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In Anticipation of New Federal Report: Sexual Abuse Shatters the Lives of Inmates

Rape and sexual abuse in detention is epidemic across America – underscores need for binding national standards

WASHINGTON--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Tomorrow, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) will release a report of its most recent nationwide survey of sexual victimization among prison and jail inmates. While this is vitally important data, JDI believes it is also essential to look behind statistics when considering the impact of sexual abuse in detention.

"Prisoner rape is a nationwide human rights crisis," said Lovisa Stannow, Executive Director of Just Detention International. "We are talking about unacceptable, preventable abuse and human suffering."

Last week, like most weeks, Just Detention International (JDI) received some 40 letters from survivors of sexual abuse in detention – men and women still behind bars, unable to get away from their assailants, often forced to suffer through the aftermath of their abuse in silence and ongoing fear. One of them, Tom, wrote from a Nevada prison, "What do I do? Risk an attempt on my life and initiate an investigation, or keep quiet and endure?"

Past BJS studies have confirmed that men and women in both prisons and jails are more likely to be abused by corrections staff than by other inmates. William in Texas, who was abused by an officer and also wrote to JDI last week, described the lengths he had to go to in order to stay safe: "I would misbehave to get locked up [in solitary confinement] so I didn't have to deal with it." William has tried to commit suicide, and has not felt emotionally stable enough to tell his girlfriend of 12 years about the abuse.

Inmates with a history of sexual abuse, and those who identify as gay or transgender are exceptionally vulnerable, and JDI hears from such inmates on a daily basis. In another letter received by JDI last week, James, an openly gay prisoner in Michigan who has been raped more than 20 times by numerous inmates over the course of several years, asked, "Do you know what it's like to see their faces each day? Seeing the look they give me? Knowing that they smile and laugh...."

In both men's and women's facilities, staff perpetrators tend to be of the opposite sex from the victim. "Allowing staff unlimited access to inmates of the opposite sex – including when they are in states of undress – encourages sexual abuse. Yet, such cross-gender supervision remains standard practice in most U.S. prisons and jails," said Stannow.

Another inmate who wrote to JDI last week, Nathan in Wyoming, described an officer fondling his genitalia while passing out medication. A nurse who observed the groping did nothing, simply stating, "I know I didn't see what I just saw." After reporting the incident, Nathan was transferred to another prison. He has not received information about the outcome of the investigation.

The letters that JDI receives from prisoner rape survivors underscore the urgent need for national standards addressing sexual abuse in detention. For the past 14 months, the Justice Department has been reviewing such standards, which were developed by a bipartisan Commission. These measures include limitations on cross-gender supervision. They also call for staff training and inmate education, the provision of medical and mental health treatment to sexual abuse victims, and regular independent, external audits to hold agencies accountable for failures to keep inmates safe from abuse.

By law, Attorney General Eric Holder had until June 23, 2010 to ratify binding standards, but he missed this deadline and no new date has been set. Once the Attorney General issues final standards, the regulations will be immediately binding on federal facilities. States and localities will have one year to get into compliance or risk losing five percent of their corrections-related federal funding.

"Every day that the Attorney General doesn't finalize the national standards is another day of anguish among prisoner rape survivors, of preventable safety breaches in prisons and jails, and of significant spending of taxpayers' money on medical treatment, investigations, and litigation that could have been avoided."

In the meantime, inmates continue to be sexually abused every day. Each of the letters JDI receives represents an act of courage. Shaun, whose location JDI cannot reveal, wrote last week: *"I've come to accept that I am a victim and a survivor of abuse by corrections officers. I totally accept the retaliation I will receive from government employees for speaking to you."*

"Sexual abuse in detention is a stain on our society," said Stannow. "Every day that the Attorney General doesn't finalize the national standards is another day of anguish among prisoner rape survivors, of preventable safety breaches in prisons and jails, and of significant spending of taxpayers' money on medical treatment, investigations, and litigation that could have been avoided."

Tomorrow's BJS report will be released at 10:00 a.m. Eastern Time. JDI will issue another press release then, highlighting and analyzing the report's most important findings.

Just Detention International is a human rights organization that seeks to end sexual violence in all forms of detention.

Note: In this press release, JDI uses only the first names of prisoner rape survivors, to protect their safety.

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