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Records reveal problems in L.A. County juvenile probation office

At least 11 officers responsible for supervising youths in the juvenile justice system have been convicted of crimes or disciplined for inappropriate conduct involving probationers, a Times investigation finds.

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At least 11 Los Angeles County juvenile probation officers have been convicted of crimes or disciplined in recent years for inappropriate conduct involving current or former probationers, including several cases of molesting or beating youths in their care, a Times investigation has found.

Additionally, two other officers are the focus of internal affairs investigations for allegedly having sex with probationers.

The Times identified the cases through court documents, law enforcement records and department sources. Probation officials said they were prohibited by law from discussing the details of officers' misconduct.

Among the incidents:

A probation officer had sex with three youths in the detention hall where she worked -- in laundry, supply and interview rooms. She was sentenced last year to four years in prison after pleading guilty to five counts of felony sexual abuse.

A probation officer caught on tape beating a youth in a juvenile hall recreation room was convicted last year of battery and sentenced to 24 months' probation.

A probation officer was sentenced to a year in jail last year for directing five teenagers under her care to beat another youngster who she mistakenly believed had stolen her cellphone.

Los Angeles County probation officers are responsible for protecting 3,000 youths in 21 halls and camps, one of the nation's largest juvenile justice systems.

The department, with an annual budget of about \$700 million, has been the subject of federal investigations in recent years for failing to prevent, report and document child abuse.

The Times examined records from the last four years -- a period during which county officials hired Robert Taylor to head the agency with the mandate of reforming the department, including providing better oversight of officers. At the time he took over, the department was struggling with violence in its halls and camps and persistent criticism that it was doing little to help the juvenile offenders in its care.

Probation officials have sustained 102 allegations of officer misconduct involving youths at the county's halls and camps over the last three years, according to a department source who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to release the information publicly. The source said many of the sustained cases involved complaints of excessive force. Department officials did not disclose how many officers were involved in misconduct or the extent of any discipline.

Taylor retired Feb. 5. Former Ventura County probation chief Cal Remington was appointed as acting chief to assess the department before the new chief, Alameda County probation chief Donald H. Blevins, takes over April 19.

During his tenure, Taylor said he tried to be more proactive than his predecessors, coordinating undercover internal investigations with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

For example, he said a probation sting with sheriff's deputies at Central Juvenile Hall in 2008 led to the arrest of a probation officer suspected of dealing marijuana to youths. The officer was fired, but has not been criminally charged, according to county officials.

"Unfortunately, we have people who fail to meet expectations and when they do, we deal with them with a disciplinary system that is swift and sure and produces the desired outcome," Taylor said. He said he did not consider the current personnel problems any worse than what other large law enforcement agencies face.

Taylor acknowledged at least one effort to monitor staff and probationers has fallen short: Many of the more than 600 security cameras at county detention halls and camps are broken. Last month, county supervisors approved spending \$1.2 million to determine how best to replace some cameras and other security equipment at a juvenile camp and three halls.

Many critics say poor oversight has hampered the department's efforts to identify abusive staff.

Two years ago, federal investigators found that the department failed to investigate and document officer abuses, including excessive use of force on probationers.

The department has eight internal affairs investigators to review hundreds of complaints leveled against 6,200 probation officers each year, including about 2,900 sworn officers working with juveniles. By contrast, the Los Angeles Police Department has 271 internal affairs investigators for 9,900 sworn officers; the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has about 30 internal affairs investigators for about 10,000 sworn officers.

A 15-member probation commission appointed by county supervisors is supposed to monitor the

department and advise the probation chief. Commissioners can ask the probation chief to investigate alleged misconduct, and if probation officials fail to take action, they can bring complaints to county supervisors. But they rarely do and have never forced the department to disclose probation personnel records, said commission President Don Meredith, a retired Glendale police lieutenant.

"When we bring it up, they say they can't discuss it with us because it's internal matters, confidential," Commissioner Jo Kaplan said of the alleged misconduct. "We have no oversight."

Teachers who work at probation camps and halls are required by law to report suspected abuse but often don't because they are afraid of the consequences, said Mark Lewis, president of the teachers union, the Los Angeles County Education Assn. "There is this belief that if I report something or file a child abuse report against a probation officer, that probation is not going to come when I need them . . . or they're going to set me up," Lewis said. "So there is a tendency not to report."

Even if someone wanted to report misconduct, they may have found it difficult: The phone number on websites and signs posted in the halls and camps for the Probation Department's ombudsman was inoperable until three weeks ago, when a spokeswoman responding to calls from The Times said an "urgent work order" had been submitted to repair it.

