

Just Detention International

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://justdetention.org/far-too-many-minors-suffer-sexual-abuse-in-youth-detention-centers-they-must-be-protected/>

Campaign and Advocacy

A DISTURBINGLY large number of youths locked up in juvenile detention centers across the country are sexually victimized, according to the Justice Department. A heartbreaking [report](#) from the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that states and localities are still doing too little to protect vulnerable youngsters who rely on the adults around them to provide safety and order. As long as this country imprisons minors, it is unacceptable that they suffer sexual abuse when they are in the care of the criminal justice system.

The bureau conducted a survey in 2018 of 6,049 youths in juvenile detention facilities in every state and the District. The results have trickled out slowly over the past year. The top-line finding: Some 7.1 percent of respondents [reported](#) being sexually victimized in the previous 12 months. That is down from 9.5 percent in 2012, but it is still far too high. The numbers include both coerced youth-on-youth sexual contact and staff sexual misconduct. But the bulk of the problem lies with staff 5.8percent of respondents reported inappropriate sexual contact with the adults charged to protect and care for them.

Not all of this sexual contact which runs the gamut from kissing to penetrative sex was forced. In fact, advocates say, much of the problem lies with staff crossing lines with inmates who have reached sexual but not mental or emotional maturity. The power imbalance makes such connections inherently abusive. Detention staff control every aspect of these prisoners lives. The survey [suggests](#) staff often win over youths by giving them gifts of contraband such as alcohol, drugs or cigarettes; by getting them out of trouble; or by offering protection from other youths. Resisting or ending such a relationship can feel impossible. The emotional damage can be lifelong.

The numbers suggest certain youths are particularly at risk. Youths who were not heterosexual reported higher rates of coerced youth-on-youth sexual victimization. Those whose gender identity is different from their sex recorded at birth reported far higher rates of youth-on-youth and staff misconduct. An astonishing 51 percent of youths reporting inappropriate sexual contact had been victimized previously in another facility.

It should not have been hard to conclude before now that populations vulnerable to abuse outside detention facilities would be disproportionately at-risk inside. With these numbers in hand, facility administrators must take special care to protect those they know would be more likely to be targeted.

Part of the solution is to lock up fewer minors. Society would be better served treating rather than criminalizing much adolescent behavior. But as long as the nation incarcerates any youths, conditions must be humane. That demands better training and accountability for staff, more emphasis on ensuring safety and meeting basic physical needs, and the collection of more data on the shape and scale of the problem. It is absurd that six years elapsed since the last survey on youth sexual victimization, and that it then took so much longer for the data to reach the public that it is nearly 2021, and we are getting the full results of a 2018 survey only now. More money to track and root out this problem would be well worth it.

Originally posted [here](#)