

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## Ohio youth agency responds to high sex-victimization stats

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Posted Feb 27, 2020 at 1:36 PM

The top official in the Ohio department that oversees the state's juvenile-detention system outlined Thursday what's being done in response to a federal agency's finding that Ohio's system is the worst in the nation on one index of sexual victimization.

A U.S. Justice Department survey of 6,049 juvenile prisoners released in December found that 15.3% of Ohio's incarcerated youths reported forced or coerced sexual activity with other youths or staff members in 2018, the highest percentage in the United States.

In prepared remarks, Ohio Department of Youth Services Assistant Director Julie Walburn explained to the Correctional Institution Inspection Committee what has been done since 2018 — and why she didn't report the results of the federal survey when she met with the committee in December, just after receiving them.

"We received an embargoed copy of the survey report only a few days before, and we were prohibited by the federal government from sharing the report or discussing it in any way," Walburn told the panel.

"We know that some members of this committee felt we were painting a rosy picture of our agency, but we were simply following directions of the previous CIIC Executive Director (Charlie Adams), who asked us to come in to talk about programming and educational initiatives at our facilities. DYS, certainly, and I never intended to mislead this committee."

Walburn noted that a smaller percentage of the state's incarcerated youths reported sexual abuse in 2018 than did in 2012, when the proportion was 19.8%. She also noted that at the Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facility, the figure had dropped from 30.3% in 2012 to 16.7% in 2018.

"While these numbers show improvement, no level of sexual victimization is ever acceptable. We want all youth to feel safe physically, mentally and emotionally in our juvenile correctional facilities," Walburn said in the prepared testimony.

At the Circleville facility, the agency improved housing units so that youths have private bathrooms and the staff-to-youths ratio was halved, said Ryan Gies, director of the youth services department.

Among the other steps the department has taken:

- Complete overhaul of youth sexual-assault policies.
- Complete renovation of the Indian River Juvenile Correctional Facility's bathrooms and shower areas for youths, to meet Prison Rape Elimination Act standards.
- Upgrades to security cameras at all three youth-detention facilities.
- Creation of locally assigned investigators at each juvenile correctional facility.
- Creation of youth-focused materials about sexual safety.

After the presentation, state Rep. Jeffrey Crossman, D-Parma, said the figures reported in the federal survey seemed "quite high and alarming," and he asked what the agency will do to reduce them.

Gies said that any reports of sexual abuse are too many, and that the agency will conduct its own survey of youths to get a better picture of the problem.

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