "requiring the defendant ... to cease its unconstitutional and unlawful practices."

**All About**[Mississippi](#) • [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) • [Juvenile Justice](#)

### Links referenced within this article

Southern Poverty Law Center  
[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Southern\\_Poverty\\_Law\\_Center](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Southern_Poverty_Law_Center)  
 juvenile court  
[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Juvenile\\_Justice](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Juvenile_Justice)  
 Mississippi  
<http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Mississippi>  
 Mississippi  
<http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Mississippi>  
 Southern Poverty Law Center  
[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Southern\\_Poverty\\_Law\\_Center](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Southern_Poverty_Law_Center)  
 Juvenile Justice  
[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Juvenile\\_Justice](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/Juvenile_Justice)

### Find this article at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/04/20/juvenile.detention.suit>

☒ Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2008 Cable News Network.