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5 juvenile detainees report staff molestation

Survey prompts effort to improve protection

By Kristina Davis

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County probation officials are reviewing how they can better protect juveniles in custody after five boys at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility reported in a national survey that they had been sexually victimized by a jail staff member.

Of the 38 boys surveyed at East Mesa, a boys-only facility in east Otay Mesa, 14 percent said they had been the victim of sexual misconduct by a staff member in the past year.

When asked about the sexual encounters, 3 percent said the staff member used force.

"Given the number of kids that come through our facility and those that responded, I would say I'm somewhat surprised at the number of kids who claimed an incident," said San Diego County Chief Probation Officer Mack Jenkins.

The roughly 230 boys housed at East Mesa are generally serving longer sen-

SEE Juvenile, B4

JUVENILE

CONTINUED FROM B1

County's other facility wasn't part of survey

tences for more serious crimes.

The other county juvenile facility, which is slightly larger and houses boys and girls in Kearny Mesa, was not included in the survey. Inmates there are usually serving shorter sentences or waiting for their cases to be adjudicated.

The National Survey of Youth in Custody, released this month by the U.S. Department of Justice, questioned nearly 9,200 children in 195 juvenile facilities as part of the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003, which requires federal authorities to analyze the prevalence of sexual victimization behind bars each year.

Nationwide, 10 percent of the youth reported an incident involving staff, and 95 percent said the incident was with a female staffer.

"What we're seeing now is just the tip of the iceberg," said Sue Burrell, an attorney at the Youth Law Center in San Francisco. "It's a lot more common than anyone

wants to admit. Kids are reluctant to report sexual misconduct by staff because they think it's just going to be their word against the staff, and no one will take them seriously."

The survey participants were granted anonymity, meaning probation officials were not provided with specific allegations against staff members.

"Even if other staff are aware of this misconduct, it's really uncomfortable for them. There's a code-of-silence problem," Burrell said. "What this kind of report can do ... is help to strengthen other staff members' resolve to not let this kind of thing go by."

In the past year, three female staffers have been investigated for alleged sexual misconduct with boys at East Mesa, Jenkins said.

"Of the three, two of the staff resigned prior to us completing the investigation, and the third allegation was unfounded," Jenkins said.

No criminal charges were filed in the cases.

The three cases were brought to the attention of officials by other staff members, not juveniles.

Since 2004, 10 such investigations have been conducted at both juvenile facilities, though some incidents allegedly involved minors who weren't in custody.

"We are reviewing all processes we have in place to prevent these types of incidents," Jenkins said.

The county facilities already comply with national recommended standards, he said, including advising youth daily about reporting sexual harassment.

The recent investigations into staff members also prompted officials to meet with the county's hiring psychologists to improve the screening process.

"We gave them information on the profiles of the staff members we had concerns about," Jenkins said. "We want to carefully review hiring process, including screening interviewees so we can detect that type of staffer who might have boundary issues or tendencies to become involved in inappropriate relationships with kids in custody."

Officials also are looking into further training for staff members.

No sexual incidents involving fellow minors were reported in East Mesa, possibly because most inmates don't share cells, Jenkins said. Most of the facility is monitored with video cameras.

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