

# Locked Inside A Nightmare

## *One Inmate Says She Was Raped Repeatedly*



*Dale Ortego says that he shredded complaints at one Wackenhut juvenile facility.*

**(CBS)** When 14-year-old Sara Lowe was arrested, her parents thought it was a blessing. They thought she was going to a new kind of juvenile detention facility - a private prison offering counseling that could turn her life around.

Many parents cling to the hope of rehabilitation. For Sara and others that hope was offered by the Wackenhut Corrections Corp. And Wackenhut is the leader of a trend in America putting prisons in the hands of private companies. Wackenhut says it can run the prisons for less money than a state can - and provide better rehabilitation.

But for Wackenhut, running prisons for profit has sometimes turned out to be much more difficult and dangerous than promised. There were great hopes for Sara and other kids, when they were sent away. But no one knew what they were really experiencing. **Scott Pelley** reports.

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There was nothing in Sara's life that hinted at the storm that was coming. She grew up in Nebraska, amid a loving family. But according to her mother Gayle Lowe, Sara had a hard time adjusting after the family moved to Texas.

The more that her parents tried to discipline her the more rebellious she became, Gayle Lowe says. One day, during a heated argument over discipline, Sara lost control and attacked her mother.

Desperate, the Lowes knew Sara needed professional help. A judge sentenced Sara to six months of detention, and the family was actually relieved because a probation officer said Sara would get intensive counseling at a new private prison: Wackenhut's Coke County Juvenile Justice Center.

**"(The probation officer) told me all the staff was very qualified,"** Gayle Lowe remembers. **"They would all have bachelor's degrees in either juvenile justice or psychology, child psychology. It just sounded wonderful."**

The center was also expensive: Texas was paying Wackenhut \$118 per girl per day,

because of the high level of counseling and education.

But Sara didn't find the promised counseling at the Coke County facility. Some counseling sessions were being run by the guards. It didn't seem there was much concern for the education of the girls either; Sara was promoted through three grades of high school in just six months. Even worse, Wackenhut's all-girl prison was mostly staffed by men.

Sara eventually told her sister, Jenny, that one of the guards raped her almost every night. **"He would take her in the next cell and molest her every night,"** Jenny says. **"She was in fear for (her) life, because he would tell her, 'I will, I'm going to kill your sister and your mom if you tell anybody.'"**

In time, Sara's mother found out. The Lowes filed suit against Wackenhut, alleging widespread, systematic sexual assault of the girls in the Texas detention center. The suit would launch an investigation, pitting the story of a deeply troubled teen-age girl against a \$2 billion company.

With 55 prisons all over the world, including ones in Texas, Florida, Michigan, New York and California, Wackenhut describes itself as a **"model of correctional management."**

The company has experienced problems in other prisons besides its Coke County facility. In 1998, while the Lowes' charges were being investigated, Wackenhut opened the Jena Juvenile Justice Center for Boys in Louisiana.

**"Jena was designed to be a model correctional facility for young people,"** says Mark Doherty, a New Orleans judge, who had been relieved to finally have a place to send kids who desperately needed help. **"Specifically they were to have a first-rate substance abuse treatment program with trained substance-abuse counselors."**

Penny Guidry was sure the Jena Center would help her son Dale Ortego. Three years ago, Ortego, then 17, had a problem with marijuana.

**"The judge knew that Dale's problems revolved around this drug use,"** Guidry says. **"So she ordered him to be sent to this facility because they were supposed to have a really good drug rehab program."** Guidry hoped her son would be sent to Jena, she says.

Ortego went to Jena for six months in 1999. As an inmate, he worked as a clerk in the warden's office. Inside Jena, Ortego didn't find the promised drug counseling. Instead several Wackenhut employees were pushing drugs and sex in the cell blocks, he says. He saw guards smoking marijuana with inmates, and some guards had sex with inmates, he says.

