

This is the second in a two-part series.

Youth Services International confronted a potentially expensive situation. It was early 2004, only three months into the private prison company's \$9.5 million contract to run Thompson Academy, a juvenile prison in Florida, and already the facility had become a scene of documented violence and neglect. The Huffington Post uploaded and annotated the documents — including court transcripts, police reports, audits and inspection records — uncovered during this investigation. Hover over the highlighted passages to see the source document behind each fact. Browse the documents behind this report » One guard had fractured an inmate's elbow after the boy refused instructions to throw away a cup, according to incident reports. Another guard had slammed a boy's head into the floor after an argument. The prison was infested with ants and cockroaches, toilets were frequently clogged and children reported finding bugs in their meager portions of food. "From day one, it was hell," said Jerry Blanton, a former monitor with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, who was then tasked with inspecting Thompson Academy. Conditions appeared so foul and perilous that he told his supervisors that he "emphatically recommended that the facility be closed," according to a memo about the discussions. What happened next speaks to how Youth Services International has managed to forge a lucrative business running private juvenile prisons in Florida and 15 other states even amid mounting evidence of abuse. The company used connections with state officials to complain that Blanton was intimidating staff. Less than a week later, the state removed him as monitor of the facility. Two months after that, he was fired. Thompson remained open, and Youth Services International retained its contract to operate it. In the nine years since, the company has won an additional eight contracts in Florida, bringing 4,100 more youths through its facilities, according to state records. All the while, complaints of abuse and neglect have remained constant. Florida leads the nation in placing state prisons in the hands of private, profit-making companies. In recent years, the state has privatized the entirety of its \$183 million juvenile commitment system — the nation's third-largest, trailing only California and Texas. Florida not only relies on private contractors to self-report escapes and incidents of violence and abuse, but the state's Department of Juvenile Justice routinely awards contracts to private prison operators without scrutinizing their records, a Huffington Post investigation has found. "We thought DJJ was going to be our biggest ally," said Gordon Weekes, the chief juvenile public defender in Broward County, who has for years complained to the state about conditions inside two YSI prisons there. "They turned out to be the ally of the corporations, and the ally of the system." Florida's permissive oversight has allowed Youth Services International to essentially game the system since entering the state more than a decade ago. Despite contractual requirements that the company report serious incidents at its facilities, YSI routinely fails to document problems, sanitizes those reports it does submit and pressures inmates to withhold evidence of mistreatment, according to interviews with 14 former YSI employees. "The state is not doing enough," said Wanda Williams, a former staffer at YSI's Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility, who quit in 2010 after growing disgusted with the violence and squalid conditions she saw inside the prison. "Because if they were, that place should have been shut down by now." Executives at YSI declined requests for interviews made over the last four months. In an emailed response to questions, Senior Vice President Jesse Williams said the company's juvenile prisons are some of the best in Florida. He added that the state's Department of Juvenile Justice rigorously inspects the facilities. "The DJJ has a very meticulous monitoring system," he said. "There are numerous announced and unannounced visits to each facility to check for quality assurance and contract compliance, and we do very well in our reviews." Williams denied that the company fails to report serious incidents to the state. "Our policy is to report everything," he said. "In fact, we communicate to our employees that if there are any doubts about whether it is a reportable incident to go ahead and notify DJJ." Senior officials at the Department of Juvenile Justice declined interview requests. The agency refused to discuss specific details of HuffPost's findings, though a spokeswoman issued a statement asserting the department is committed to ensuring that youth in its system "remain safe and are given every opportunity to thrive." She said contract oversight is one of the agency's top priorities. "With 100 percent of the agency's residential services provided through contractors, the contract selection and renewal process is paramount to our success," said the spokeswoman, Meghan Speakes Collins, in an email. Since 2011, when Republican Gov. Rick Scott took office in Florida, the department has "revamped" its review of contractors, she added, by engaging in deeper statistical analysis of trends such as high staff turnover and the number of altercations between staff and youth. **A Prison Empire Through the Years:** For more than a decade, James F. Slattery focused largely on incarcerating adults and undocumented immigrants through his for-profit prison business. In 2005, he sold off the adult division and shifted entirely into the juvenile market.

