

Juvenile Residential Facilities and Sexual Violence

RESIDENTIAL CENTERS AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In recent years, lawsuits have been filed in multiple states against juvenile detention facilities/centers over allegations of sexual abuse, assault, and harassment against juveniles while in the centers' care. Since 2020, more than a dozen states have changed their laws to expand the statute of limitations for civil actions, and fifteen additional states have bill proposals in 2025 to do the same (Hernandez, 2025).

Lawsuits filed in Pennsylvania in 2024 allege sexual abuse, assault and harassment occurring between the years of 2000 and 2023 (Geanous, 2024). Included within the lawsuits are declarations from the victims stating they had told staff at the facilities about the incidents, but nothing was done.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), enacted in 2003, requires annual data collection on incidence rates and the effects of sexual assault within both adult correctional facilities and juvenile facilities (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021). The Bureau of Justice Statistics is responsible for this annual review and analysis, with data collected through the Survey of Sexual Victimization, the National Inmate Survey, and the National Survey of Youth in Custody.

In 2013, these surveys were updated and modified to reflect definitions and wording in the U.S. Department of Justice's National Standards to Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).

In 2018, within state juvenile systems as well as locally or privately operated juvenile facilities, 321 of 2,467 allegations of sexual victimizations were substantiated (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).

“This reflects an 89% rise in allegations from 2013 to 2018, with an increase of 44% in substantiated incidents. This rise may be linked to the release of the national standards, due to more effective investigations, or it may indicate an increase in incidents.”

From the years of 2013 through 2018, 6,323 allegations of staff-on-youth incidents were reported (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021). Of those, 487 incidents were substantiated, while 181 were still under investigation at the time of publication. Staff-on-youth incidents include both staff sexual misconduct and staff sexual harassment. Staff sexual misconduct is defined by the Bureau of Justice Statistics to include “consensual or nonconsensual behavior or act of a sexual nature directed toward a youth by staff, including romantic relationships,” while staff sexual harassment is defined as “repeated verbal comments or gestures of a sexual nature to a youth by staff” (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021).

While Maruschak and Buehler’s report does not examine the details of substantiated incidents beyond whether they were staff-on-youth or youth-on-youth, Beck and Rantala’s report, which looked at incidents in the years of 2007 through 2012, gives more details about the nature and location of substantiated abuse that occurred.

In the cases of staff-on-youth incidents, over half (64%) of the perpetrators of staff sexual misconduct were females. Roughly one-third (31%) of those perpetrating staff sexual harassment (Beck & Rantala, 2016) were also female. Sixty-four