**"The guards were just...like inmates,"** he says. **"It's just they got control over us."**

Jena was out of control from the start. In one year, Wackenhut went through five wardens and turned over the entire staff three times. The U.S. Department of Justice investigated Jena and found that youths were subjected to **"cruel and humiliating punishments,"** and guards **"routinely used excessive force."** The report says that **"the Jena Center is a dangerous place to be."**

Investigators found that Louisiana and Texas had the same problem: Most guards had no experience. Often Wackenhut didn't check their backgrounds. Some guards hired for Jena had criminal records.

The Department of Justice identified one guard, a sergeant, with an assault conviction on his record. He was eventually fired after seriously injuring one of the youths by repeatedly slamming his face into a concrete floor. Fear inside Jena was so great that some of the offenders were driven to desperation, according to the Justice Department report.

Ortego says that he saw two offenders cut their wrists with the razor wire that surrounds the facility.

Judge Doherty was shocked by the allegations he read in the report, he says. So far he has released seven Jena inmates, putting them on probation. He decided Wackenhut was putting their lives at risk.

**"No matter what reason landed these young people at this facility, they are human beings,"** he says. **"The way this facility operates or has operated in the recent past is that young people are treated as if they walk on all fours."**

In 1998, a riot in Wackenhut's New Mexico prison killed two people. In addition, the company was stripped of a \$12 million contract in Texas, where 12 guards were indicted for having sex with adult female inmates.

**"A correctional organization is subject to numerous allegations of that nature,"** says George Zoley, chief executive officer of Wackenhut Corrections Corp., which oversees all the company's prison operations, including the juvenile centers in Texas and Louisiana. **"That's part of the business; it's a tough business. The people in prison are not Sunday school children."**

Zoley says that Wackenhut runs first-rate correctional facilities and that any problems that have occurred are exceptional. He also says that Wackenhut has operated Jena safely and securely, in a way that meets all federal standards.

The Justice Department disagrees. Its report contends that Jena medical records confirmed an **"unacceptably high of traumatic injuries."** The infirmary logs for the Jena prison showed 100 serious traumatic injuries in less than two months - a rate of two a day.

Wackenhut's Zoley says that this figure doesn't seem out of the ordinary for a facility of its type where there are **"hundreds of juveniles who are physically in contact with one another - recreating...recreation or altercations between juveniles."**

This spring the Louisiana's Department of Corrections seized control of Jena. A state corrections investigator reported that a Wackenhut guard was caught erasing a videotape that allegedly showed inmate abuse.

Zoley is not aware of any evidence that destruction of any evidence took place, he says.

But Ortego says while he worked as a trustee in the Jena office, he was assigned to shred complaints that inmates had made against the guards.

Wackenhut's Jena operation is now being sued by the inmates and the Department of Justice.

In Texas, Sara Lowe's lawsuit was joined by 11 more girls from the Wackenhut prison there. Two Wackenhut employees pled guilty to criminal charges of sexual assault. The company decided to settle Sara's civil suit - as long as her parents would agree to never discuss what happened inside the prison.

The day of the settlement, Sara committed suicide. **"She shot herself twice,"** says her mother Gayle Lowe. **"She wanted to die so bad she shot herself under her chin and her temple."**

Sara had been deeply troubled even before she entered Wackenhut's care. But her sister Jenny says she was upset about the settlement because the company and its founder George Wackenhut refused to admit any responsibility.

**"She didn't want any money,"** Jenny says. **"She wasn't trying to get money out of it. She just wanted an apology and for Mr. Wackenhut to live like one day in the life of all the girls and boys in the facility just to see what they go through every day. Ad just to have an apology for ruining her life."**

Zoley says he can't comment on the case: **"We have signed a confidentiality agreement regarding that lawsuit, and I'm really not allowed to speak about it any further."**

Asked if the Wackenhut Corp. owes an apology to Sara or any other inmate, Zoley responds, **"Not that I'm aware of. I don't know what you mean by that."**

Wackenhut still runs the Texas detention center, which has been converted to an all-boys facility. In the face of the lawsuits in Louisiana, Wackenhut has turned the inmates over to the state.

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