

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://eji.org/news/sexual-violence-in-prison-remains-serious-problem/>

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Sexual abuse in correctional facilities remains a major problem in Alabama and nationwide.

About 80,000 women and men are sexually abused in American jails and prisons each year, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and half of prison sexual assault complaints are filed against staff. As BJS senior statistical adviser Allen Beck explained, institutional culture and facility leadership may be key factors in determining the level of victimization.

Societal indifference sustains the problem of prison rape. Rape persists, wrote Chandra Bozelko for the *New York Times*, because its the cultural wallpaper of American correctional facilities. In other words, [w]e preserve the abuse because were down with perps getting punished in the worst ways.

Alabamas Tutwiler Prison for Women exemplifies how the refusal to demand accountability from prison leadership perpetuates a culture of violence and abuse. In 2012, EJI reported the [widespread sexual abuse of women prisoners by male guards at Tutwiler](#) and called for a federal investigation. In January 2014, the Justice Department confirmed EJIs findings and demanded reforms, but meaningful changes are not being implemented and women have suffered retaliation for reporting abuse.

The Alabama Department of Corrections never publicly held accountable Tutwilers warden, who was transferred to another prison and later allowed to retire with full benefits, or its deputy warden, who was promoted to warden at another prison where complaints of abuse have since increased. The failure to hold prison leadership accountable continues to be a major barrier to meaningful change at Tutwiler and throughout the state prison system.

Changes are most urgently needed to protect youth under 18 from prison rape. Recognizing that youth in adult jails and prisons face an extraordinarily high risk of being sexually abused, federal standards require sight and sound separation of youth and adults housed in the same facility. Since 2005, 27 states and the District of Columbia have enacted reforms to remove children from adult facilities. Current Alabama law allows children as young as 14 to be housed in adult jails and prisons, but Alabama lawmakers are now considering legislation that would require sight and sound separation of children and adults.

While some states have cited cost in refusing to comply with federal rape prevention laws, failing to implement reforms may be more costly than compliance. The Justice Department estimates that full nationwide compliance with the federal Prison Rape Elimination Act standards would cost \$468.5 million a year, while prison rape and sexual abuse cost society \$51.9 billion annually, including the costs of victims compensation and increased recidivism.

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