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Records Show Surge in Sexual Attacks in Prisons

By Associated Press

DALLAS – Sexual assaults in state prisons are up sharply, with hundreds of inmates reporting that they were attacked by cellmates or corrections officers.

The number of reported sexual assaults in Texas prisons has increased 160 percent, to 609 in 2004 from 234 in 2000, according to state records.

At least 129 Texas prisoners have alleged that they were raped or had sexual contact with corrections officers since 2000, the records show. Claims of inmate-on-inmate rape was even more frequent.

State officials said the increase in reported assaults resulted from their vigilance in punishing offenders.

However, inmate advocates said the problem is greater than the state figures show. They have begun a nationwide legal campaign against assaults and the complacency that they say allows them to flourish.

“I really have become convinced over the last three years or so that Texas is the prison-rape capital of the country,” said Margaret Winter, a lawyer who represents two inmates who sued the prison system. “When prisoners report it, they are ignored, laughed at and often punished.”

Former Texas inmate Roderick Johnson, who said prison officials did nothing as gangs bought and sold him as a sex slave, is suing seven administrators and staff members from the Allred

Unit in Iowa Park, near Wichita Falls. Set for trial in July, the case involves whether prison officials violated the inmate's Eighth Amendment protection from cruel and unusual punishment.

According to the lawsuit, prison administrators refused to protect Johnson because he is gay.

Cases such as Johnson's are described as common by prison-rape victims' attorneys who contend that corrections officers often don't bother to investigate the claims. Some officers even regard the crime as a natural byproduct of incarceration, the attorneys have said.

Most sexual assaults do not produce criminal prosecutions, according to records. However, prison officials say they take rape allegations seriously, adding that the number of claimed attacks is low for a prison population of 151,000 inmates.

"The message is hammered constantly that we do not tolerate rape in Texas prisons," said Mike Viesca, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. "People are more comfortable reporting these incidents because they know we take them seriously."

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