YEAR 1989, FACILITIES 2, TOTAL BEDS 245, YOUTH BEDS 0. Bed counts are specified by contract and may not reflect the number of prisoners. Sources: Securities and Exchange Commission, Youth Services International website via The Wayback Machine. Former employees say Youth Services International has maintained a pristine image in the state's official accounts in part by massaging the paperwork. Riots often go unreported, meaning law enforcement officers never arrive to investigate or document evidence of problems, these sources say. Staff training sessions tend to be conducted in a perfunctory fashion, with little effect – but they are nearly always well-documented and up to date. “The paperwork was spotless,” said Angela Phillips, a former shift supervisor at Broward Girls Academy in Pembroke Pines, northwest of Miami. “But if you go to a facility that has no toilet paper, no laundry detergent, no underwear or bras, it seems like somebody would have raised a red flag.” Annual quality assurance reviews play a major role in determining whether the state renews a juvenile prison contract. Under Florida guidelines, a private juvenile prison that fails this test comes up for review again within six months. A subsequent failure can result in contract termination. Yet these reviews often fail to probe conditions inside facilities, merely assessing whether required policies are in place, not necessarily whether they are followed. When the Department of Juvenile Justice does examine actual conditions, its reviews often rely on surveys of staff and inmates, as opposed to interviews and written testimony. “They rely too much on what the providers tell them, and not enough on what the children tell them,” said David Utter, the director of Florida policy at the Southern Poverty Law Center, who has followed the rise of YSI and was involved in a lawsuit alleging abuse at Thompson Academy. “Quality assurance is looking at contract adherence, whether they’re meeting the general terms of the contract, not the goals of the rehabilitation of the youth,” explained Weekes, the Broward County public defender. “They do a cursory review of the youth. They look more at whether [the contractors] are record-keeping properly.” HuffPost reviewed logs documenting complaints inside state youth prisons recorded between 2008 and 2012. Those logs show that several of the YSI facilities that received positive “quality assurance” reviews also generated an outsize share of staff arrests, youth injuries and allegations of excessive force. Bart Lubow, a juvenile justice expert with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, says such reviews tend to measure contractual compliance rather than what actually happens to youth inside the facilities. “How many people got hurt? Are kids learning anything? Any of the things that a parent would care about, or that a taxpayer ought to care about, are not at the heart of this stuff,” he said. According to Speakes Collins, the department spokeswoman, earlier this year the agency began conducting more inspections and more frequent interviews with youth across the system in an effort to pinpoint programs with a high incidence of violence and to discover whether problems are being covered up. Youth Services International became skilled at navigating the state's contracting system in part by hiring the very people who developed it. Woodrow Harper, the company's executive vice president, was a deputy secretary at the Department of Juvenile Justice when the agency was first formed in 1994. The company's vice president of contract compliance, Dorothy Xanos, also previously worked for the department, helping to develop some of the state's first quality assurance standards. Damon Nunn, who runs YSI's Palm Beach juvenile facility, used to be the state monitor at one of the company's programs in South Florida. State probes of mistreatment claims typically end with inconclusive evidence. Only about a quarter of cases across the state system involving allegations of abuse by staff are ever substantiated, according to a HuffPost tabulation of investigations logged by the inspector general's office at the Department of Juvenile Justice. Many are simply ruled “inconclusive” when staff say one thing and youth say another, despite trends indicating that problems are systemic. At a YSI facility in St. Augustine in 2009, more than 25 separate children accused staff and management at the facility of preventing them from calling the state's abuse hotline, according to an internal investigation by the DJJ. All the cases were found to be inconclusive. Even in state-run facilities, outside authorities found that cases of abuse went undocumented. The U.S. Justice Department's civil rights division noted many concerns about state oversight in an investigation of a violence-ridden state juvenile prison in north Florida two years ago. Federal investigators concluded that problems inside the institution indicated a “failed system of oversight and accountability” across Florida's youth prisons. The state closed the facility before the Justice Department finished its report, citing a lack of funds. In a follow-up letter to the DOJ in January 2012, Gov. Rick Scott challenged the “unsupported suggestion” that problems in Florida's juvenile justice programs were systemic. “Nonetheless, my administration remains committed to review and reform,” he wrote. Former Department of Juvenile Justice officials say that because Florida has turned over its youth prison system to contractors like YSI, the state is effectively complicit in allowing problems to fester at private facilities. With a fully outsourced system, there is little incentive to crack down on

