

Harris County Jail Has One of the Worst Sexual Assault Rates in the Country

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Nelson Mandela once said that “no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails,” and that “a nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.” If Mandela is right—and he was certainly someone in a position to know—then the judgments one can make against Harris County are fairly unkind.

That’s the conclusion it’s hard not to draw, anyway, based on the Department of Justice’s review of prison rape. The study carried out on behalf of the federal agency found that the Harris County Jail at 1200 Baker Street in Houston features a staggering 7.6 percent assault rate, more than twice the national average, according to the report ([which you can view in full via Grits For Breakfast](#)). That puts Houston’s jail at number three, nationwide, for incidences of assault.

What’s perhaps most shocking about these numbers is that they aren’t based on inmate-on-inmate assault in a long-term prison facility. While there’s obviously no justification whatsoever for a nation with a functioning justice system to allow for its inmates to be raped while in long-

term custody, the incidents found in Harris County are actually of a different nature, [according to the *Houston Chronicle*](#):

After several minutes of reading an opening statement describing the jail system he commands, which is the nation's third-largest, [Harris County Sheriff Adrian] Garcia was cut off by a panelist and urged to get to the point of the sexual assault statistics.

He responded by listing the things his department has done in the past five years to protect the inmate population, including additional staff hiring; changes to inmate screening; changing hiring and training procedures; setting up a hot line for inmates to report abuse; and adding \$800,000 of video cameras to the network at the Baker Street jail.

Although the survey found inmate-on-inmate abuse, Garcia has moved aggressively to curb staff-on-inmate abuse.

The most serious incident came to light in 2011. An internal investigation found “numerous” female inmates had sexual relations with jailers in the laundry rooms of two downtown jails, apparently in exchange for favors.

The article from the *Chronicle* is behind a paywall, but subscribers would do well to read it in full, as it depicts a system in which women, mostly incarcerated for short periods, were victimized by the people responsible for them. There are reports of excessive force used on prisoners, unauthorized strip searches, and jail staff trading drinks and cigarettes for sex.

In an environment like a jail, it's reasonable to ask whether consent is even possible, which raises questions about whether an arrangement of bartering sex for cigarettes and sodas from someone who has the authority to deliver excessive punishments could possibly be consensual.

The *Chronicle* reports that prisoners who go through the Baker Street jail are typically in there for about 72 hours.

The numbers for inmate-on-inmate assault aren't much better. The Baker Street unit still comes in third place, behind Ripley County Jail in Indiana and Philadelphia City Riverside Correctional Facility, with a rate of over six percent. According to the report, inmate-on-inmate sexual violence comes in at under two percent on average in jails, nationally. (The rates on prisons are higher, and both Beaumont's Stiles Unit and Lubbock's Montford Psychiatric Facility place in the top five there.)

It is worth noting, as both the *Chronicle* and Grits For Breakfast do, that Garcia and the Harris County Sheriff's Office have been proactive in attempting to correct this course—and Garcia himself noted that the county's three other facilities come in well below the national average. Sheriff's Office public affairs director Alan Bernstein described the county as “ahead of the curve” in investigating and preventing abuse. Still, as Grits points out, the fact that the Sheriff's Office disputes the study's findings in the media, but that Garcia declined to challenge it before the DoJ itself is a bit telling:

[I]t seems a bit disingenuous to decline the opportunity to attack it at the DOJ where his counterclaims could be interrogated. I'm sure Mr. Bernstein will show up soon in the comments to tell us the survey was flawed, all the problems have been fixed, so "move along, nothing to see here." [...] But if Garcia isn't willing to dispute the survey results when called before the review panel that issued them, those criticisms start to seem a little less credible.