

Guards, police charged with abuse of prisoners at New York area jails

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5 February 2000

Officials arrested four corrections officers employed at the Westchester County jail last week on charges that the men sexually abused female prisoners. The guards, who work in the facility's women's quarters at the jail north of New York City, are accused of rape and sodomy, as well as forcing prisoners to strip in front of them.

The investigation into the allegations began after the Westchester County district attorney received a letter from a victim's friend in June of last year. The evidence, based in part on interviews with 33 former and current inmates, contends that Carlos Aldarnodo and Javier Corona raped female prisoners, the former in the woman's cell, the latter in a supply closet. Michael Downey and Robert Escalera are charged with forcing female prisoners to remove their clothes in front of them. One victim claims that Escalera would not give her medication to dispel the pain from a toothache, unless she exposed various body parts. When the tooth, which later required extraction, continued to ache and the patient requested additional medication, the victim accused Escalera of requiring that she remove additional clothing.

Investigators, who say the incidents have occurred intermittently since April 1997, maintain that the officers warned the prisoners not to tell anyone or complain.

William Rehm, a detective on the case, stated that thus far nothing has led the investigators "to believe that there was any kind of cover-up or that any other corrections officers had knowledge of what was going on." However, the recent allegations are not isolated incidences. Since 1994, three other jail guards at the Westchester institution have been convicted of sex related crimes against prisoners.

The response of the county authorities has been to

initiate a change in prison policy, to begin in the next couple of weeks, that would only allow female corrections officers to oversee cells in the women's quarters. County Executive Andrew Spano stated last week, "We don't want men any longer to have access to the living quarters of female prisoners." Male guards will still be allowed to monitor female prisoners outside of residence areas.

Following the announcement, the union covering the jail guards, the Westchester Correction Officers Benevolent Association, said it would legally challenge the new policy, on the grounds that it discriminated against male guards.

Numerous advocacy groups and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, have documented the systematic nature of sexual abuse of women inmates in US prisons. But this is only one of the forms of mistreatment and brutality that occurs at all levels of the criminal justice system.

On the same day that the news broke about the Westchester County jail guards, six police officers in another part of the New York metropolitan area—Newark, New Jersey—were indicted by a grand jury for beating a man arrested on sexual assault charges. In addition to the pummeling that took place in the kitchen of the precinct house, the officers stand accused of instigating a further beating of the man by other inmates.

According to prosecutors, after a police sergeant and four rookie cops finished with Emmanuel Aldea, they made a point of informing his cell mates what he had been accused of, knowing full well this would subject him to further violence. Four inmates were also indicted in the beating that left Aldea with facial injuries and a broken nose. Aldea's mother, who complained after her son's release on bail, says Aldea is

mentally retarded. He has yet to be tried for the assault charges brought against him.



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