



James 'Whitey' Bulger's killing is just the latest in a string of troubling violence for W.Va. prison



By [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [Emily Sweeney](#)

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The [killing](#) of notorious Boston gangster [James "Whitey" Bulger](#) at a West Virginia prison Tuesday was at least the third killing at the facility this year, according to media reports.

One inmate was killed in a fight just last month, and another inmate was killed in a fight in the spring at the maximum-security USP Hazelton. Each incident sparked an outcry from federal lawmakers and union officials about violence and inadequate staffing at the prison.

Richard Heldreth, the president of the union that represents workers at the prison, said the prison usually averages one murder a year, but problems have been getting worse because of lack of staffing.



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This 1986 FBI file photo shows James "Whitey" Bulger.

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“This facility is severely understaffed,” he told the Globe by phone Tuesday shortly after reports surfaced of Bulger’s killing. “This is the third murder at the prison in the past seven months.”

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Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton said Bulger’s death “underscores reports of a culture of violence” at the Hazelton facility.

Norton reiterated [calls](#) she made earlier this month for US

Department of Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz to open a formal investigation “into the alleged appalling conditions inmates are facing” at the prison, citing the deaths this year of two inmates “during violent altercations” and “reports of brutal treatment of others.”

“Based on reports from my constituents who are housed at Hazelton and their relatives, there appears to be a serious shortage of staffing and other resources, leaving prisoners and guards vulnerable to attacks,” Norton said in a statement Tuesday.

Norton, who represents Washington, D.C., also called for the removal of all D.C. inmates

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from the prison. Her office said there are about 500 D.C. inmates there. The prison's total population is approximately 1,300.

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The New York Times [reported](#) that a shortage of correctional officers has become chronic under President Trump, and that the USP Hazelton has been particularly plagued by violence.

The first killing was in April. Inmate Ian Thorne, 48, was killed after a fight, according to The [Associated Press](#).

He arrived at the facility in mid-January to serve a 20-year sentence for conspiracy to commit murder, the AP reported. The other inmate in the fight was treated for minor injuries.

"I believe this tragedy would not have happened if staffing levels were kept at adequate levels to keep prisons and correctional officers safe," US Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia told [The Dominion Post](#) at the time.

A spokesman for Congressman David McKinley at the time also raised concerns to the The Dominion Post about the prison "using cooks and other staff to fill in the guard slots due to shortage."

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Heldreth, the union president, [told local news outlets](#) then that the prison was using staff "such as secretaries, teachers, counselors, accounting staff, welders and plumbers, to work security posts that are normally staffed with correctional officers."

Heldreth said at the time there was a "culture of violence" and a "major" drug and weapon problem at the facility.

In September, inmate Demario Porter, 27, was killed, [according to the AP](#).

He had only been at the prison briefly. He arrived Sept. 6 to serve a 26-month sentence for a parole

violation. He was killed after a fight on Sept. 17. The other inmate involved in that altercation, who was not identified, was treated for minor injuries.

Following that death, Manchin told the [The Preston County News & Journal](#) in a statement: "I've pressed the Bureau of Prisons and Attorney General Jeff Sessions to follow the law and act on this dangerous situation. They have done nothing. The lack of action on the part of the Bureau of Prisons is unacceptable."

The District of Columbia Corrections Information Council, an independent Washington, D.C. agency created to inspect and monitor prisons on behalf of DC residents, last week issued a [memo](#) to Bureau of Prisons acting director Hugh Hurwitz outlining concerns about the recent violence following a visit and interviews with dozens of inmates at USP Hazelton.

The memo from the council's director Michelle Bonner said the inmate killed in September was stabbed to death in the dining hall and a half-dozen inmates who witnessed that incident "raised serious concerns about how staff handled the aftermath of the assault."

"Inmates reported that staff prioritized restraining the stabbing victim over getting him medical attention," Bonner's memo said. "They reported that he was on the floor with an officer's knee in his back from five to ten minutes (range based on various accounts) before he was taken to receive medical attention."

The memo said the April killing was also a stabbing and that some inmates described frequent, if not daily, stabbings and beatings at the prison.

Inmates reported that security protocols, such as metal detector alarms, at the facility are frequently ignored by staff, particularly to enter the dining hall and there is little direct supervision in the recreation yard, the memo said.

There have been reports of guards assaulting prisoners, leaving them in tight restraints for days, and uttering racist and other verbally abusive remarks, the memo said. It also noted concerns from inmates about non-security personnel fulfilling security duties at the prison.

Bonner said by phone Tuesday violence at the prison "has gotten worse particularly over the last 12 to 18 months."

Yet, she said, as far as she knew, prison officials had not announced any reforms.

Hopefully, Bulger's killing will spur action, Bonner said.

"It's unfortunate that the two D.C. residents' deaths didn't get the same amount of attention as Whitey Bulger. "But we're hoping now there will be change for the better."

Over the years, there have been other killings and violence at the prison in Bruceton Mills, W.Va.

In late 2015, inmate Marricco Sykes allegedly strangled a fellow prisoner during a fight, according to a [news release](#) the US Department of Justice issued in March 2016 announcing a federal grand jury indictment for first-degree murder against Sykes.

In January 2013, two prisoners — John David Pinke and Edward C. Crow — assaulted a fellow inmate, who had broken bones, cognitive impairment, and stab wounds from razor blades, according to a [news release](#) federal prosecutors issued in October 2014 announcing that Pinke and Crow had been sentenced to serve extra prison time following convictions on several charges from that incident.

In a separate incident in April 2013, Crow used a handcrafted spear to stab a correctional officer through the food slot in his cell door, federal prosecutors said. Crow was convicted on multiple charges and received additional prison time in that case, too.

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Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](#).

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