contractors, former staffers say. “They don’t want the providers to look bad, because they don’t have anyone else to provide this service,” said a former Department of Juvenile Justice executive staffer, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of jeopardizing a continued career in the field. “Bottom line, the state of Florida doesn’t want responsibility for these kids.” Playground and buildings at the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Fla., in 1968. (State Archives of Florida / Florida Memory) **Troubled Past:** Such pronouncements have dogged authorities in Florida for decades. In the early 1980s, lawyers with the American Civil Liberties Union began investigating reports of horrendous conditions and mistreatment inside Florida’s three “training schools” for juvenile delinquents. One institution on the Florida panhandle, the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys – then among the largest youth jails in the country – had gained a reputation for extraordinary brutality and neglect. In 1983, the ACLU joined with another juvenile rights group to sue the state for its treatment of inmates at Dozier and two other facilities. According to the lawsuit, guards hog-tied children, forcing them to lay on their stomachs on concrete slabs for hours at a time while their hands and feet were bound behind them in shackles and handcuffs. The state rarely screened youth for psychological problems when they arrived, effectively abandoning those who were developmentally disabled or suffering from mental illness. To this day, former Dozier inmates continue to push state law enforcement to investigate the deaths of dozens of inmates that occurred there from the turn of the 20th century through the early 1970s. Forensic anthropologists from the University of South Florida have identified an estimated 50 unmarked graves on the school’s site. Under a consent decree in 1987, the state agreed to reforms, including a promise to transition toward smaller facilities with more dedicated treatment plans for the mentally ill and sexually abused. As part of the agreement, the state gave a federal judge and a court-appointed monitor oversight of Florida’s entire juvenile justice system. The federal monitor, a nationally recognized juvenile incarceration expert named Paul DeMuro, felt the state wasn’t moving quickly enough to adopt reforms. Six years into the agreement he resigned in frustration, concluding in a series of reports that the quality and monitoring of the state’s new programs were “sorely suspect.” A few months after DeMuro resigned, in early 1994, state juvenile justice officials convinced U.S. District Judge Maurice Paul to release Florida from federal monitoring, arguing that the state had the proper controls in place to effectively treat and rehabilitate the youth under its care. The decision coincided with a rush to construct new youth prisons across the state. Several headline-grabbing murders by Florida teenagers in the early 1990s had sparked fears in the tourism industry, and state politicians began toughening penalties for young offenders. “Some of the top criminologists were basically scaring the hell out of people, saying, ‘We’ve got this wave of new barbarians at the door,’” said Barry Krisberg, a criminal justice expert who is director of research and policy at the University of California, Berkeley’s Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy. “It’s true that youth crime rates were rising. But they were projecting that this was going to double, triple. It was outrageous.” Amid the prison-building boom, James F. Slattery and his company – then named Correctional Services Corp. – embarked on what would eventually grow into a rewarding business relationship with the state of Florida. Slattery’s company had previously been confined largely to Texas, New York and New Jersey. In 1995, it won three contracts in Florida, and then moved its headquarters to Sarasota, on the Gulf Coast. Problems emerged almost immediately. Juvenile court judges from Miami to West Palm Beach began fielding complaints about fetid conditions, violence and staff abuse at one Correctional Services Corp. facility, the 350-bed Pahokee Youth Development Center. DeMuro, the former federal monitor, was brought in by public defenders in Miami to inspect Pahokee in 1997. He described a “negative sub-culture” where “larger and stronger kids can take advantage of weaker kids.” Staff only contributed to the vile atmosphere, he found. “Staff often curse at youngsters, talk about their family situations,” DeMuro testified in a court hearing about conditions at Pahokee that year. “There is an inappropriate use of force by banging kids against the wall and taking them down.” Jesse Williams, the current company spokesman, acknowledged that Correctional Services Corp. had “some issues that we dealt with effectively 15 years ago.” By 1999, problems at Pahokee had become so dire that Correctional Services Corp. risked losing its contract. Under state law, that termination would have prevented the company from securing a new contract in Florida for at least a year. So the company employed the tactic that has kept its record clean in the eyes of the state: It voluntarily withdrew from the contract several months early, closing the books before damaging reports might be set down for future consideration. Crosses made of metal pipes mark the graves of 32 unidentified bodies in a small, hidden graveyard near the former Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Fla. (Photo by Emily Michot / Miami Herald / MCT via Getty Images) **Firing the Monitor:** That clean record would become a valuable asset four years later, as the Department of Juvenile Justice

