



## TODAY IN 1931

President Herbert Hoover signed a measure making "The Star-Spangled Banner" the national anthem.

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# Abuse claims rife at juvenile jails

## 13,000 claims found over 3-year period

By Holbrook Mohr  
Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Miss. — The Columbia Training School — pleasant on the outside, austere on the inside — has been home to 37 of the most troubled young women in Mississippi.

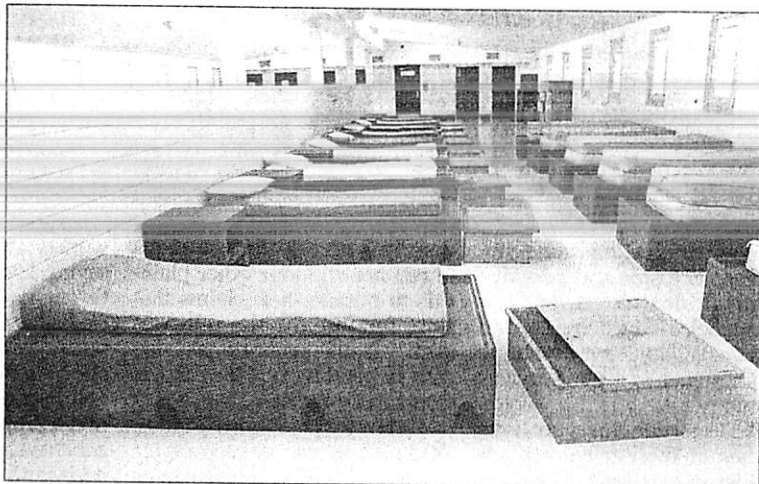
If some of those girls and their advocates are to be believed, it is also a cruel and frightening place.

The school has been sued twice in the past four years. One suit by the U.S. Justice Department, which the state settled in 2005, claimed detainees were thrown naked into cells and forced to eat their own vomit.

The second suit, brought by eight girls last year, said they were subjected to "horrendous physical and sexual abuse." Several of the detainees said they were shackled for 12 hours a day.

These are harsh and disturbing charges — and, in the end, they were among the reasons why state officials announced last month that they will close Columbia. But they aren't uncommon.

Across the country, in state after state, child advocates have deplored the conditions under which young offenders are housed — conditions that include sexual and physical abuse and even deaths in restraints. The U.S. Justice Department has sued institutions in 11 states over su-



Rogelio V. Solis/Associated Press

Officials have announced that they will close the Columbia Training School in Mississippi. The institution has been sued twice in the past four years.

pervision that allegedly is either abusive or harmfully lax and shoddy.

Still, a lack of oversight and nationally accepted standards of tracking abuse make it difficult to know exactly how many youngsters have been assaulted or neglected.

The Associated Press contacted asked state agencies that oversee juvenile correction centers for information on the number of deaths and the number of allegations and confirmed cases of physical, sexual and emotional abuse by staff members since Jan. 1, 2004.

According to the survey, more than 13,000 claims of abuse were identified in juvenile correctional centers around the country from 2004 through 2007 — a remarkable

total, given that the total population of detainees was about 46,000 at the time the states were surveyed in 2007.

Just 1,343 of those claims of abuse identified by the AP were confirmed by various authorities. Of 1,140 claims of sexual abuse, 143 were confirmed by investigators.

Experts say only a fraction of the allegations are ever confirmed. The purported victims are some of the most troubled young people in the country and some will make up stories. But in other cases, the youths are pressured not to report abuse; often, no one believes them anyway.

Undoubtedly, juvenile correctional facilities and their programs benefit many youths by offering substance-abuse treatment, educa-

tional courses and mental-health counseling. And for many troubled youths, the facilities are the last hope to straighten out problems that could eventually lead them to suicide, to prison or to other institutions.

Still, advocates for the detainees contend that abuse by guards remains a major problem and that authorities aren't doing enough to address the situation.

In 2004, the U.S. Justice Department uncovered 2,821 allegations of sexual abuse by juvenile correction staffers. The government study included 194 private facilities, which likely accounts for the higher numbers than the AP found.

But some experts say the true number of sexual incidents is likely even higher. Some youths view sexual relationships with staff members as consensual, not as abuse of power by adults in positions of authority.

Advocates say sex among detainees is also a major problem in some institutions, a claim backed by government findings. A U.S. Department of Justice report described sex at the Plainfield Juvenile Correctional Facility in Indiana as "rampant."

And sometimes suicidal youth or those who want to harm themselves in other ways don't get the personal attention they need.

Mississippi's juvenile correctional centers have been under the supervision of a court-appointed monitor since 2005 as part of the settlement to end the lawsuit by the federal government.