

Supporting Incarcerated Survivors: Understanding Detention Facilities

On any given day in the U.S., nearly two million people are held in a detention facility – more than in any country in the world. A disproportionate number of incarcerated people come from poor communities and communities of color; many have endured trauma prior to their incarceration.

Rape crisis advocates have the necessary tools to help survivors who are incarcerated. However, the U.S. has a patchwork of detention systems, and it's helpful to have a basic understanding of how they function.



Types of Detention Facilities

Jails are usually county- or city-run, and typically house people who are awaiting trial or who have been sentenced to less than a year on a misdemeanor offense. With high turnover, jails are chaotic; they also have few programs and services.



Prisons are run by states or by the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). State and federal prisons house people who have been convicted, usually of a sentence of more than one year. Generally, prisons have greater programming and therapeutic opportunities than jails.

Youth detention facilities generally house people under the age of 18, and they can be operated by a state or county. These facilities are classified as either "secure," meaning youth cannot leave the grounds, or "non-secure," which are less restrictive.

Other types of facilities include local police lock-ups, immigration (ICE) detention, and community confinement centers.

Staff Contacts



Your main contacts will likely be the PREA Coordinator and/or the PREA Compliance Manager. They are staff whose job is to ensure that people in custody are safe and can get services, including from outside providers. Keep in mind that while detention facilities have in-house medical and mental healthcare, these services are frequently inadequate and sometimes are not free.