

## Six Years of Dying Behind Bars

### ***State-reported Deaths in West Virginia Jails and Prisons, 2020–2025***

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#### **Overview**

In 2025, the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy (WVCBP) created *The Quantez Burks Report*, the first-ever public database of people who died in West Virginia jails and prisons.<sup>1</sup> The WVCBP named the project for Mr. Burks, a 37-year-old Raleigh County man killed by Southern Regional Jail staff in March 2022.<sup>2</sup> The WVCBP updates the online database each month with information provided by the Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DCR) through public records requests.

Over a span of six years, at least 344 people died in West Virginia jails, prisons, and community corrections facilities. The years at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic – 2020 and 2021 – were the deadliest for people behind bars. Deaths declined each of the next three years.

But 2025 was the deadliest year behind bars since the pandemic, with deaths increasing 44.4 percent over 2024.

A person died behind bars every **6.3 days** between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2025.

This is a snapshot of state-reported deaths in custody over the last six years. Our findings include:

- From 2009–2019, West Virginia had the highest jail mortality rate in the country, at 2.2 deaths per 1,000 people. In 2025, that rate had climbed to 3.7.
- One in four people who died were legally innocent and awaiting trial. 55.2 percent of people who died in jail awaiting trial had died in the first 10 days behind bars.
- Two of the ten regional jails – North Central and Southern – accounted for 43.1 percent of all jail deaths due to overdose, suicide, homicide, and accident.
- 75.2 percent of deaths by medical illness occurred in prisons, whereas 85.5 percent of unnatural deaths (homicide, suicide, alcohol or drugs, or accident) occurred in jails.

Notably, there are additional deaths the state has not reported. In 2025, the WVCBP uncovered the death of 31-year-old Marissa Crim.<sup>3</sup> DCR has never reported her death in custody at Northern Regional Jail despite a court filing that plainly states, “Jail informed defendant died in custody.” The WVCBP will continue to track unreported deaths like Ms. Crim’s and address those in future publications.

#### **Who is Dying?**

Of the officially reported deaths from 2020–2025, white people accounted for 92.4 percent of deaths and Black people accounted for 7.3 percent of deaths. Men constituted 94.8 percent of officially reported deaths.

<sup>1</sup> Sara Whitaker, Special Project: The Quantez Burks Report (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy), <https://wvpolicy.org/quantez-burks-report/>. WVCBP created this database from death in custody reports provided by DCR between September 2025 and January 2026, available here: <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Deaths-in-Custody-Provided-by-DCR-2025.09-2026.01.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Levenson, “Four Ex-Jail Officers Are Sentenced in Death of West Virginia Inmate,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/10/us/west-virginia-jail-beating-officers-sentenced.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Sara Whitaker, “Are Fewer People Dying in West Virginia Jails? Or is the State Simply Not Counting?” *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* (blog), March 20, 2025, <https://wvpolicy.org/are-fewer-people-dying-in-west-virginia-jails-or-is-the-state-simply-not-counting/>.

People who died behind bars ranged in age from 20 to 90 years old. While the overall average age was 58 years, the average age of people who died in prisons was 20 years older (average age of 66) than those who died in jails (average age of 46).

**One in four people who died had not been convicted of a crime. Of those people, the majority died in their first 10 days behind bars.**

One in four people were legally innocent and awaiting trial when they died. Of these 87 people, more than half (55.2 percent) had been incarcerated for 10 days or less.

### Where are They Dying?

Most deaths behind bars occurred in prisons. Two men's facilities – Mt. Olive in Fayette County and St. Mary's in Pleasants County – accounted for 87.1 percent of all prison deaths. These facilities house people serving the longest sentences (including life without the possibility of parole), and have specialized medical units, such as "geriatric" units.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1

#### State-reported Deaths in Custody by Facility Type

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	All Years
<b>Prisons</b>	44	42	23	29	28	44	<b>210</b>
<b>Jails</b>	21	27	28	16	15	19	<b>126</b>
<b>Community Corrections</b>	2	0	1	1	2	2	<b>8</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>344</b>

Prison deaths declined significantly following the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. But in 2025, prison deaths climbed 57.1 percent to match the pandemic high of 44 deaths in one year.

While there were fewer overall deaths in jails than in prisons, the mortality rate in jails remains alarmingly high.

From 2009–2019, West Virginia had the highest jail mortality rate in the United States at 2.2 deaths per 1,000 people.<sup>5</sup> That rate has since worsened: with a high of 6.4 in Fiscal Year 2022 and a rate of 3.7 in Fiscal Year 2025.<sup>6</sup>

Jail deaths were not equally distributed among the 10 regional jails.

