

# SEXUAL COERCION RATES IN SEVEN MIDWESTERN PRISON FACILITIES FOR MEN

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*Sexual coercion rates in seven prison facilities for men in midwestern states were assessed. Anonymous written surveys were distributed to the total population of 7,032 inmates and 1,936 security staff in the facilities. Usable surveys were returned by 1,788 inmates (25%) and 475 staff (25%). Results showed that 21% of the inmates had experienced at least one episode of pressured or forced sexual contact since incarcerated in their state, and 16% reported that an incident had occurred in their current facility. At least 7% of the sample had been raped in their current facility. Seven percent of the sample had experienced sexual coercion, and at least 4% had been raped during the most recent 26 to 30 months. Factors that appeared to increase sexual coercion rates were large population size, racial conflict, barracks housing, inadequate security, and having a high percentage of inmates incarcerated for a crime against persons.*

The prevalence of sexual coercion of men in prison—defined here as the occurrence of pressured or forced sexual contact against one's will—is perhaps one of the most illusive statistics in the criminal justice field. There is general agreement that sexual coercion is a contributing factor to prison violence (Lockwood, 1980), tension and anxiety in the prison environment (Smith & Batiuk, 1989), medical trauma to victims (Lipscomb, Muram, Speck, & Mercer, 1992), emotional trauma to victims and suicide (Donaldson, 1993), and the spread of infectious diseases and HIV ("Breaking the Silence," 1995). However, after decades of research, social scientists have yet to agree on what percentage of incarcerated men experience coercive sexual contact (Dumond, 1992, 1999). Thus, corrections authorities and policy makers are faced with remedying a problem of unknown dimensions (Cotton & Groth, 1982).

A majority of the research suggests that less serious incidents of sexual coercion, such as genital fondling and failed attempts at intercourse, are com-

mon in men's prison facilities but that completed rapes (defined here as forced oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse) are infrequent. One early study by Lockwood (1980) revealed that 28% of 89 male inmates interviewed in a New York state prison had been the target of sexual aggression, but only one inmate (1.3%) was reportedly raped. Nacci and Kane (1983) interviewed 330 male inmates in the federal prison system and found that about one third had been the target of sexual aggression, but less than 0.3% had experienced a completed rape. According to Cooley (1993), only 1 of 55 inmates in five Canadian federal prisons reported a sex-related victimization in a year's time. More recently, Hensley (2000) reported that 14% of 174 male inmates interviewed in an Oklahoma prison had been sexually threatened, but only 2 (1.1%) had been raped.

However, many researchers have noted that sexual assault is likely to be underreported by male inmates because of fears of reprisals, unwillingness to be a "snitch," and fear of being labeled a homosexual or weak (Cotton & Groth, 1982; Eigenberg, 1994). At least two studies suggest that when inmates are given the opportunity to report sexual-assault experiences in an anonymous way, the rates are significantly higher. In 1982, Wooden and Parker found that 14% of a sample of 200 male inmates in a California medium-security prison reported in an anonymous survey that they had been pressured into having sex against their will. The sexual-assault rates varied by sexual orientation: 41% for homosexuals, 2% for bisexuals, and 9% for heterosexuals.

Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, and Donaldson (1996) conducted an anonymous written survey of sexual assault in the Nebraska state prison system in 1994. The survey was distributed to the total population of 1,700 male inmates in three facilities. Results showed that 12% of 486 men who responded to the survey had been forced to engage in sexual intercourse at least one time since incarceration. Another 10% had experienced less-serious incidents of sexual coercion (e.g., attempts at contact, acts of pressured sex).

What can explain the finding of prison rape rates as low as 1% to as high as 14%? According to Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, and Bennett (1995), the disparities may be due to differences in methodologies, definitions of sexual assault, and types of facilities studied. Differences in time periods when the studies were conducted may also be a factor. The present study was undertaken to overcome many of these limitations. We planned to replicate our study of sexual coercion of Nebraska inmates in several other state prison facilities. Inmates in each facility would be assessed with the same survey instrument and research procedures during the same time frame. The major objective



was to find consistencies in the results that could help establish estimates of "true" sexual-assault rates. Another purpose was to determine if characteristics of prison facilities and/or their inmate populations influenced sexual-assault rates.

