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Sex abuse, violence alleged at teen jails across U.S.

- Story Highlights
- U.S. Justice Department suing 11 jurisdictions, alleging abuse of teen inmates
- Girls as young as 13 say they were shackled for days at Mississippi lock-up
- An official at a Texas jail allegedly offered birthday cake for sex with teen
- "It's a nationwide crisis," says expert with 30 years experience in juvenile justice

By Ashley Fantz
CNN

JACKSON, Mississippi (CNN) -- Girls as young as 13 say they were shackled for weeks at a time in Mississippi.


A Texas teen was allegedly offered birthday cake in exchange for sex.

A guard drove his knee into the neck of a frail suicidal Ohio boy after the youth was wrestled to the ground and held down by other guards who stripped him and covered his face with a smock, a state report said.

More than two dozen girls at an Indiana lock-up describe "networking" -- their term for sneaking into each other's cells to have sex, with no interference from guards.

This is a glimpse into what America's juvenile jails look like, according to lawsuits, criminal cases and experts who have spent years delving into what they call a broken system.

"It's a nationwide crisis that has been going on for years, one the public has never been told the extent of," said psychiatric social worker Jerome Miller, the co-founder of the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, who has evaluated and helped reform juvenile jails for more than three decades.

This summer, Mississippi plans to close Columbia Training School, a juvenile facility that houses mostly minor offenders. They are often runaways from abusive homes.  [Listen to stories of Mississippi's teen lock-ups »](#)

Erica was 16 when she was sentenced to Columbia after running away, a probation violation of an earlier marijuana conviction.

She admits she was a girl quick to sass her parents, full of anger about the death of a relative that happened around the same time Katrina wrecked her family's Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, home.

Nervously touching a sparkly barrette in her red hair, she cries as she describes how guards forced her legs into tight metal shackles. She said she was cuffed and chained when she ate and used the bathroom -- and was even forced to play soccer that way against other girls.

Guards called her "Chain Gang," she said.

"I will always remember them things around my ankles, the way they cut into me," she said, pulling up her pant leg to show slash-mark scars on her ankles and heels. "They made you feel like you were nothing."

 [Watch teen explain suicide attempt was cry for help »](#)

Represented by attorneys with the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), Erica and nine other girls housed at Columbia are suing the state, claiming they endured a range of sexual and physical abuse, including shackling. Don Desper, a licensed therapist and former employee at Columbia who opposed the practice, told CNN it was used to prevent the teens from escaping.

In a handwritten affidavit, a 15-year-old girl described a male guard molesting her. She wrote: "He came inside my cell half way half of his body and he started touching me and he tryed (sic) to kiss me and then he left he came back with my snack in his hand and he opened my cell again and he started grabbing me around my waist and he tryed (sic) to stick his hands in my pants and I started crying."

When the lawsuit was filed in 2007, a U.S. Justice Department monitor was making periodic inspections at Columbia as part of a 2005 settlement with Mississippi in a previous case. The Justice investigation that led to that settlement found Columbia youths were hog-tied, forced to strip and eat their own vomit and were held in isolation in what was called the "Dark Room," a windowless room with a hole in the floor used as a toilet. [Read the Justice Department report that describes girls being shackled to poles](#)

Hundreds of youths have allegedly suffered similar abuse at juvenile detention centers across the United States, according to experts interviewed by CNN and court records checked for this story.

The [U.S. Justice Department](#) has sued nine states and two territories alleging abuse, inadequate mental and medical care and potentially dangerous methods like the use of restraints. The department doesn't have the power to shut down facilities -- states do -- but through litigation it can force a state to improve its detention centers and protect the civil rights of jailed youths.

Another facility under Justice scrutiny is Oakley Training School near Jackson, Mississippi, which was sued by the department at the same time as Columbia. Gov. Haley Barbour recently announced Columbia's inmates would be transferred this summer to Oakley when Columbia is closed.

But the Justice Department said Oakley has satisfied barely a fraction of requirements the department set for it years ago. According to a March 2008 Justice report, there is an "enormous amount of work" needed to make Oakley a safe and productive place to rehabilitate troubled teens.

Barbour would not respond to questions for this report. The Mississippi Department of Human Services, which runs Columbia and Oakley, refused to answer most of a CNN public records request citing pending litigation and also declined to be interviewed.

The U.S. Justice Department could not talk specifically about ongoing cases, but Lisa Krigsten, civil rights division principal deputy assistant attorney general, noted the department is going after double the number of juvenile jails for civil rights violations during the Bush administration than in any previous administration.

"We take this seriously and are committed to protecting the vulnerable children who are in these places," she said.

A CNN check of other juvenile facilities shows that, despite years of court wrangling, serious problems persist.

