

Supporting Incarcerated Survivors: An Overview of Sexual Abuse in Detention

Sexual abuse in detention is a nationwide crisis. Every year, roughly 200,000 adults and children are abused behind bars. The good news is that local advocates are increasingly stepping up to deliver high-quality services that survivors in detention need and deserve.

Sexual Abuse in Detention: The Basics

- Roughly half of all sexual abuse in adult detention facilities is committed by staff
- People with mental illness, those who have been previously sexually victimized and/or who identify as LGBTI are at increased risk for sexual victimization
- Many incarcerated survivors of sexual abuse have histories of trauma and prior abuse, and many are victimized repeatedly
- More than 7% of children in youth detention facilities are sexually abused each year; in the vast majority of cases, the perpetrators are staff



The Trauma of Detention

Daily life inside a detention facility can be traumatizing for anyone, but survivors are especially likely to be triggered by conditions of confinement, such as:



- Lack of privacy and autonomy
- Minimal access to mental health and other services
- Insufficient access to basic hygiene items, including toilet paper, soap, sanitary napkins, and tampons
- Isolation from loved ones and lack of community social support
- No control over noises, lighting, and the level of crowding
- Ongoing contact with perpetrator(s)
- Retaliation after making a report

Victim Services in Detention



The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) standards call on detention facilities to provide a level of care for survivors that is consistent with what is available in the community. One of PREA's key requirements is that detention facilities work with local victim service organizations to make available confidential advocacy services, including:

- Confidential emotional support via phone or letter
- Accompaniment during medical forensic exams
- Confidential follow-up services
- Accompaniment during investigatory interviews
- Access to medical and mental health care for emergencies and ongoing care and at no cost to survivor