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Allegations of sexual misconduct by federal prison staff growing

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Allegations of sexual misconduct and sexual abuse of federal inmates at the hands of prison staff have doubled in the past eight years, growing at a faster rate than both the prison population and prison staff, according to an analysis by the Justice Department.

The study by the Office of Inspector General, which reviewed allegations made in fiscal years 2001 to 2008 - including five at the federal prison in Talladega - led the OIG to conclude that efforts made by the Bureau of Prisons to prevent sexual abuse need to be re-evaluated.

Prison officials, however, said the number of complaints has grown because of their efforts to encourage reporting of such incidents.

The inspector general reported:

Complaints of sex abuse rose 104 percent, from 76 in fiscal year 2001 to 155 in fiscal year 2008. There were 33 reports of sexual misconduct in fiscal 2001 and 76 in 2008, a 130 percent increase.

Female staffers make up 27 percent of the BOP staff but were subjects in 30 percent to 39 percent of the complaints.

A total of 1,585 sex abuse and sexual misconduct complaints were filed during the period studied. Complaints were made at all but one of the federal system's 93 prison locations. Ten complaints were made at facilities in Montgomery and Talladega. Officials at those facilities referred questions to officials in Washington.

BOP spokeswoman Traci Billingsley said prison officials' encouraging inmates to report abuse has led to the increased numbers. "Over the last several years we have done a great deal of educating, of both inmates and staff, about the importance of reporting any and all possible cases of abuse," she said. "It is not surprising that due to this initiative, as well as the increase in our population, that the number of allegations have increased."

An investigation determined the five allegations made at the Federal Prison Camp in Montgomery were unfounded, but the five complaints made at the Federal Correctional Institution in Talladega still are being investigated, Billingsley said.

She could not comment on the specifics of the incidents under investigation in Talladega. But she said the complaints range from an allegation that a staff member told crude jokes to inmates to another that an inmate had witnessed a sexual encounter between an inmate and a staff member.

The OIG report described an incident at one facility of a supervisor abandoning his post to have sex with a female inmate. In another case described in the report, a ring of correctional officers provided contraband to inmates in return for sexual favors, even providing BOP employees with keys to offices to use for rendezvous between staff and inmates.

Billingsley said the number of allegations found to be true across the prison system - up to 28 a year - is considerably lower than the number of complaints filed.

"It is a tiny number who engage in this type of behavior," Billingsley said. "Nevertheless, even one is too many and we are committed to continuing our education and training efforts. We encourage staff and inmates to continue to report any suspected incidents."

The BOP has about 36,000 employees and 171,000 inmates. It had 125,560 inmates at the beginning of the 2001 fiscal year.

Results from the BOP's efforts to prevent staff sexual abuse have been mixed, the OIG report said. Staff training isn't effective and does not adequately address the challenges female staff face while working with male inmates, the report said.

'Power dynamic':

Billingsley said it was not surprising that a disproportionate number of allegations were made against female workers, since the overwhelming majority of inmates are male.

Adam Lankford, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama, said women in positions of power often don't see anything wrong with sex abuse.

"I think there is an obvious parallel with the prison cases and the cases of female teachers having sex with their male students," Lankford said. "It's the same power dynamic. They rationalize that they aren't doing anything wrong because of the long history of men being in power when it comes to sex relations. They don't feel they can be the abuser, and the male victims often encourage it."

The study found that prosecutors brought 90 cases against BOP employees during the eight years studied. Convictions were obtained in all but seven cases. The study found that female staff members were less likely than their male counterparts to receive prison time. Those who did received shorter sentences.

One of the OIG's recommendations is to improve training for female staff working in male prisons and focus on preventing and detecting abuse of male inmates. The BOP said it will include information on that topic at its next annual training session. Other recommendations the BOP agreed with included updating training manuals and conducting reviews to gauge the effectiveness of prevention programs.

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