sought a private contractor to run Thompson Academy, the 112-bed facility for “moderate-risk” boys northwest of Miami. Slattery submitted a proposal, touting his company’s “history of successfully operating juvenile facilities for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.” The 60-page proposal noted that the company’s programs were “nationally recognized” for “consistent, high-quality services.” The proposal described other moderate-risk facilities the company had “successfully operated” in other parts of the country, including the 355-bed Charles H. Hickey, Jr. School outside of Baltimore. The proposal neglected to mention that the U.S. Justice Department was in the midst of investigating widespread violence and rampant staff abuse at Hickey that same year. The proposal also avoided mentioning that the company was in the midst of a wrongful death lawsuit in Texas, after an 18-year-old inmate died of pneumonia despite begging to be taken to the hospital. Correctional Services Corp. was not required to disclose any of this history in bidding for business with the state of Florida. According to the Department of Juvenile Justice’s contract scoring process, state officials examine records in other states only when the private operator has no previous contracts in Florida. When the state evaluates current contractors, past performance counts for less than one-fourth of the total score. The bulk of the rating stems from the quality of the contractor’s technical proposal – its plans to staff the facility, for example, and its policies on security, escapes and training. Outside evaluators are instructed not to consider “any other information, other than the information contained in the proposal, including personal experience with provider or staff, news articles, anything heard or said about provider.” “They’re not getting rated on the things that are most important,” said Vanessa Patino Lydia, who has followed Florida’s juvenile justice system as a research director at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center, a nonprofit focused on girls in the juvenile justice system. “The points are about: ‘Did you respond to the questions on what you’re going to do?’” The Department of Juvenile Justice asserts that problems with a company’s program in one state do not necessarily raise concerns about its activities in another. “Comparisons between states can be difficult since juvenile justice is administered differently around the country,” said Meghan Speakes Collins, the DJJ spokeswoman. “Additionally, companies often have different management oversight and personnel operating programs in individual states.” The proposal Slattery put forward for Thompson Academy included descriptions of his company’s “expert managers and well-trained staff that are setting the highest standards in our industry.” He won the contract. Soon, the same problems that had emerged at many of his institutions cropped up again, according to HuffPost’s review of state facility reports. In December 2003, a month before Slattery’s firm formally took over Thompson, state monitors noted that the company had yet to fill any of the direct-care staff positions, the guards who work most closely with children. A state review found that the company also had yet to detail its plans for recreation and physical fitness, or arrangements for food services. In February 2004, less than two months into the contract, a boy escaped Thompson with the help of another youth. An investigation by the Department of Juvenile Justice found that “facility policies did not address escape prevention” and staff had not been properly trained. Furthermore, the company had not notified the state of the escape within 24 hours, as required. Less than 10 days later, a staff member attacked a 15-year-old boy, slamming his head to the floor and punching him, according to incident reports. When the boy complained that he couldn’t breathe, the guard put his hand over the boy’s mouth. The guard was later fired. The following month, a youth counselor slapped an inmate in the face and then head-butted another while saying, “Suck my dick,” according to an incident report filed by the state. The state only learned of the latter incident when a therapist called the abuse hotline. The guard and his supervisor failed to notify state authorities, as required in the company’s contract. The same month, a group of boys handed a letter to one of the state monitors noting “a bad bug problem in our cafeteria,” including in the food. “Staff interviewed stated youth had too small portions of food, the last group fed got less,” read an email from a different monitor, Pamela