## METHOD

### SELECTION OF FACILITIES AND SAMPLE

We sent out proposals to the Department of Corrections (DOC) in 14 states requesting their participation in a sexual-assault survey. We guaranteed that the identities of participating facilities would be kept anonymous. Six departments declined, three requested that we make our request at a later time, and five agreed to participate. Of these, four departments offered the participation of seven men's facilities. (Three women's facilities were also made available, but only the men's facilities are the subject of this article.)

The total population of inmates and security staff in a facility were sampled. Facility 1 was a maximum-medium-minimum facility that provided a sample of 1,770 men from the maximum-security unit and 517 staff members. A sample of 1,650 inmates and 395 staff members were obtained from Facility 2—a maximum-medium-minimum security facility. In Facility 3, a maximum-medium-minimum security facility, surveys were sent to 1,150 inmates in the maximum-security unit and 370 staff members. Facility 4 was a maximum-medium-minimum security facility that provided 890 inmates and 220 security staff members for sampling. Facility 5 was a maximum-security long-term segregation facility with 952 inmates and 280 security staff members. Five hundred inmates and 154 security staff members were surveyed in Facility 6—a maximum-medium facility. A sample of 120 inmates was available from Facility 7, a minimum-security facility. (Staff members were not sampled.) The total sample size was 7,032 male inmates and 1,936 security staff members.

### INSTRUMENTS

The inmate and staff questionnaires were shortened versions of the Nebraska survey instruments. The inmate and staff surveys each had sections for demographic data; perceptions of the prison environment; and opinions about, and remedies for, sexual coercion. Only the inmate survey had a section for actual sexual coercion experiences. The relevant questions from the inmate and staff surveys are described below.

*Sexual coercion rates.* In the inmate survey, the statewide sexual coercion rate was assessed by the question, "Since the time you have been in a (name of state) prison, has anyone ever *pressured* or *forced* you to have sexual contact (touching of genitals, oral, anal, or vaginal sex) against your will?" The facility sexual coercion rate was determined by a follow-up question: "If yes or not sure, list all of the (name of state) facilities where it happened, how many times it happened in each facility, and the years you were in each facility."

*Worst-case incident and rape rates.* Inmates were asked, "If you have been *pressured* or *forced* to have sexual contact while in prison, please describe what happened in the rest of the questions. If you have been forced or pressured to have sexual contact more than once in prison, describe the one time that was the *most serious or harmful to you.*" Questions followed about the number, gender, race, and relationship (e.g., inmate or prison staff) of the perpetrator(s) and the year in which it occurred. Inmates were requested to write a description of the incident.

Inmates were asked whether the incident was brought about by pressure (persuasion, bribery, blackmail, threat of love withdrawal, or use of alcohol or drugs) or force (threats to harm or hurt, physical intimidation, physical restraint, physical harm, and use of a weapon). They also indicated the sexual outcome—attempts at touch; genital touching; and oral, anal, or vaginal sex.

*Sexual coercion estimates and facility protection level.* Inmates and staff were asked, "In the prison you are in now, about what percentage of inmates do you think have been pressured or forced to have sexual contact against their will? Circle your best guess." The numbers ranged from 0%, 1%, 5%, 10%, and upward to 100% in 10% increments. Inmates and staff also were asked, "In the prison you are in now, do you think that the prison system protects inmates from pressured or forced sexual contact? Circle one number." The 7-point scale ranged from *definitely no* to *definitely yes*.

## PROCEDURES

Following approval from the university Human Subjects Committee, the investigators and their undergraduate research assistants prepared packets that contained a consent form explaining the anonymous and voluntary nature of the survey, the questionnaire, and a postage-paid, return-addressed envelope. Between February and July 1998, the packets were boxed and delivered to DOC officials at the participating facilities. Prison staff then distributed packets to all of the inmates and security staff in the facilities.



