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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://justdetention.org/floridas-lowell-prison-is-cesspool-of-sexual-abuse-by-staff-feds-say-in-blistering-report/>

Campaign and Advocacy

In a scathing rebuke of Floridas Department of Corrections, the U.S. Department of Justice has found that officers at Lowell Correctional Institution have raped, sodomized, beaten and choked countless female inmates as part of a pattern of civil rights abuses that goes back years.

The sexual torment by staff at the womens prison so horrified DOJ investigators that they have put the state on notice, instructing prison officials to institute remedial measures to protect inmates within 49 days or face legal consequences.

[The] sexual abuse of women prisoners by Lowell corrections officers and staff is severe and prevalent throughout the prison, DOJ said in a report issued Tuesday. These acts, DOJ noted, continue at the Central Florida prison in violation the Eighth Amendments ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

For at least a decade, women at the prison have complained that officers tramp through their dorms and showers and grope, rape and threaten to beat and even kill them if they dont comply with the officers sexual demands. If they report the abuse, they are subjected to retaliation, thrown into solitary confinement or lose visiting privileges with their children and families.

Inmates told Justice Department investigators that they are attacked in bathrooms, closets, laundry areas, outdoors and in officers stations. Sometimes officers march into their sleeping quarters in the middle of the night and force themselves upon them.

We are so used to Lowell getting away with everything. Its got to stop now. I hope this is a big hammer on top of that prison, said Debra Bennett, an activist who has been fighting for reforms at Lowell for years.

Our punishment was to be removed from society for our crimes not to be raped or groped or pushed and beaten, crippled and killed.

Federal investigators reviewed over 100,000 pages of documents and interviewed dozens of inmates at the facility, the second-largest womens prison in the country.

The sprawling, dilapidated compound, located in Ocala, has been the focus of federal scrutiny since 2018. Lawyers for DOJs civil rights division began meeting with inmates and their families about the inhumane conditions and abuses that had been documented in a 2015 Miami Herald investigative series, Beyond Punishment.

The DOJ discovered that the prisons culture not only fostered an environment where sexual assault and exploitation happened; they found it was thriving. This is in large part because the Florida Department of Corrections continues to soft-pedal investigations, allowing guards with numerous sexual assault complaints to continue working in the prison. This condones the behavior, DOJ said.

Prisoners spoke of sex between staff and prisoners as a regular event, suggesting a normalization of sexual abuse by staff, the report said.

Corrections officers frequently withhold basic necessities, such as soap and toilet paper, from the prisoners as leverage to get them to perform sexual favors, the DOJ found.

Even as DOJ investigators were visiting the prison and collecting evidence, prison staff continued to intimidate and sexually violate Lowell inmates.

Among the litany of crimes listed in the report was a 2018 incident in which a sergeant grabbed an inmate, pulled her clothes off and sodomized her; another involved an officer who took a prisoner outdoors, pushed her down on the ground and put his penis in her mouth; a third cited an officer with a history of sexual abuse complaints who woke an inmate in the middle of the night, forced her to have sex, then supplied her with prescription drugs.

These were not isolated incidents, DOJ said.

Some of the violence was documented with photographs and other evidence. One woman, for example, suffered lacerations and bruises

on her neck when a guard grabbed her by the throat and forced her to perform oral sex. Another inmate who was raped saved her clothing so that investigators could test it for DNA.

Prisoners were forced or coerced to perform fellatio on or touch intimate body parts of staff. In other incidents, staff demanded that prisoners undress in front them, sometimes in exchange for basic necessities, such as toilet paper.

The report demands reforms, but DOJ stopped short of holding anyone criminally liable or accountable.

They could never make this a criminal case because they would have to arrest everybody. That prison is so corrupt that everyone is in on it, said Bennett, who was incarcerated at Lowell years ago and now runs a nonprofit to assist women at the prison.

Tuesday evening, hours after a comment on the report was requested from FDC, the department released the following statement in the name of Secretary Mark Inch:

FDC has cooperated fully with the U.S. Department of Justices Civil Rights Division during their investigation initiated in 2017 and will continue to do so. We appreciate the work of the U.S. Department of Justice and will be sharing the actions our Department has taken to address the serious concerns outlined in their review.

Gov. Ron DeSantis office did not respond to a request for comment.

Its shocking to see this kind of sexual abuse at every level of the prison, from trainees to lieutenants. Its just been acceptable at that facility, said Julie Abbate, former deputy chief of special investigations in DOJ's civil rights division.

Floridas own prison investigators condone the violent behavior by ignoring or losing evidence, dismissing credible complaints from staff and administering trivial discipline to officers who were caught, DOJ said. The agency often inordinately delayed investigations or kept them open indefinitely, transferred repeat offenders to other prisons or simply moved officers to different locations on the compound where they continued to grope and rape inmates, the report said.

A Lowell sergeant, who was arrested in February 2017 on charges of having sexual intercourse with a prisoner had been the subject of numerous allegations for years, some of which had been closed by [FDC investigators] as unfounded despite being inadequately investigated, DOJ said.

By under-exploring or ignoring potential available evidence or abruptly closing a case without completing the investigative process, [FDC] fails to provide accountability and corrective action to prevent future sexual abuse.

DOJ cited the Miami Herald's series about rampant physical and sexual abuse at Lowell as putting the state on notice years ago about the risk of harm and serious civil rights violations against women. Yet, the piecemeal measures that FDC instituted after the series failed to meet the agency's constitutional obligations to protect inmates, DOJ said.

For example, Justice Department investigators found that FDC has known for some time that staffers have used mezzanine areas at Lowell for sexual encounters with inmates, but have not installed cameras to cover those areas.

In another case, FDC showed blatant disregard for inmate safety by ignoring multiple sexual assault complaints filed against an officer.

While this officer was ultimately relocated to another facility, it took ten allegations involving sexual misconduct before action was taken against the officer, the report said.

The prison systems history of corruption and abuse and its inability to adequately supervise corrections officers and staff at Lowell has forced the Justice Department to intervene to protect inmates constitutional rights, DOJ said.

Abbate said its imperative that FDC institute independent monitoring at Lowell, because the unlawful behavior is so ingrained that the sexual abuse of female inmates wont end until there is new oversight at the prison.

This is about fixing it going forward. Its important to have a culture change so this doesnt happen again. Its the same disregard for prisoner humanity, whether its sexual, physical or mental abuse all across Florida prisons, she said.

Originally posted [here](#)