

Sexual Violence in Correctional Facilities

FACT SHEET

Overview

Sexual violence occurs in all types of correctional facilities.¹ It can be committed by another incarcerated person or by facility staff, and it affects people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds.² Although the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) created national standards to help prevent and respond to sexual abuse and sexual harassment, sexual violence remains a serious problem in correctional facilities.³

Key Facts

- Approximately **80,600** incarcerated adults experience sexual victimization each year.⁴
- **4.1%** of incarcerated adults experienced sexual victimization from 2023-24, with **2.3%** of cases perpetrated by another incarcerated individual and **2.2%** of cases by facility staff.⁵
- **7.1%** of youth in juvenile correctional facilities reported sexual victimization in 2018. Of those incidents, **1.9%** reported victimization by another youth, while **5.8%** reported victimization by staff.⁶

Common Misconceptions

- **Sexual violence in detention only happens between incarcerated individuals:** Sexual violence in detention is not limited to abuse by other incarcerated individuals. Facility staff also commit sexual abuse and sexual harassment.⁷
- **Sexual violence in detention only affects women:** Sexual violence in detention does not only affect women. People of all genders can experience sexual violence, although some groups are at higher risk than others.
- **Official reports capture the full extent of sexual violence in detention:** Official reports do not show the full extent of sexual violence in detention. Many survivors never report their experiences, so surveys may underestimate how often sexual violence occurs.⁸
- **Sexual violence is just part of life in correctional facilities:** Sexual violence is never acceptable or something that is inevitable at correctional facilities. Correctional facilities are to maintain a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence and investigate each report.⁹
- **Sexual relationships between incarcerated individuals and facility staff can be consensual:** Sexual relationships between incarcerated individuals and facility staff are never considered consensual due to the inherent power imbalance. Any sexual misconduct by facility staff is a serious violation of an incarcerated person's rights.¹⁰
- **False reports are common in prison because incarcerated persons want benefits or special privileges:** Only 2-10% of reports of sexual violence are false.¹¹ All reports need to be treated seriously and investigated according to PREA standards.
- **Only certain people are victimized:** Anyone can experience sexual violence in detention, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or background.¹²

¹ "Sexual Victimization in Correctional Facilities (PREA)" (n.d.). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/prea>

² "Sexual Victimization in Correctional Facilities (PREA)" (n.d.). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/prea>

³ Buehler, Emily D., "Substantiated Incidents of Sexual Victimization Reported by Adult Correctional Authorities, 2016–2018" (2023). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/substantiated-incidents-sexual-victimization-reported-adult-correctional>

⁴ "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>

⁵ Field, Michael B. et al., "Sexual Victimization in Prisons Reported by Inmates, 2023–24" (2025). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/sexual-victimization-prisons-reported-inmates-2023-24>

⁶ "Sexual Victimization Reported by Youth in Juvenile Facilities, 2018" (2019). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/press-release/sexual-victimization-reported-youth-juvenile-facilities-2018>

⁷ Buehler, Emily D., "Sexual Victimization Reported by Adult Correctional Authorities, 2016–2018" (2021). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/sexual-victimization-reported-adult-correctional-authorities-2016-2018>

⁸ 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>

⁹ "§ 115.11 Zero tolerance of sexual abuse and sexual harassment; PREA coordinator" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://cdn.prearesourcecenter.org/implementation/prea-standards/prisons-and-jail-standards>

¹⁰ "§ 115.31 Employee training" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-31>

¹¹ Gardinier, Lisak D. et al., "False allegations of sexual assault: An analysis of ten years of reported cases" (2010). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.nsvrc.org/resource/false-allegations-sexual-assault-analysis-ten-years-reported-cases>

¹² "The Very Basics about Sexual Abuse in Detention" (2018). Just Detention International. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Fact-sheet-The-Very-Basics-about-Sexual-Abuse-in-Detention.pdf>

- **Restricted housing or protective custody is always the safest option:** Putting someone in restrictive housing should be a last resort, not the default response. Extended isolation can have negative effects on mental health and lead to increased isolation.¹³
- **People who have committed crimes do not deserve support:** Sexual assault is not part of the punishment for being incarcerated. Every person has the right to physical and emotional safety.¹⁴

People Who May Face Increased Risk of Sexual Victimization

- LGBTQ+ individuals¹⁵
- Women¹⁶
- Adolescents and youth¹⁷
- People with mental health conditions¹⁸
- Persons with disabilities, especially individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities¹⁹
- People in restrictive or isolated housing²⁰

Long-term Effects of Sexual Violence²¹

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Depression and anxiety
- Self-harm and suicidal thoughts
- Physical injuries and chronic health problems
- Difficulty trusting others and authority figures

¹³ “§ 115.43 Protective custody” (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-43>.

¹⁴ See Footnote 9

¹⁵ Anderson, R E, “Comparison of Sexual Violence Perpetration Rates Among Gay, Lesbian and Heterosexual Cisgender Adults” (2024). National Library of Medicine. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-01030-2>.

¹⁶ “About Sexual Violence” (2025). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/sexual-violence/about/index.html>.

¹⁷ “About Child Sexual Abuse” (2025). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/about-child-sexual-abuse.html>

¹⁸ Kaul, Anjali, et al, “Prevalence and risk of sexual violence victimization among mental health service users: a systematic review and meta-analyses” (2024). Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-024-02656-8>.

¹⁹ Mailhot Amborski, Amylee, et al, “Sexual Violence Against Persons With Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis” (2021). National Library of Medicine. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838021995975>.

²⁰ Browne, Angela et al, “Keeping Vulnerable Populations Safe under PREA: Alternative Strategies to the Use of Segregation in Prisons and Jails” (2015). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/library/housingvulnerablepopulationsfinalmarch.pdf>.

²¹ Speckhard Pasque, Lisa, “The lingering effects of sexual trauma” (2023). Mayo Clinic Press. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://mcpress.mayoclinic.org/women-health/lingering-effects-of-sexual-trauma>.