

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Sun, Dec. 28, 2008

Probe: Sex assaults by staff on inmates 'a problem' at federal prisons

A female inmate's brutal experience of sexual assaults by guards at the Federal Detention Center in Miami isn't uncommon in U.S. prisons.

Justice Department investigators concluded in a 2005 report that staff sexual assaults on inmates is a "significant problem" in federal prisons.

The department's Office of the Inspector General said it investigated hundreds of allegations of inmate sexual abuse by U.S. Bureau of Prison personnel nationwide.

Such cases make up about 12 percent of the inspector general's total investigations every year.

From 2000 to 2004, the office opened investigations of 351 correctional officers and other staff accused of sexually abusing inmates -- with slightly more than half resulting in administrative punishment or criminal prosecutions.

The report -- stressing that "staff sexual relations with inmates is always illegal" -- recommended that Congress toughen the punishment for offenders, from a misdemeanor with a maximum one-year prison term to a felony carrying up to five years' imprisonment.

Last year, lawmakers made the change to a felony, imposing a maximum penalty of 15 years.

-- JAY WEAVER

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