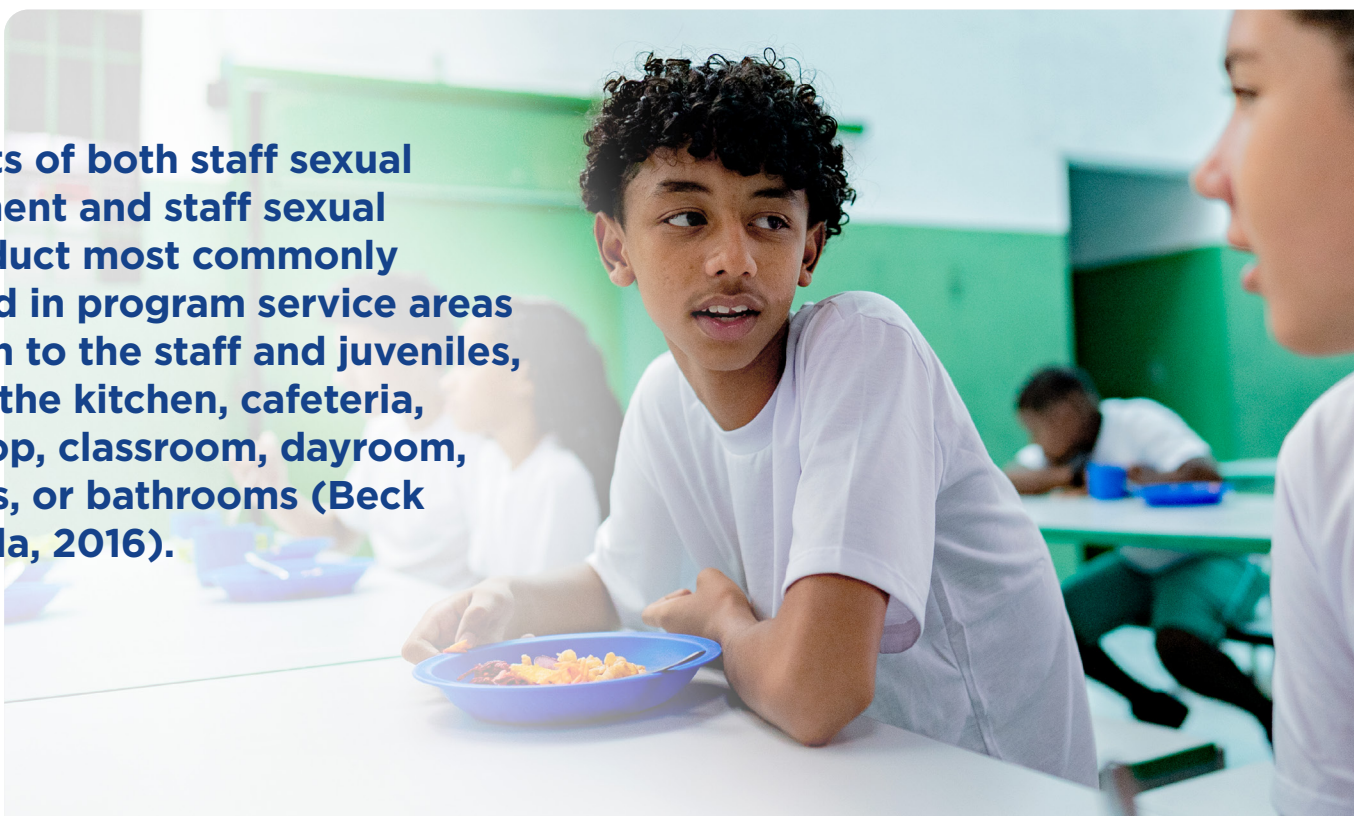
percent (64%) of the staff sexual misconduct incidents that occurred between 2007 and 2012 involved sexual relationships in which the youth “appeared to be willing” (Beck & Rantala, 2016).

Staff sexual harassment tended to occur during the day, with 48% happening between the hours of noon and 6p.m., while staff sexual misconduct occurred largely between 6p.m. and midnight (Beck & Rantala, 2016).

Sexual victimization within juvenile facilities is not limited to staff perpetration. Two-thirds of the substantiated incidents reported in the years 2007 to 2012 were youth-on-youth sexual misconduct and harassment (Beck & Rantala, 2016).

For this resource, there is more of a staff-on-youth perpetration focus because the research shows that staff and the residential facilities seem to be more aware, and perhaps more accepting of the existence of youth-on-youth incidents. Therefore, abuse is reported more frequently. For more information on youth-on-youth sexual violence, you can check out the resources referenced at the end of this resource, particularly the reports by Beck and Rantala and Maruschak and Buehler.

Incidents of both staff sexual harassment and staff sexual misconduct most commonly occurred in program service areas common to the staff and juveniles, such as the kitchen, cafeteria, workshop, classroom, dayroom, hallways, or bathrooms (Beck & Rantala, 2016).





Within a juvenile residential center, this may appear as a staff member offering to take the ‘difficult’ youth as their charge, giving extra time or rewards to the youth, or spending time one-on-one with walks, tutoring, or other activities (Bravehearts, 2024).

GROOMING

To understand and combat sexual victimization of youth, the concept of grooming must be addressed and understood in the context of juvenile residential centers.

Grooming, by definition, is “the act or process of preparing someone to fill a position or role or to undertake an activity” (Dictionary.com, 2025). When used in context with sexual abuse, the definition changes to “an act or instance of engaging in behaviors or practices intended to gradually condition or emotionally manipulate a victim over time, as through friendship, gifts, flattery, etc., in order to entrap the person in a sexually abusive or predatory relationship.” Grooming is a specific process that occurs both to the targeted potential victim and within the community around them.

