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STATEMENT OF ALEX BUSANSKY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMMISSION ON SAFETY AND ABUSE IN AMERICA'S PRISONS IN RESPONSE TO BJS PRISON RAPE STATISTICS

The latest report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Violence Reported by Correctional Authorities, 2004, represents an important but limited step in understanding and reducing sexual violence behind bars in this country. Experts within and outside BJS know that the 8,210 reported allegations of sexual violence in 2004 paint only a partial picture of the real threat and occurrence of rape in prison. As BJS states, "Due to fear of reprisal from perpetrators, a code of silence among inmates, personal embarrassment, and lack of trust in staff, victims are often reluctant to report incidents to correctional authorities."

Prison rape is a terrible, unintended consequence of incarceration. But until the government can accurately assess the magnitude of the problem, it will persist, and prisoners and corrections officers will remain in jeopardy. That's why BJS's forthcoming survey of inmates about sexual assault is so vitally important.

Other forms of violence among inmates and between inmates and officers could be even more common in our prisons and jails than sexual assault, but we don't know with certainty. The Commission is encouraged by efforts - including a pilot project by the Association of State Correctional Administrators (ASCA) - to make the administrative data provided by thousands of prisons and jails scattered across the country more reliable and better suited to drawing comparisons across states. But official records of violence will never tell the whole story.

As BJS prepares to survey inmates nationally about sexual assault, we should seriously consider how get more and better information about other types of violence and abuse that can occur in correctional facilities. These are grave problems that threaten those who are incarcerated as well as the men and women who work behind bars, and that compromise our whole correctional system.

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