

Inmates allege serious abuse by L.A. County prison guards

An ACLU report includes complaints from scores of prisoners who say deputies assaulted them or arranged attacks by other inmates.

By Robert Faturechi, Los Angeles Times

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Dozens of inmates at Los Angeles County's Men's Central Jail have alleged serious physical abuse by deputies — broken ribs, black eyes and head wounds that needed to be stapled shut, according to a report released by the American Civil Liberties Union on Wednesday.

The extent of abuse at the downtown L.A. facility is impossible to gauge, the report said, because the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department refuses to share information on the number of use-of-force incidents investigated and its findings.

Sheriff's Department officials said all complaints are investigated thoroughly by the Office of Independent Review, which oversees the department.

"Whether these investigations are shared isn't relevant," said sheriff's spokesman Steve Whitmore. "What is relevant is the complaint itself is thoroughly investigated."

The ACLU report, spanning a 12-month period from 2008 to 2009, was based on weekly visits to the facility and inmate complaints. Many were anonymous, the report said, because inmates feared retribution from deputies. The complaints detail direct assaults from deputies and prisoner attacks orchestrated by guards.

Whitmore denied that guards masterminded any prisoner attacks.

The civil rights advocacy group has long called for Men's Central Jail to be shut down, or have its inmate population significantly reduced. Sheriff Lee Baca and others from the department have acknowledged deficiencies in the past, lobbying to open a more modern facility.

The department is seeking federal stimulus money to revamp the jail and replace it with a "high-tech facility," Whitmore said.

The report includes a complaint from an inmate who says he was assaulted by about a dozen guards. He said they entered his cell and hit him with flashlights repeatedly. "They used their flashlights like a bat, like I was a baseball or something," the inmate told the ACLU. The inmate reported that he needed stitches but refused to visit the medical clinic because guards had

intimidated him.

"I refused stitches. I refused a tetanus shot," the complaint says. "I refused everything."

The report suggests cutting the number of inmates by releasing some and monitoring them through electronic devices and drug and mental health programs.

Whitmore downplayed overcrowding at the facility, saying its capacity is 5,200 inmates with a current population of 4,175. In recent years, great improvements have been made, Whitmore said, especially compared to decades ago when "inmates were sleeping on the roof."