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U.S. says sex abuse high at 13 juvenile centers

By Martha T. Moore, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — More than 12% of children in juvenile prisons are sexually victimized, according to a Justice Department survey out Thursday, and the vast majority of cases involve boys and female staff at the facility.

In the worst facilities surveyed — in Indiana, Maryland and Texas — more than 30% of children reported they were sexually victimized; all three states have been sued by the Justice Department for allegedly failing to protect children in their facilities from harm.

The rate of sexual victimization is more than seven times higher than indicated by a 2008 Justice Department report that collected sexual abuse claims to juvenile facility administrators.

The survey showed that 10.3% of youths reported the sexual contact was with staff, compared with 2.6% who reported sexual victimization by other children. In incidents with staff, 4.3% of youths reported having sexual contact as a result of force. Boys were more likely than girls to report sexual activity with facility staff (10.8% compared with 4.7%), but girls were more likely to report forced sexual activity with another youth (9.1% compared with 2%).

The survey, which included 9,198 interviews with teenagers, is the first of its kind and included methods to eliminate interviews considered unreliable. The survey covered 195 facilities, more than three-fourths state-run and the remainder locally or privately operated. Approximately 26,550 juveniles — 91% of them boys — are held in more than 500 such facilities around the country.

Sexual victimization of youths in custody "is one of those hidden closets of the system," said Bart Lubow, director of the juvenile justice and strategy group for the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which advocates for children. He called the double-digit rate "startling" and the rates at the worst facilities "so high they're stunning."

"I am, on the other hand, never surprised as people peel the layers of the youth corrections onion and expose more and more things that make you cry," Lubow said.

The survey named six juvenile facilities where more than 30% of the youths held there reported being sexually abused: Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility in Indiana; Corsicana Residential Treatment Center in Texas; Backbone Mountain Youth Center in Swanton, Md.; Samarkand Youth Development Center in Eagle Springs, N.C.; Cresson Secure Treatment Unit in Pennsylvania; and the Culpeper Juvenile Correctional Center, Long Term, in Mitchells, Va.

Seven sites reported levels of sexual abuse or victimization that were nearly as high: Victory Field Correctional Academy in Vernon, Texas; Indianapolis Juvenile Correctional Facility; Shawono Center in Grayling, Mich.; Woodland Hills Youth Development Center in Nashville; L.E. Rader Center in Sand Springs, Okla.; Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center in Virginia; and New Jersey Training School in Monroe Township, N.J.

"We take this very, very seriously," said spokesman Doug Garrison of the Indiana Department of Corrections, which runs two facilities with rates of sexual victimization among the highest in the survey. He says his department's own statistics on sexual victimization are not as high as those in the Justice Department's survey.

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