

Sexual Abuse in Detention: The Most Vulnerable Inmates

“For me, being sexually abused as a child made me an easy target. It was in our file, and the guards can see that. We are easy targets because we learn from a young age to keep our mouths shut. There are repercussions to telling. It is brainwashed into us. It was almost the norm because of how I grew up. I just felt like, ‘Well, here comes another one.’” — Robin, sexual abuse survivor who was raped by corrections officials

While anyone can be sexually abused in detention, we know that some people are at especially high risk. Staff and inmate perpetrators tend to target those who are the least likely to report — or to be believed or treated with compassion if they do. In particular, inmates who have mental illness, who identify or are perceived as LGBT, or who have experienced prior victimization are at high risk of sexual abuse.

Survivors of Prior Sexual Abuse

Many people who are incarcerated have suffered previous sexual abuse — but have never received the help they need to heal. Overall, at least one in six men has experienced sexual abuse at some time in their lives.¹ Of women in jails, 86 percent are survivors of sexual abuse.² Once in detention, survivors of prior sexual abuse are extremely vulnerable. They are six times more likely to be sexually abused by other

inmates than the overall prison population. They are also twice as likely to be sexually abused by staff.³

Several factors contribute to the vulnerability of survivors of previous sexual abuse. These survivors, especially those who were abused as children, may believe they should expect or tolerate abuse, or may not expect that staff, or anyone else, will help them. Perpetrators are skilled at testing people’s boundaries and identifying those who are unlikely to report or seek help. Predatory staff, in particular, know which inmates have been sexually abused, making it easier for them to target and groom vulnerable individuals.

Inmates with Mental Illness

People with mental illness are drastically overrepresented in U.S. prisons and jails. Some 36 percent of people in prison and 43

percent of jail inmates have a mental health diagnosis.⁴ Notably, a person with a serious mental illness is three times more likely to find themselves in a prison or jail than in a hospital.⁵ In prisons, people with symptoms of mental illness are nine times more likely than those with no such symptoms to be assaulted by another inmate. In jails, these inmates are five times as likely as those with no symptoms to report inmate-on-inmate abuse. Alarming, among people with mental illness who are sexually abused by other inmates, 80 percent are victimized repeatedly.⁶

Most prisons and jails simply are not able to meet the needs of people with mental illness. Lacking the skills and training to intervene effectively with a person suffering from severe distress, corrections officials may dismiss reports from people who display psychotic symptoms. People with mental illness often disclose abuse in ways that seem confusing or unclear. Staff without adequate training may not know how to respond to such reports and may dismiss them as delusional. Perpetrators know that inmates with mental illness are unlikely to be believed if they report abuse, especially if they make repeated reports.

LGBT Inmates

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual inmates are sexually abused by other inmates at a rate more than six times that of the general prison population, and by staff at more than twice the rate of other inmates.⁷ Transgender inmates are even more vulnerable; 40 percent are sexually

abused in detention, either by staff or inmates, which is nearly 10 times the rate of the general prison population.⁸

Prison culture in men's facilities is dominated by hyper-masculine, homophobic attitudes among inmates and staff, which encourage predators to target anyone perceived as not living up to stereotypes of dominant male behavior. With rare exceptions, transgender women are placed in men's institutions, where they are routinely mocked, humiliated, and abused by staff and inmates. Likewise, in women's prisons, lesbians and gender nonconforming women are often singled out for staff sexual abuse and punishment. In addition, contrary to popular misconceptions, many women face abuse from other inmates — but corrections officials often do not recognize such violence among women, characterizing it as a “relationship problem” that does not demand the same kind of attention as other forms of abuse.

Protecting Vulnerable Inmates

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) requires corrections officials to screen inmates upon arrival in a facility. Staff must identify people who are at increased risk of sexual abuse, as well as those who are likely to be perpetrators, and make commonsense housing and programming decisions to prevent sexual abuse and keep vulnerable inmates safe.

Endnotes

1. 1in6, “Information About Male Sexual Abuse & Assault,” available at: <https://1in6.org/get-information/the-1-in-6-statistic/>
2. Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform, available at: https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report/legacy_downloads/overlooked-women-and-jails-report-updated.pdf
3. Allen J. Beck, et al., *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-12* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2013), available at: www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112.pdf
4. Ibid.
5. E. Fuller Torey, M.D., et al., *More Mentally Ill Persons Are in Jails and Prisons Than Hospitals: A Survey of the States* (The Treatment Advocate Center and National Sheriffs’ Association, May 2010), available at: http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/final_jails_v_hospitals_study.pdf
6. Allen J. Beck, et al., *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-12* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2013), available at: www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112.pdf
7. Allen J. Beck, et al., *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-12* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 2013), available at: www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112.pdf
8. Allen J. Beck, *Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011-12: Supplemental Tables: Prevalence of Sexual Victimization Among Transgender Adult Inmates* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2014), available at: https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112_st.pdf

JDI Contact Information

Los Angeles Office

3325 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 340
Los Angeles, CA 90010

(p) 213-384-1400

D.C. Office

1900 L St. NW, Suite 601
Washington, DC 20036

(p) 202-506-3333

This project is supported by a grant awarded by the Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed herein are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime.