Table 2

#### Jail Mortality Rate Per 1,000 People

<b>FY 2021</b>	3.9
<b>FY 2022</b>	6.4
<b>FY 2023</b>	4.0
<b>FY 2024</b>	2.8
<b>FY 2025</b>	3.7

<sup>4</sup> WV Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DCR) Annual Report FY2025, 11-12, <https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/2025.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "Overcrowded and Deadly: West Virginia's Jails are in Crisis" (Charleston, WV: ACLU-WV, February 2021), 3, [https://www.acluwv.org/app/uploads/2021/02/overcrowded\\_and\\_deadly\\_final.pdf](https://www.acluwv.org/app/uploads/2021/02/overcrowded_and_deadly_final.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Mortality rates calculated based on the average daily count of people in jail for Fiscal Years 2021–2025. WV DCR FY 2023 Annual Report, 38, <https://dcr.wv.gov/Documents/FY23%20ANNUAL%20REPORT%20WVDCR.pdf>; WV DCR Annual Report FY 2024, 21, [https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/Pub\\_AnnualReport\\_FY2024\\_DHS\\_DCR.pdf](https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/Pub_AnnualReport_FY2024_DHS_DCR.pdf); DCR Annual Report FY 2025, 21, <https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/2025.pdf>.

Fifty-eight percent of all jail deaths occurred across just three facilities: Southern Regional Jail, North Central Regional Jail, and South Central Regional Jail.

## How are They Dying?

DCR's manner and cause of death disclosures must be viewed with skepticism. For nearly two years, DCR continued to report that Quantez Burks died a "natural" death caused by "heart diseases" – despite the state medical examiner's report of homicide determined within weeks of his death.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, DCR's data is the only available information to assess how people are dying.

Death looks different in prisons and jails. Prisons exclusively house people serving sentences of more than a year while jails are designed for shorter sentences and for people detained pretrial.

Nearly nine in 10 deaths among people in prison were from illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, respiratory illness, and other illnesses. By contrast, most jail deaths were unnatural deaths – caused by drugs or alcohol, suicide, homicide, or accident. While overdose was the leading cause of death for people in jails, DCR reported no overdose deaths for people in prison.

Table 3

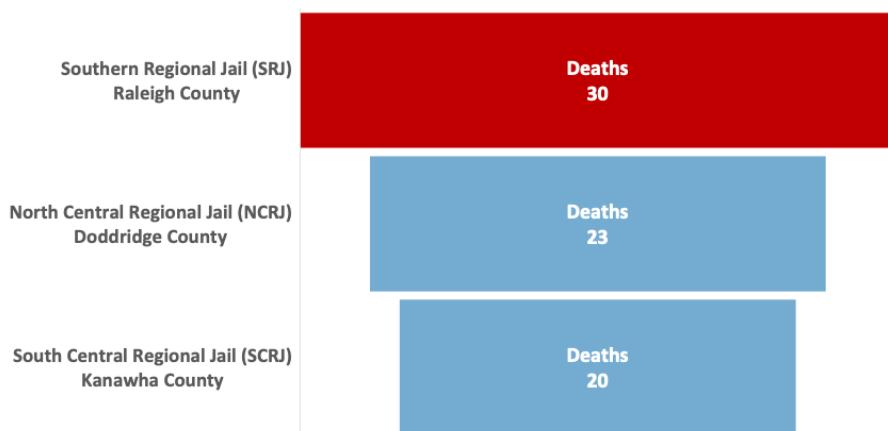
### Top Three Causes of Death in West Virginia Jails and Prisons

Leading Causes of Death				
Jails		Prisons		
	Cause of Death	Average Age	Cause of Death	Average Age
<b>No. 1</b>	<b>Overdose</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>No. 1</b>	<b>Heart Disease</b>
	<i>36 people; 28.6% of jail deaths</i>			<i>67</i>
<b>No. 2</b>	<b>Heart Disease</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>No. 2</b>	<b>All Other Illnesses</b>
	<i>27 people; 21.4% of jail deaths</i>			<i>67</i>
<b>No. 3</b>	<b>Suicide</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>No. 3</b>	<b>Cancer</b>
	<i>22 people; 17.5% of jail deaths</i>			<i>64</i>
				<i>37 people; 17.6% of prison deaths</i>

On any given day, there are roughly the same number of people incarcerated in jails as prisons. So why are there so many more people dying unnatural, preventable deaths in jails?

Jails are defined by constant churn. In Fiscal Year 2025, 36,461 people entered the regional jails, while 34,926 people were released.<sup>8</sup> The effects of this churn are amplified by endemic overcrowding. The 10

Figure 1  
**Jails with Most Deaths in Custody, 2020 – 2025**  
Three regional jails accounted for nearly 3 out of 5 jail deaths



<sup>7</sup> DCR FOIA Response dated January 11, 2024, p. 6, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/DCR-Reported-Deaths-2020-2023.pdf>; Jessica Farrish, "West Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner Found in 2022 That Quantez Burks' Death Was a Homicide," WVNS, September 13, 2024, <https://www.wvnstv.com/news/west-virginia-office-of-the-chief-medical-examiner-found-in-2022-that-quantez-burks-death-was-a-homicide/>.

