
ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE



SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE YOUTH DETENTION SYSTEM

As discussed in episode #2 in our conversation series, childhood sexual abuse typically happens within a family or other social network, such as a church or youth sports team. This abuse is also rife within the juvenile justice system. Youth detention facilities are supposed to provide education, treatment, and counseling to help youth turn their lives around. Instead, a significant number of youth in the system experience sexual abuse. Disturbingly, the vast majority of this abuse is committed by staff — the very people whose job it is to keep youth safe. A Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) study found that roughly three times as many youth reported that they were abused by staff than by other youth. To understand the full range and complexity of serving adult survivors of child sexual abuse, it's helpful for advocates to understand the experience of children in detention.

WHO GETS LOCKED UP IN YOUTH FACILITIES, AND WHY?

On any given day, nearly 50,000 youth are held in juvenile detention facilities across the U.S. An additional 5,000 or so youth are detained in adult prisons and jails. While the over-incarceration of children remains a major problem, the number of young people in detention facilities has decreased dramatically in recent years. In 2012, nearly 80,000 youth were held in youth facilities detention settings, and another 10,000 in adult prisons and jails.

The typical youth detention facility holds people under the age of 18. The children, who are usually referred to as “residents,” are kept in locked, or secure, corrections-style facilities, meaning they are not allowed to leave the grounds. Nearly two-thirds of kids in youth facilities are in for nonviolent offenses, including parole violations, drugs, or truancy; many have yet to stand trial.

The juvenile justice system holds some of the most marginalized children in society. A significant portion have a severe learning disability, mental illness, or alcohol or other drug addiction. Additionally, the role of race cannot be overlooked. Youth of color are highly overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. A staggering 42% of boys and 35% of girls in youth detention are Black — even though Black kids make up just 14% of the overall population. Latinx youth also are several times more likely than white youth to be in detention.

A large percentage of youth who are in the juvenile justice system have a history of trauma. Youth with a history of prior sexual abuse, and especially girls, are far more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than those with no prior abuse — a dynamic that is known as the “sexual abuse to prison pipeline.”

Sexual abuse is devastating during any phase of life, but children and teen survivors are at especially high risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and drug addiction. Indeed, how youth cope with or seek to escape sexual abuse (running away from home, skipping school, or violating curfew) may contribute directly to their ending up in juvenile detention. Some young survivors act out their feelings in ways that are especially dangerous — like destroying property, getting involved in drugs, or harming themselves. Such behaviors are usually a cry for help; often, however, they land youth in a detention facility.



SEXUAL ABUSE AND YOUTH DETENTION

Sexual abuse is widespread in the juvenile justice system. It is also completely preventable. Youth detention facilities with strong leaders can build a culture of respect and openness, where kids feel comfortable speaking out and staff who cross boundaries are held accountable. Yet leadership often fail to address unprofessional behavior, creating conditions for abuse to thrive. BJS studies have found that an overwhelming majority of youth who were victimized by staff reported prior inappropriate contact with their abuser.

More than four out of five youth victimized by staff said the prior behavior involved the staff member talking or joking about sex, or sharing sexual stories; roughly three quarters said staff told them they felt emotionally close or had special feelings for them; nearly half said staff gave them pictures or wrote them letters; and more than two out of five said staff offered them drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, or other prohibited items. Perpetrators use such tactics to exert control over their victims, whom they manipulate into thinking that what is occurring is not abusive but a healthy “relationship.” Shockingly, more than nine out of ten victimized youth were sexually abused by staff more than once; a quarter were abused more than ten times.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, most staff sexual misconduct is perpetrated by women. According to the BJS, nine in ten youth who experienced sexual abuse in detention said their abuser was a female staff member. For many advocates,

working in a context where most survivors are male, and where women are the perpetrators in such a large proportion of cases, may feel unfamiliar. However, survivors in detention have the same right to and need for high-quality advocacy services as survivors in the community.

In some cases, abuse by staff persists after the youth is released. The abusive staff member might use an offer of assistance — or the threat of another stint in custody — to control their victims. Some might even use the promise of continuing their “relationship” as way to keep their victims close. Detention staff who sexually abuse youth in custody are rarely held accountable, either by the people who run their facilities or in a court of law.

Unfortunately, advocacy services are rare in juvenile detention. With few resources to help them heal, children who survive sexual abuse in detention often struggle get back on their feet. Many wind up back in the youth system, and are eventually funneled to adult prison and jails, where they become prime targets for yet more abuse.

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR YOUR ADVOCACY WORK WITH ADULT SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

When you learn that a survivor was in youth detention, you can use the information you learned here to strengthen your advocacy for that survivor. Remember to center yourself in compassion and [use your advocacy skills](#). Think especially about these advocacy skills:

- Build trust with survivors over time
- Help survivors explore options for the issues they are facing today, without judgement
- Welcome and receive survivors' whole selves, including cultural identities, strengths, and trauma. Respect survivors' strength and creativity

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