## RESULTS

### RETURN RATES

A total number of usable surveys returned was 1,788 for inmates (25% return rate) and 475 from security staff (25% return rate). The actual return rates were 2 to 3 percentage points higher when all returned responses were considered. About 140 inmate surveys could not be used because they were incomplete, prankish, or grossly inconsistent. Many inmates sent back a letter instead of a survey. According to a handwriting screen of surveys from inmates claiming sexual coercion, two inmates sent in five duplicated surveys. About 40 staff surveys could not be used, usually because the respondent was a new employee who could not answer the questions.

See Table 1 for the number of inmate and staff returns for each facility (rows 1 and 2). The return rate for inmates ranged from as low as 21% from Facilities 5 and 7, to as high as 35% in Facility 6. The number of staff returns varied from as low as 15% in Facility 2, to as high as 37% in Facility 6 and 39% in Facility 3.

### SEXUAL COERCION RATES

*Statewide and facility sexual coercion rates.* Of the 1,788 respondents, 375 (21%) indicated that they had experienced at least one incident of pressured or forced sex while incarcerated in their state. As shown in row 3 of Table 1, the statewide sexual coercion rates for the seven men's facilities varied from 16% to 26%. Two hundred eighty-five inmates (16%) had been sexually coerced in their current facility. The facility rates for the seven men's facilities ranged from 4% to 21% (row 4). The facility rates were, of course, lower than statewide rates because some inmates experienced sexual coercion in prisons or jails other than their current facility.

*Facility worst-case incident rates.* Two hundred fifty-four inmates (14% of 1,788 respondents) provided information about a worst-case incident that happened in their present facility. Rates ranged from 4% to 17% in the facilities (row 5). The worst-case rates were lower than the facility rates because many inmates chose to write about an incident that took place at another facility, even though they had experienced sexual coercion in their present facility. Also, some inmates reported that an incident took place in their present facility but declined to provide information about a worst-case incident. Therefore, the worst-case incident rates were a low-end estimate of the actual number of incidents that took place in a facility.

TABLE 1: Summary of Sexual-Assault Rates and Estimates for Midwestern Prison Facilities

Characteristic	Facility						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sample size—inmates	461	430	270	232	196	174	25
2. Sample size—staff	109	59	143	46	61	57	—
3. Inmates reporting a pressured- or forced-sex incident in any prison/jail in the state (%)	24	21	26	16	18	16	16
4. Inmates reporting a pressured- or forced-sex incident in this facility (%)	18	19	21	14	4	14	4
5. Inmates reporting a worst-case incident in this facility (%)	16	17	15	14	4	14	4
6. Inmates reporting a worst-case incident in this facility between 1996 and early to mid-1998 (%)	9	8	8	7	3	5	4
7. Inmates reporting a worst-case incident of rape in this facility (%)	8	11	9	6	0	7	4
8. Inmates reporting a worst-case incident of rape in this facility between 1996 and early to mid-1998 (%)	4	6	4	3	0	2	4
9. Inmate estimate of how many inmates are pressured/forced into sex in this facility (0-100%)	27	41	24	13	17	12	7
10. Staff estimate of how many inmates are pressured/forced into sex in this facility (0-100%)	18	29	12	18	11	4	—
11. Inmate rating of sexual-assault protection level in this facility (1-7)	2.4 Low	2.1 Low	2.8 Low	3.0 Low-Medium	3.9 Medium	4.6 Medium-High	4.6 Medium-High
12. Staff rating of sexual-assault protection level in this facility (1-7)	4.8 Medium-High	4.2 Medium	5.7 High	5.0 High	6.2 Very High	6.0 Very High	—
13. Percentage of incidents that involve staff	20	21	22	15	—	28	—
14. Percentage of survey respondents incarcerated for a crime against persons	80	56	71	59	70	60	20

NOTE: 1 = maximum-medium-minimum facility for men (survey focused on maximum unit); 2 = maximum-medium-minimum facility for men; 3 = maximum-medium-minimum facility for men (survey focused on maximum unit); 4 = maximum-medium-minimum facility for male felons; 5 = primarily maximum facility for men that holds long-term segregation offenders; 6 = maximum-medium facility for male felons; 7 = facility for male felons, misdemeanants, and first offenders.