<sup>8</sup> WV DCR Annual Report FY 2025, 20, <https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/2025.pdf>.

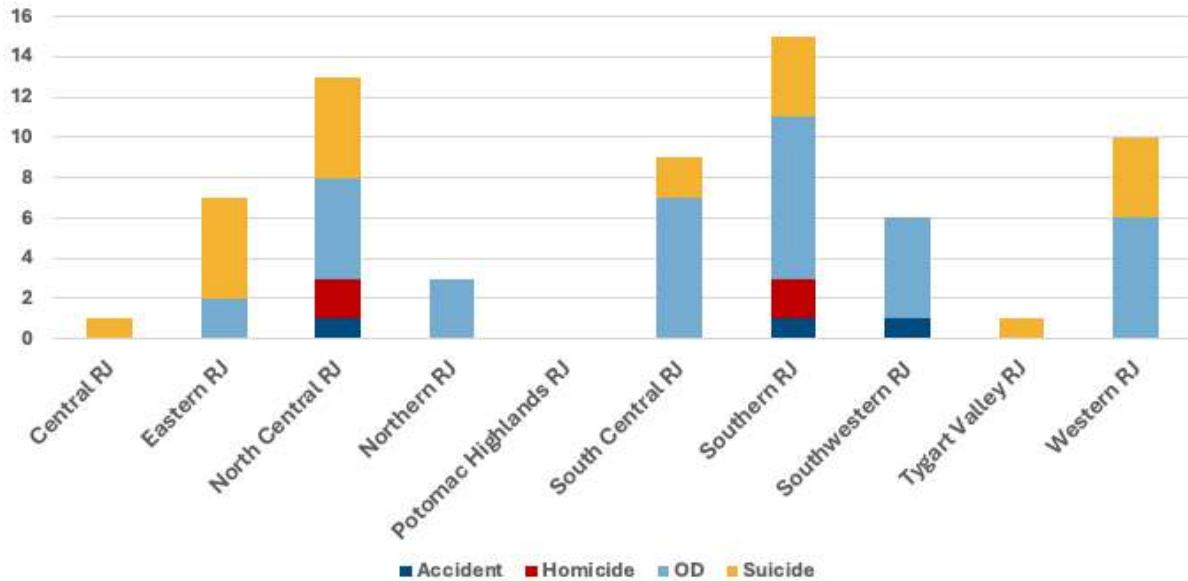
regional jails were originally designed to house 2,883 people.<sup>9</sup> DCR has added hundreds of beds over the years, stretching its stated capacity to 4,265. And yet, on January 16 of this year, the regional jails housed 4,780 people.<sup>10</sup>

The crisis of preventable jail deaths is not experienced equally across all 10 facilities. When three facilities account for more than half of unnatural jail deaths, it is worth asking why.

Figure 2

### Unnatural Jails Deaths By Cause and Facility, 2020 – 2025

North Central RJ and Southern RJ had 43.1% of all jail deaths by accident, homicide, overdose, and suicide



### Conclusion

Transparency alone will not save lives behind bars. The only thing that will is to reduce the number of people in jails and prisons.

The WVCBP has provided a road map for how to do this: appointing lawyers on day one so that people are not jailed unnecessarily; offering county-level checklists to reduce jail bills; eliminating technical violations of probation and parole, which account for one in four prison admissions; making use of already existing compassionate release polices for seriously ill people behind bars; creating a Second Look policy to give judges the ability to reconsider long sentences that no longer fit the person or the interests of justice; etc.<sup>11</sup>

Shrinking the carceral system in West Virginia is a matter of life and death.

<sup>9</sup> "Annual Report FY 2017" (Charleston, WV: West Virginia Regional Jail & Correctional Facility Authority, February 2018), 10, [https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/Documents/annual\\_reports/RJA-Annual-Report-2017.pdf](https://dcr.wv.gov/resources/Documents/annual_reports/RJA-Annual-Report-2017.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation – Adult Inmate Count," January 16, 2026, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/2026.01.16-DCR.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Whitaker, "Court Watch: Cutting Jail Bills on Day One," *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* (blog), January 7, 2026, <https://wvpolicy.org/court-watch-cutting-jail-bills-on-day-one/>; Sara Whitaker, "How Counties Can Use Existing Law and Rules to Reduce Their Jail Bills," *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* (fact sheet), November 2024, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024.11-Fact-Sheet-How-Counties-Can-Reduce-Jail-Bills.pdf>; Sara Whitaker, "Caging the Elderly: West Virginia's Aging Prison Population," *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* (fact sheet), October 2023, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/2023.10-Caging-the-Elderly.pdf>; Sara Whitaker, "Second Look Policy: A Second Look for West Virginia Corrections," *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* (fact sheet), January 2024, <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/WVCBP-Fact-Sheet-Second-Look-Policy.pdf>.