

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Violence in Incarceration

Overview

About **80,600** incarcerated individuals experience sexual victimization in the United States every year.¹ Nevertheless, sexual violence in correctional and detention facilities remains widely underreported, and the true number of people who experience sexual violence is likely higher than official estimates.²

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Violence in Correctional Facilities

- **Unsure how to report sexual violence:** Some survivors may be uncertain where to go, what options are available, or how to access support after experiencing sexual violence.³
- **Fear of retaliation:** Survivors may worry about being harassed or experiencing retaliation from other incarcerated individuals or facility staff.⁴
- **Fear of lack of confidentiality:** Survivors may not trust that their report will remain confidential or that they will be protected after reporting.⁵
- **Fear of not being believed:** Survivors may worry that staff will not believe them, minimize their experience, or assume they are making a report to be transferred or receive other benefits.⁶

How the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) Helps Protect Survivors

- **Facilities must provide incarcerated individuals with multiple ways to report sexual abuse or sexual harassment,** including contact information for outside victim advocacy organizations and rape crisis centers.⁷
- **Facilities must provide access to outside victim advocates and explain the limits of confidentiality.** Information about a report should only be shared with those who need it for treatment, investigation, or safety.⁸
- **Facilities must protect survivors and others from retaliation after a report is made.** Facilities must monitor for retaliation and take steps to protect anyone who may be at risk.⁹
- **Facilities must not automatically or routinely segregate survivors or restrict their access to programming or other activities or privileges.** PREA limits when facilities can place survivors in restrictive housing for their protection. It must be used as a last resort and used for the shortest time possible. Survivors must continue to have access to programs and services whenever possible.¹⁰

¹ "Sexual Victimization in Prisons Reported by Inmates, 2023-24" (2024). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/sexual-victimization-prisons-reported-inmates-2023-24>

² "PREA Data Collection Activities, 2024" (2025). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/prea-data-collection-activities-2024>

³ Zinzow, Heidi M. et al, "Barriers to Formal Help-seeking following Sexual Violence: Review from within an Ecological Systems Framework" (2022). Victims & Offenders, 2022, v. 17, n. 6, p. 893. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2021.1978023>

⁴ § 115.67 Agency protection against retaliation" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-67>

⁵ "§ 115.53 Inmate, detainee, and resident access to outside confidential support services" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-53>

⁶ "Advocating for Incarcerated Survivors During Sexual Abuse Investigations" (2023). Just Detention International. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Advocating-for-Incarcerated-Survivors-During-Sexual-Abuse-Investigations.pdf>

⁷ "§ 115.51 Inmate, detainee, and resident reporting" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-51>; "§ 115.53 Inmate, detainee, and resident access to outside confidential support services" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-53>

⁸ "§ 115.61 Staff and agency reporting duties" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-61>

⁹ "§ 115.67 Agency protection against retaliation" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-67>

¹⁰ "§ 115.68 Post-allegation protective custody" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-68>