Former Probation Officer Kimberly Hald, 37, describes herself as a "soccer mom" who made some bad decisions during a difficult time in her life. Prosecutors say she's a predator who had sex with three teenage boys -- ages 16 to 18 -- at a detention hall for more than a year.

Starting in August 2006, Hald had sexual encounters with the teenagers at Central Juvenile Hall where she worked as a probation officer, according to court records. She bought her victims' silence with treats, including hall passes, food from home and cellphone access, the records show.

Hald became infatuated with the probationers, prosecutors said, sending them letters with provocative photos of herself. She even got a tattoo with the initials of one of the youths.

Hald was caught when one of the youths resisted her advances in a hallway, a scuffle ensued, and he reported her, according to prosecutors. Even after she was arrested and suspended from her probation job, Hald continued to visit the youth at the jail and gave him money. She was later convicted of sexual abuse and sentenced to four years in prison.

Taylor said it would have been difficult to catch Hald because she was well-educated and showed no signs of misconduct. "She was a married mother of three children with advanced college degrees," he said.

Hald declined to be interviewed. But in a letter sent from prison in response to an inquiry from The Times, she blamed her problems on a troubled marriage and expressed remorse. "I did not take the probation job seriously," she wrote.

"I was vulnerable due to a very bad domestic violence situation, and I let myself be carried away by the endless compliments and flattery of the young men," Hald wrote. "Bottom line, I had a consensual relationship with a young man who was 17 and I stupidly thought I was in love with. Everything else I did was completely inappropriate, unethical and extremely unprofessional."

Ademole Turner's career as a probation officer ended when a surveillance camera captured him hitting a boy in the face.

Video footage from the July 20, 2007, encounter in the recreation room at Los Padrinos Juvenile Hall shows the former college football star hitting a 16-year-old boy in the face, throwing him to the floor and kicking him at least once, prosecutors said.

The confrontation began when the boy approached another youth and asked about his gang affiliation, authorities said. Turner, 32, immediately interceded and struck the teenager. The youth had a bloody nose and bruised face, prosecutors said.

Downey police called to investigate Turner screened the tape and gave it to prosecutors, who charged Turner with assault by an officer, assault likely to cause great bodily injury, child abuse, corporal injury to a child and attempting to dissuade a witness from reporting.

Turner pleaded no contest to misdemeanor battery last year as part of a plea deal. He was sentenced to 24 months' probation and 50 hours' community service. A father of three, he quit his probation job and was teaching math and coaching football at a high school in Gardena.

Turner's attorney, Charles J. McLurkin, said there were "extenuating circumstances" that led to the beating, noting that his client was not properly trained to supervise violent youths.

"This is an issue of the training the county did not provide," McLurkin said.

Probation Department spokeswoman Kerri Webb disputed that allegation, saying that all probation officials are trained consistent with state standards.

When Probation Officer Diane Buchanan couldn't find her cellphone, she was convinced one of the boys she supervised at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall in Sylmar had stolen it, prosecutors said.

Court records tell how Buchanan, 39, first strip-searched the youths. Failing to find the phone, she questioned them.

Racial tensions had been simmering for weeks between black and Latino youths at the facility, the youths testified. One of the black youths alleged that a Latino detainee, Miguel Jimenez, had stolen the phone and flushed it down a toilet.

Buchanan believed him and started planning her revenge, prosecutors said.

On her way to Jimenez's cell, she approached a group of youths and told them she would unlock

Jimenez's cell, then let them run past her to beat him up, according to court testimony.

"She told us to go in there and get him for the phone," one of the youths told investigators. "If I didn't do it, I was going to be with him."

Five youths attacked Jimenez, beating and kicking him as he lay on the floor. Jimenez, then 17, was in detention for vandalism. He cowered as the youths laughed and beat him, according to court records. He said Buchanan, who he called "Miss B," refused to intervene.

Buchanan left after a few minutes, locking the door and leaving Jimenez with numerous bumps and scrapes. He was not allowed to see a doctor until the next day, when another probation officer noticed his injuries and persuaded him to report the attack.

Buchanan later found her cellphone -- in the parking lot. A grand jury charged Buchanan with child abuse. In May, she was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail.

Jimenez was being held at North County jail last week on assault charges and could not be reached for comment. But his brother Jorge Jimenez, 26, of Los Angeles said Jimenez was still upset about the beating.

"He feels betrayed," Jorge Jimenez said. "He was at a place where he was supposed to be rehabilitated, and instead this happened."