Stillwell. Jerry Blanton, then the state’s top monitor at Thompson Academy, asked for a special audit team to review the program. The resulting report found the facility to be seriously understaffed and unsanitary, and that staff were dismissive of grievances filed by youths housed there. The average starting salary for youth care workers was \$17,680 and staff turnover was high, according to documents filed with the state. An emergency state review in March found no evidence that staff had been trained in the proper ways to restrain youth. According to an email from a department monitor regarding the March evaluation: “There is nothing in training files for staff – no training plans, no documentation of any training regarding [restraints], CPR and first aid, fire, riot and other emergency situations.” Just as Blanton and others from the state began documenting problems, the facility administrator at Thompson Academy, Jasir Diab, was requesting meetings with Blanton’s superiors at the state Department of

Juvenile Justice, according to internal department memos and company correspondence obtained by HuffPost. Diab had previously worked at the company's troubled Pahokee facility and today serves as corporate regional vice president. A few weeks after the state's special review of Thompson in 2004, Diab met with DJJ regional director Darryl Olson to discuss concerns he had about Blanton's behavior, according to department correspondence. In an April 2004 letter to department officials and corporate higher-ups at the company, Diab complained that Blanton had been conducting unannounced visits – allowed under the contract terms – and intimidating staff and demanding documentation from employees who lacked the requisite information. Diab also complained that Blanton encouraged employees to call him with concerns about the program, “thus undermining the management of the facility,” according to a letter the administrator sent to the state. In an interview, Blanton acknowledged that he stuck out within the culture of the Department of Juvenile Justice, sometimes coming off as confrontational where colleagues generally projected an air of collaboration with the private contractors whose programs they inspected. “I dance to my own music,” he said. The usual spirit of cooperation flowed from a basic understanding about the nature of the employment cycle, according to the former department executive staffer who requested anonymity: Many state employees wound up going to work for the same private contractors they regulated. “It was widely known in the department that the relationships you are able to build on the outside are where your next paycheck is coming from,” the former employee said. “It's your way of guaranteeing yourself work when the next administration comes in.” Blanton did not live by that code. A 66-year-old African-American man from upstate New York in a department dominated by whites, he says he took particular interest in the welfare of the youths housed in Florida's juvenile prisons, who were overwhelmingly black and Latino. He makes no apologies for confronting his bosses and the private prison companies alike when he found evidence that young people incarcerated under the state's authority were being neglected or abused. “The purpose of a monitor is to ensure that the mandates set down by the state and the rules in the contract were followed,” he said. “Two things really stood out: Staffing was not adequate, and the kids weren't eating. Therefore they were not safe.” A week after Diab met with state officials, Blanton's bosses removed him as the monitor at Thompson Academy. He was fired two months later. In a series of memos before he was fired, Blanton asked his superiors why they took the complaints from the company as fact without also consulting him. “I have some problems with your process,” Blanton wrote. “They are as follows: 1) allegations are made and taken as truth; 2) as a DJJ employee, I was never given the opportunity to meet with my accuser; 3) you did no investigation or verification of the validity of the complaint. How does one manage/supervise people in such a manner?” In the letter calling for Blanton's termination, his superiors cited the complaints from Diab and a complaint from a different contractor that described Blanton as “confrontational” and “intimidating.” His bosses also cited “apparent attempts at retaliation” after Blanton told them he “should not be underestimated” following his removal from monitoring duties at Thompson. Blanton was also cited for turning in four facility reports late, and for leaving the office without signing out, according to the termination documents, which Blanton shared with The Huffington Post. Back in the 1990s, Blanton had run a state facility in Palm Beach County, where youth had accused counselors of mistreating them. He was temporarily reassigned as local prosecutors investigated, but the state never brought charges and he was never found to have violated procedures. This history was not mentioned as a reason for his termination, according to state documents. Williams, the current spokesman, confirmed that the company had lodged a formal complaint against Blanton, but added: “It was not the reason he was terminated.” He referred other questions to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Speakes Collins, the