

# Stopping prison rape

## Rape is a crime. Corrections officers, of all people, need to know that

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Even by the standards of the Texas justice system, the number of rapes committed in our prisons is astounding. And it's even more appalling that most of the rapists are corrections officers — the very people charged with enforcing our laws.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that of the 10 U.S. prisons with the highest rates of sexual abuse, five are in Texas. The Estelle Unit, in Huntsville, is No. 1 on that wretched list.

Nationwide, 4.5 percent of prisoners report that they've been sexually victimized in the last 12 months. At the Estelle Unit, it's 15.7 percent. Assuming that Estelle is running near its capacity, that means roughly 470 people are raped there each year; many of those victims are raped more than once.

The other four Texas prisons on the list — the Clements Unit in Amarillo; the Allred Unit near Wichita Falls; the Mountain View Unit near Gatesville; and the Coffield Unit near Tennessee Colony — had rates between 9.3 percent and 13.9 percent.

Most often, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics surveys, the rapists are corrections staff. The prisoners most at risk tend to be the weakest: women, gay men, juvenile offenders, the mentally disabled, the physically small and those new to life behind bars.

In every state, it's a crime for corrections officers to have sex with prisoners, whether it's consensual or not. But that crime is rarely prosecuted.

That needs to change. And lately, we have reason to hope that it will.

In 2003, George W. Bush signed the Prison Rape Elimination Act, which prompted the studies we're quoting. Attorney General Eric Holder hopes that soon he'll be able to implement the actions those studies suggested. Some of those common-sense standards seem easy to put into effect: Have a written policy of zero tolerance toward all forms of sexual abuse, whether by prisoners or corrections personnel; make it mandatory that staff report any suspicions; assess inmates' risk of abuse; protect those most in danger. (Meaning: Don't put a scrawny, new-to-prison 18-year-old in the same cell as a big, violent known rapist.)

Harder to change, though, will be the code of silence that protects staff at many prisons. As Linda McFarlane, deputy director of Just Detention, recently told the Chronicle, each prison “is sort of an entity unto itself.” For that reason, one of the recommendations under consideration is particularly important: requiring regular independent audits of every prison or jail and making that data public.

How much do we need those independent audits? Consider the West Texas State School, a juvenile prison repeatedly praised by the Texas Youth Commission's internal quality assurance monitors — even as the school's staff was complaining to their higher-ups, and even to officials in Austin, that two high-ranking officials had been sexually abusing teenage inmates for more than a year. A volunteer alerted the Texas Rangers, and an investigation uncovered significant evidence that the officials used a combination of bribes and threats to ensure both cooperation and silence. After refusing advances, one boy was locked in solitary confinement for more than 13 hours.

Even after that investigation, neither the area's district attorney nor the Department of Justice pressed charges against the two men, who found jobs elsewhere (one at a school). Only after the Texas Observer broke the story, and the scandal became public knowledge, did anyone act to clean up the school.

Secrecy is sexual abuse's best ally. And in prison, it's all too easy to keep secrets.