

# Alabama must stand against sexual abuse in its jails, prisons

By LOVISA STANNOW  
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Sexual abuse rates at two Alabama jails are among the highest in the nation, according to a recent report from the U.S. Justice Department. The study, conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, found that both the Madison County Detention Facility in Huntsville and Houston County Jail in Dothan had rates of sexual abuse that were more than double the national average. The report presents the results of a survey of prison and jail inmates nationwide about their experiences with sexual abuse in the previous year.

Another BJS report released earlier this year uncovered a similarly troubling picture of sexual violence in Alabama juvenile facilities — 11.2 percent and 19.6 percent of youths at the Mt. Meigs and Vacca facilities, respectively, reported they had been sexually abused in the preceding year.

Victimized inmates are not the only ones affected by sexual violence behind bars. Once released — and the vast majority of prisoners do ultimately return home — sexual abuse survivors bring their trauma and medical conditions with them, back to their families and communities throughout Alabama. This is a human rights crisis — not only locally, but across the nation. Unfortunately, the news that the Madison County jail has a high rate of sexual abuse should not come as a surprise. Madison has a history of notoriety; the jail is still under a federal consent decree entered in 2000.

Under the terms of the settlement, the facility agreed to address problems with overcrowding, medical care, housing for at-risk detainees and various security issues. Yet, some of the conditions that prompted the lawsuit persist. The county continues to detain some pretrial detainees in close quarters on the top floors of the Huntsville courthouse, where, in 2005, Ronald Pinchon, a 19-year-old de-

of chest injuries inflicted by other pretrial detainees. Overcrowding at the facility has been so severe that properly classifying detainees to protect vulnerable inmates has presented a formidable challenge.

Despite the grim BJS findings, there is good news. Sexual violence in detention is preventable, and we know how to stop it. Under the Prison Rape Elimination Act, a 2003 federal law sponsored by U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., a bipartisan commission has developed straightforward, common-sense measures aimed specifically at ending sexual abuse in detention.

These provisions call for improved staff training and inmate education, mechanisms for identifying and separating inmates who are vulnerable to abuse from those known to be predatory, the provision of medical and mental health treatment to sexual abuse victims, and regular independent, external audits to hold agencies accountable for failures to take reasonable steps to prevent abuse.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder had until this past June 23 — one year after the bipartisan commission released its recommendations — to issue binding standards. But he missed this deadline, and no new date has been set. Once the attorney general issues final standards, they will be immediately binding on federal facilities. States and localities will have one year to show compliance or risk losing 5 percent of their corrections-related federal funding.

Holder must finalize the national standards without further delay. Regardless, Alabama corrections and law enforcement officials must make every effort to adopt preventative measures to protect people in their custody from the threat of sexual victimization.

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