In Ohio, a dozen employees at the Scioto Juvenile Correctional Facility have been indicted since 2003 on charges relating to physical and sexual abuse of youth, according to a May 2007 Justice report. Five were convicted of various charges, including sexual battery and assault; six cases were dismissed and a jury found one employee not guilty.

In January, a state-hired consultant blamed a "culture of violence" in Ohio's juvenile jails for numerous abuses. The expert's report details examples of "egregious use of force" by guards and included a video he viewed of a 2007 incident in which a "frail" boy who was threatening to harm himself was restrained by guards.

The boy was wrestled to the ground, cuffed and stripped, with one guard seen putting his full body weight on the boy's back while driving his knee into the boy's neck.

A so-called "Suicide Smock" was placed "over his airways," the report said. "The youth actually screams that he can't breathe."

In response to the report, the Ohio Department of Youth Services, which oversees detention facilities, has installed more

surveillance cameras and beefed up its mental health care staff, spokeswoman Andrea Kruse said.

"We're doing everything we can to improve," she said.

On Thursday, Ohio announced settlement of a suit brought by Children's Law Center of Kentucky. It will add up to \$30 million annually to its juvenile justice budget and hire more guards, psychologists and teachers for its system.

Accusations similar to those made in Ohio were made at a Florida boot camp in 2006. Martin Lee Anderson, 14, was seen on surveillance tape being beaten and restrained by guards. Anderson later died. Seven guards and a nurse were acquitted of manslaughter in October.

Since then, the NAACP's Florida chapter has called for an investigation of the state's teen jails, noting at least seven youths have died at lock-ups since 2000, including 17-year-old Omar Paisley, who died at a Miami detention center of a ruptured appendix after begging for help during three days that he was in pain.

A grand jury found that two nurses repeatedly failed to help Paisley. They are charged with third degree murder and manslaughter, have pleaded not guilty and are scheduled for trial in July.

Florida issued a report in January asking for more than 50 changes to its system and a partnership with the Department of Education to attack problems before kids drop out of school. Overall, the report calls for treating troubled kids with therapy as an alternative to jail.

Texas is grappling with the fallout from reports of long-term sexual abuse at its facilities, where, since 2000, more than 90 Texas Youth Commission employees -- roughly one a month -- have been sanctioned or fired for sexual misconduct with adolescents, commission spokesman Jim Hurley told CNN.

Texas granted early release in February to a 16-year-old girl who attempted suicide after she was allegedly molested repeatedly by a male guard. The guard was indicted in December on four counts of molesting the girl. He was previously charged with raping four other female inmates, but those charges were dropped, said Hurley, after witnesses retracted their accounts.

This spring, two administrators at a west Texas youth facility are scheduled to stand trial on charges they were having sex with juvenile inmates, one allegedly enticing a teen to perform sex acts for birthday cake. The men resigned in 2005, Hurley said.

Texas recently has added hundreds more surveillance cameras and personnel to its facilities to avoid more problems, he said.

"Girls are sexually abused in these institutions more often than the public would believe," said Paul DeMuro, a delinquency expert who in 2002 inspected Columbia for the Justice Department and is now a consultant for the Southern Poverty Law Center. Nationwide, the Justice Department has said 2,821 allegations of sex abuse were made in 2004, the most recent data on the topic available.

An Indiana juvenile judge said there's another dimension of sexual misconduct happening at Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility -- inmate on inmate sex.

State Judge Peter Nemeth is refusing to send female offenders to the lock-up after a team of delinquency experts interviewed a total of 31 girls at the facility. The girls described "networking," or sneaking into each other's cells for sex. Members of the team told CNN that locks on cells were not working, allowing the young women to leave and enter their cells whenever they wish.

One girl interviewed said a guard had participated in the sex.

"It's a dangerous place," said Nemeth, who is sending youths to two other facilities at more than twice the cost to taxpayers. "It seems like chaos to me, very little discipline. The girls say they are running the place."

In March, the Indiana Department of Correction said it is transferring boys at the facility to another lock-up, which Nemeth hopes will allow more staffers to oversee the girls section. "It may be a step in the right direction," he said, but won't necessarily solve the problem of girls frequently having sex with other girls.

Before March, the judge detailed his concerns in two letters to Gov. Mitch Daniels, whose office referred all questions for this story to Indiana Department of Correction spokesman Doug Garrison.

"We disagree with the judge's characterization," Garrison said, adding that no investigation at the facility has substantiated

the girls' claims.

When Erica was held at Columbia, she said she didn't think anyone would believe her accounts of abuse. It's taken months of therapy, including some counseling at a YMCA, which she found in her small Mississippi hometown.

Erica talks about wanting to be an attorney. It's the first time in her life she is considering her future. She tries not to think about Columbia, but smiles when she talks about the facility closing.

"I'm happy, real happy," said Erica. "That means nobody is going to get hurt there again."

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