Grooming typically follows a pattern of behaviors or stages that the offender will engage in, leading up to the abuse itself and to maintain secrecy afterwards (Pruitt & Wolf, 2025). The first stage is the selection of the victim. An offender may utilize their access to children to try and connect with children who have certain vulnerabilities. These may include low levels of self-esteem; lack of attention, affection, or connection with caring adults; a history of victimization; and a quiet or compliant personality with lower boundaries (Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect, 2024). After determining a potential victim, the offender will create situations where they may gain access to and/or isolate the youth from others.

The third stage, trust development, often occurs in conjunction with the second stage. In the development of trust, the offender will continue to give time and attention to the youth but will also share secrets or engage in rule-breaking activities to test the youth’s ability to keep secrets (Pruitt & Wolf, 2025). Offering contraband items to residents, such as candy, drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes is one way staff members build trust and rapport with potential victims (Geanous, 2024).

The fourth and fifth stages of grooming, desensitization and normalization, both feature physical and psychological boundary crossing. As part of desensitization, the youth may be made to feel as though sexual language and ‘accidental’ touching are appropriate or not an issue. Inappropriate language, jokes, sharing of memes and social media postings, as well as asking the youth questions about their sexual experiences and the offender sharing their own are all used to make the interactions between the youth and an adult seem normal and appropriate (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network [RAINN], 2020). Non-sexualized touching, such as wrestling, tickling, shoulder massages, and hugging may test the youth’s boundaries and begin desensitizing them to sexualized touches including brushing against body parts and touching of private areas over clothing (Pruitt & Wolf, 2025). Offenders often use their words to normalize the sexual misconduct, stating things such as, “this is what people who like each other do,” and pointing out that the touches feel good (RAINN, 2020).

This normalization may also be utilized along with guilt trips, threats, and positions of power to maintain secrecy and control after the abuse has occurred. In allegations of abuse at a Maryland facility, victims described the grooming done by a former staff member (Hernandez, 2025). They described receiving special privileges, money, drugs, and expensive gifts. In order to keep the abuse a secret, the staff member used his position of authority over his victims, threatening punishment if they were to report. In claims against two cottage parents in Pennsylvania, the victim describes being threatened with isolation, physical punishments, and negative points on the facility's system if he talked about the abuse (Geanous, 2024).

When incidents of sexual victimization were reported, the person making the report varied depending upon whether the incident was perpetrated by another youth or by a staff member. Staff-on-youth incidents tended to be reported by the victim or another youth.

In contrast, youth-on-youth incidents were reported by a staff member in a third of the victimizations (Beck & Rantala, 2016). Staff members having training on grooming behaviors and specific examples of how this may appear within a juvenile residential detention setting may lead to earlier intervention and reporting. In a study done by

Winters and Jeglic (2015), participants were able to identify grooming behaviors present in situations of sexual abuse when looking back in hindsight. However, their findings also suggested that, **with training on behaviors, participants were able to recognize these as they were occurring.** As Winters and Jeglic (2015) point out, "behaviors associated with sexual grooming do not automatically signify a person is a child molester but rather should be recognized as possibly worrisome should these behaviors form a systematic pattern."



RAPE CRISIS CENTERS AND JUVENILE RESIDENTIAL CENTERS

As the PREA responders and victim service providers, rape crisis centers can work with juvenile residential centers in the awareness and prevention of sexual misconduct. Centers can offer in-person training to line staff or supervisors on grooming behaviors and how to identify and respond when they recognize boundary-crossing by either other youth or other staff members. Trainings can also be offered to staff members to help identify implicit biases about offenses and offenders that come from society; helping staff to be more aware of situations that are often overlooked, such as violations where females are the offenders. Rape crisis center staff can provide assistance with policy and protocol review and consultation. Staff trained in Safe Spaces may be able to assist in an assessment of space and provide recommendations for best practices.

For initial outreach to a juvenile residential center, it may be suggested that the Executive Director or Director of Programming make an introduction to the facility, including an invitation for facility administrators/supervisors to visit your center for a tour and overview of agency services. This could lead to an invitation for an in-person meeting to discuss further collaborations, etc.

SPECIAL THANKS

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