Sex survey troubling for Ga. juvenile jails

Victimization rates at 4 state youth prisons among highest in U.S.

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Four Georgia lockups for juvenile offenders are among the U.S. facilities with the highest rates of sexual victimization, according to a federal report released Thursday.

A regional youth detention center in Paulding County led the nation with 32.1 percent of the teenagers surveyed anonymously last year reporting they were victimized sexually by either staff or other juveniles. That was more than three times the national rate of 9.5 percent.

Also included in the list of the 13 U.S. facilities with the highest rates of sexual victimization were the Eastern Youth Development Campus in Dodge County, the Augusta YDC in Richmond County and the Sumter YDC in South Carolina.

Researchers found that 15.8 percent of the 497 juveniles in Georgia's criminal justice system who were surveyed had had a sexual encounter with a staff member, which is a felony.

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Could drones help ease your commute?

Georgia Tech studying peaceful uses such as real-time traffic cams.

By Kelly Yamanouchi
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In Afghanistan, drones can deliver death from the skies. In Atlanta, their civilian cousins could deliver traffic conditions on the highways.

While the use of weaponized drones for lethal military strikes is now legalizing controversy, researchers at Georgia Tech are studying the potential for more peaceful uses of unmanned aerial vehicles.

That includes the potential use of drones to monitor I-285 and other congested highways for backups or help with accident investigations to clear roads faster.

Not that the civilian use of drones doesn't come with its own challenges. The Federal Aviation Administration is currently working on how to safely integrate unmanned aircraft into the nation's airspace by 2015. Debate also swirls around their potential impact on people's privacy without any resolution in sight.

The Tech study is part of a yearlong project exploring how drones might help the United States Agency for International Development to improve conditions in developing countries.

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Some have privacy concerns

Drone study

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Georgia Department of Transportation with its day-to-day mission, even though widespread use of them is still years away. GDOT is funding the $75,000 study with a combination of federal research funds and state funds. "We can already see so many applications that would make things so much better for all of us," said Georgia Tech assistant professor Javier Irizarry, a lead researcher in the study.

Atlanta traffic congestion is the seventh-worst in the nation, according to the Texas A&M Transportation Institute’s Urban Mobility report.

Irizarry thinks drones can improve the accuracy and timeliness of GDOT’s online Navigator map of highway congestion. Existing stationary cameras have a limited field of vision, he said, and sometimes “traffic managers can see backup, but they cannot see what the cause is.”

On the Navigator map or on dynamic highway signs, “that data could be more precise. It could be more real-time.”

Georgene Geary, a GDOT research engineer, said she hopes drones might also be able to help with clearing accidents faster to reduce backups.

The study will also explore how they could be used in other GDOT areas ranging from construction to airports. Geary hopes drones might help with bridge inspections.

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Geary hopes drones might help with bridge inspections. Workers today get into “snooper trucks” that hang over the side of the bridge to inspect the underside of tall bridges. But an unmanned aircraft might be able to do the job more quickly, safely and at lower expense, she said.

Irizarry and his partner in the study, Eric Johnson, an associate professor of avionics integration at Georgia Tech’s School of Aerospace Engineer-

space in 2015.

"It's coming — it's not a question of if, it's a question of when," said Steve Justice, director of Georgia's Center of Innovation for Aerospace.

The FAA says unmanned aircraft systems can come in "a variety of shapes and sizes, and serve diverse purposes." The aircraft can be "smaller than a radio-controlled model airplane" or have a wingspan the size of a Boeing 737, the agency said.

Justice thinks many of the drones will probably fly at low altitudes — perhaps 30 to 400 feet — to inspect things such as crops, roadways and construction projects, and will be relatively small.

"Most people would not even notice that they're there," Justice said.

The FAA plans to propose procedures, policies and standards for users of small unmanned aircraft — defined as under 55 pounds — later this year.

Meanwhile, Georgia is competing to be selected as one of six test sites for unmanned aircraft systems. An FAA decision is expected by the end of the year. A test site could be used to test potential capabilities of the drones for GDOT.

With the growing controversy over weaponized military drones, Johnson said he worries that uses of unmanned aircraft for safety and other civilian purposes "may be slowed down or viewed in a negative light because of that connection, which in my view is really searchers counter that privacy issues exist whether aircraft are manned or unmanned. They also say the public is already being monitored by cameras posted all over — including along metro Atlanta highways.

"It's a problem to connect important discussions about privacy to whether it's an aircraft with a person in it or not," Johnson said.

But Goodman thinks "it's much easier" to spy on people with unmanned aircraft because they could be quieter, smaller and less noticeable.

Amie Stepanovich, director of the Washington-based Electronic Privacy Information Center's domestic surveillance project, is concerned that traffic surveillance technology could be used to track people. "We need to prohibit the broad and untargeted surveillance of individuals," she said.

At the moment, how privacy concerns will be addressed in the case of drones has not been determined.

As GDOT's study proceeds, Geary said if the use of drones is feasible, "we may go through another phase and actually test it out, do a pilot." She envisions GDOT working with a consultant to use the aircraft, rather than the department managing its own fleet.

The reaction of GDOT employees to the possibility of using drones in their jobs has varied, Geary said. But by studying the issue before the widespread use of the aircraft comes, "that gives people time to think about it."

The unmanned aircraft might even be able to help conduct bridge inspections. JASON GETZ / JGETZ@AJC.COM.

Drones can improve the accuracy and timeliness of the state's congestion reports because existing stationary cameras have a limited field of view. JOHN SPINK / JSPINK@AJC.COM.

The DOT alert signs, also known as dynamic highway signs, can become more timely and accurate with the use of drones patrolling the highway system. BOB ANDRES / BANRES@AJC.COM.