agency spokeswoman, declined to comment on the issue, asserting that it would be “inappropriate” to discuss matters that happened during a past administration. Less than four months after Blanton was fired, another state review of Thompson confirmed and amplified many of the problems he had documented. Among the “critical” concerns listed in the annual audit: employees had been hired absent the criminal background checks required by state law. A review of incidents involving staff and youth revealed that many had not been reported to the state within the required timeframe. Only two out of 20 reviewed employees had completed required training on child abuse and incident reporting during their first two weeks on the job, as required by the state. The review also found that staff at Thompson badly neglected preparing juveniles for release, in one case failing to notify the state social services agency about the departure of a boy who had previously been in foster care. Over the next two years, the facility continued to receive low marks on annual reviews, including a finding in 2006 that youth who had been placed on suicide watch received minimal counseling. But when the Thompson contract came up for renewal after three years, the state again selected Slattery's company – by then known as Youth

Services International – to continue running the facility. Under Florida guidelines, the question of whether to renew a private juvenile prison contract “is at the Department’s sole discretion” and “shall be contingent, at a minimum, upon satisfactory performance.” In the case of Thompson Academy, the state renewed YSI’s deal even though documents showed that 96 percent of staff had left the facility and eight confirmed cases of child abuse had emerged there over the previous year. The company has continued to win other contracts while using its successful proposal for Thompson as a template. The Department of Juvenile Justice maintains that it has improved its contract oversight process by granting fewer renewals. The new system allows more companies to submit proposals once a contract is nearing completion, increasing competition. Speakes Collins declined to say whether YSI would have seen its Thompson contract renewed under the new guidelines. Former YSI employees dismissed the review process as a mere formality. The Department of Juvenile Justice “doesn’t care about these kids,” said a former manager at two YSI facilities, who asked not be identified because the person still works in the field. “They have cut so many costs and taken away so many tools to help these kids, that it’s just a revolving door.” The Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility is Youth Services International’s largest youth prison in Florida, with 118 beds. (Chris Kirkham / The Huffington Post) **Doctoring documents:** In recent years, some of YSI’s facilities have shown improved scores on annual reviews from the state, in some cases scoring so highly that they won exemption from required reviews the following year. But interviews with former YSI staff members reveal that this numeric progress may have little to do with improved conditions. Rather, they said, it likely reflects the company’s sophistication in fabricating the necessary paperwork for its annual quality assurance evaluations. Each facility knows when state auditors are scheduled to visit, according to former YSI employees. In the weeks prior to such visits, these sources said, staff work feverishly to prepare documents showing that medical exams, therapy sessions and staff trainings are conducted as required—supplementing and back-dating the files as needed. The quality evaluation process “was a joke,” said Angela Phillips, the former Broward Girls Academy shift supervisor. “The paperwork looked great, because someone was going around and spending overtime just to make sure that paperwork was correct. If there was something missing, they would just forge it.” Several former employees recalled marathon work sessions in which they sometimes fabricated entire log books to paper over discrepancies in records, or to fill in the gaps when the files lacked required reports. “Just about every area you could look into, they were deficient,” said a former medical employee at YSI’s Palm Beach Juvenile Correctional Facility. “So they made up documents to make it seem like they weren’t.” Genesia Williams-Wilkerson, a former case manager at the same prison who left the institution in 2011, said the accuracy of paperwork documenting staff training sessions was particularly questionable. Even if employees missed or showed up late for classes on CPR or proper restraint techniques, managers told them to sign in as if they had attended, she said. “They’d just bring around the paper, and you’d sign it. That way they’d have the papers saying we’ve done the training,” she said. “They just worry about the audits. They’re not worried about these kids’ lives.” Jesse Williams, the YSI spokesman, denied claims that paperwork was backdated and fabricated, calling the inspection process “stringent and thorough.” But according to former employees, when state officials visited to review facilities, managers would handpick trusted employees and youth to be interviewed. “We would be coached,” said Wanda Williams (no relation), a former youth care worker at the Palm Beach prison. “They’d say, ‘You better not put anything on this paper that you shouldn’t put there.’ The state didn’t do enough, and they never wanted to talk to us one-on-one.” Because the state relies almost entirely on its juvenile jail contractors to self-report major incidents, staffers said the company consistently tried to conceal fights and riots from the state Department of Juvenile Justice as well as state and local authorities. “They don’t want any outside company, because they want the program to look like it’s running smoothly,” said Williams-Wilkerson. “Outside support should be called for a lot of what goes on, but they don’t do that.” The state maintains a special hotline for juvenile inmates seeking to report mistreatment. But youth who have been inside YSI facilities told HuffPost that those wanting access to the hotline must seek permission from staff — often the same staff they say abused them. Williams, the YSI spokesman, denied that inmates were pressured not to report abuse. “There are multiple ways for detainees to report abuse, such as hotlines directly to the state, reporting to other administrators (anonymously) or simply telling their family members during visitation,” he said. Chelsea Fernandez, an inmate at Broward Girls Academy who left the program last year, said she was denied hotline calls despite suffering bruises after being thrown up against a wall and onto the floor by a female staff member. “She kicked me like a dog,” Fernandez recalled. She said the next day, during a group therapy session, staff told the girls present not to mention the fight to anyone. To discourage

inmates from reporting abuse, staff provided youth with snacks or special privileges, such as being allowed to stay up late, former inmates said. Fernandez recalled that before an inspection by state officials last year, staff promised to throw a party for the girls if they behaved and answered questions as instructed. After state officials left, the whole unit was treated to KFC, she said. Phillips, the former shift supervisor at Broward Girls Academy, said the point of such rewards was clear to all: It was about burying evidence of abundant troubles. "The girls would get pizza or ice cream after there was a riot, or some girls would have a fight and then they would get candy," she said. "Why would you reward them and disregard the fact that they just had a fight? It was so you don't cause a problem, so you can forget about what happened." Chelsea Fernandez, a former inmate at Broward Girls Academy, poses for a photo outside her home in Miami on May 31, 2013. (Chris McGonigal / The Huffington Post)

Encouraging Participation: While Florida looked the other way, the abuse and neglect inside its juvenile prison system drew the attention of federal officials. A U.S. Justice Department report two years ago found horrific conditions at two state-run programs in north Florida. At the Dozier School for Boys – the same jail that landed the state in federal court in the 1980s – investigators found that the Department of Juvenile Justice hired staff members who were abusive and often failed to document fights. Guards choked and slammed boys into the ground without provocation, according to the Justice Department's report. Staff often failed to document these assaults, and made a point of engaging in violent behavior away from the view of security cameras. The central takeaway: problems had been allowed to fester because of "the state's failed system of oversight and accountability." "These problems may well persist without detection or correction in other juvenile facilities operating under the same policies and procedures," the report concluded, urging the state to take "immediate measures" to improve its policies and hire consultants to rework the system. By the time the report came out in December 2011, the state had already closed Dozier, citing budget cuts. Florida Gov. Rick Scott sent a frosty response to Washington, arguing that the issues were "confined to the closed facility" and "do not constitute a sufficient, sound or fair basis for concluding that an entire state agency and its employees are failing to properly administer the juvenile justice system in Florida." In response to questions about whether the state has hired outside consultants to review its juvenile commitment system, as recommended by the Justice Department, a spokeswoman pointed only to Scott's letter. In the push to fully privatize the system and phase out state-run facilities, Florida has continued both to renew YSI's contracts and to award the company new ones. Last year, Florida opted not to extend YSI's contract to oversee Thompson Academy, the facility where Jerry Blanton had blown the whistle and lost his job eight years earlier. In a letter to YSI sent in summer 2012, the state told the company that the contract would end because the DJJ was "moving away from large institutional models" and toward smaller, community-based programs. Still, the letter added, "We strongly encourage your participation" in an upcoming bid for new contracts. In January, the state gave YSI a \$7.3 million, five-year contract to run the new Broward Youth Treatment Center, a 28-bed program less than a mile away from Thompson. And this summer, YSI won contracts to take over two more state facilities, one in the Tampa area and another in Jacksonville.