

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/justice-department-launches-investigation-sexual-abuse-tutwiler-prison/>

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Lawyers with the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice were at Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama, last week as part of a formal inquiry into widespread sexual abuse of women prisoners by male guards.

Last year, [EJI filed a complaint with the Justice Department](#) calling for a swift and thorough federal investigation into the rampant abuse at Tutwiler, where in interviews with more than 50 incarcerated women, EJI had uncovered evidence of frequent and severe officer-on-inmate sexual violence.

Consultants with the National Institute of Corrections conducted an assessment of conditions at the prison and earlier this year released a report finding that female prisoners who report sexual abuse and misconduct at Tutwiler routinely have been placed in segregation, stripped of their property, denied contact with their families, and forced to submit to unwanted medical procedures.

The Justice Departments Civil Rights Division has now opened a formal investigation under the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act (CRIPA) of 1980, a federal law intended to protect the rights of people in state or local correctional facilities, nursing homes, mental health facilities, and institutions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The Special Litigation Section enforces CRIPA, which provides that lawyers must first determine if the facility falls under the authority of the law. The section then reviews all complaints to determine whether the allegations merit a more extensive investigation.

The assistant attorney general decides whether the evidence warrants a full investigation. If the decision is made to investigate, the State is given at least one weeks notice, after which, the Justice Department contacts State officials to arrange for a tour of the facility and may ask officials to produce documents relevant to the case.

The attorney generals office has notified the Alabama Department of Corrections and begun touring Tutwiler prison and interviewing witnesses to civil rights violations there. If a pattern of violations is uncovered, the assistant attorney general will send a findings letter that states the alleged violations, explains evidence that was found to support the findings, and defines the minimum steps required to correct the violations.

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