*Facility worst-case incident rate for 1996-1998.* The worst-case facility rates included sexual coercion cases that had happened as far back as the 1960s. To determine rates in recent years, we estimated the number of worst-case incidents that had occurred in a facility from 1996 until the time in 1998 when the survey was conducted. Depending on the facility, the end date was either early or midyear of 1998. Thus, the estimates were for a 26- to 30-month period. The number of inmate cases in this category was 130 or 7% of the total sample. The rates ranged from 4% to 9% for the facilities (row 6).

*Facility worst-case incident rate for rape.* To estimate the number of incidents that would meet a legal definition of rape, we counted only the facility worst-case incidents that were brought about by a force tactic and resulted in oral, anal, or vaginal sex. The number of inmate cases for this category was 131 or 7% of the total sample. As shown in row 7, the rates for facility worst-case incidents of rape ranged from 0% to 11% in the facilities.

*1996-1998 facility worst-case incident rate for rape.* The estimated number of inmate cases of rape that had occurred from 1996 to 1998 was 67 or 4% of the total sample. Rape rates for the past 26 to 30 months ranged from 0% to 6% in the facilities (row 8).

*Estimates of sexual coercion rates.* As shown in Table 1 (rows 9 and 10), inmate estimates of the sexual coercion rate in their facility were usually close to the reported statewide sexual coercion rate, but somewhat higher than the reported facility rate for their institution. Staff estimates tended to be lower than the statewide or facility rates. In Facility 4, inmate and staff estimates were within a few percentage points of the actual facility rate. Facility 2 was unusual in that both inmate and staff estimates were substantially higher than the reported statewide or facility rates—an outcome that will be discussed later.

*Ratings of facility protection level.* As shown in Table 1, row 11, inmates in the larger men's facilities (1, 2, and 3) gave low ratings for their facility protection level. A medium rating was given by inmates in Facility 5, a high-security, long-term segregation facility. A medium-high rating was given by inmates in Facility 6, a relatively small prison, and by inmates in Facility 7, a small minimum-security prison.

Staff ratings for the prison protection level (Table 1, row 12) were much higher than inmate ratings in all of the facilities. However, those facilities that had the lowest inmate ratings for protection also had the lowest staff ratings for protection (Facilities 1 and 2). Facilities with the highest inmate protec-

tion ratings had some of the highest staff ratings for protection (Facilities 5 and 6). Thus, inmates and staff generally agreed on whether protection levels were relatively low or high in their facility.

*Alleged staff involvement.* As shown in Table 1, row 13, about 20% of the inmates from the larger facilities indicated that a male or female staff member(s) participated in their worst-case sexual coercion incident. The percentages for the other facilities are not shown because they were based on a small number of incidents.

## DISCUSSION

We integrated all of our data to produce facility profiles that could help explain the variable sexual coercion rates in the seven facilities. The facilities are discussed in order of highest to lowest sexual coercion rates. We judged Facility 2 as having the worst sexual coercion climate of the seven facilities surveyed. It had one of the highest facility sexual coercion rates (19%) and the highest rape rate (11%). The primary cause appeared to be the use of barracks housing, where 50% of the sexual coercion incidents reportedly occurred. Another problem was racial conflict. White inmates complained that Black sexual aggressors routinely preyed on young White inmates. Our data showed that the targets in 60% of the incidents were White, whereas the perpetrators in 74% of the incidents were Black.

A third factor was lax security. Both inmate and staff respondents complained about poorly paid, unmotivated staff who failed to complete basic rounds. Many inmates also complained that some homosexual and/or Black staff tended to be permissive about sexual coercion. Numerous inmates alleged that a few high-level officers had for years demanded sexual favors from inmates.

The inmate responses suggested that a climate of fear about sexual assault dominated the prison. Supporting evidence was the unusually high estimates of sexual assault and the low protection-level ratings given by both inmates and staff. Although the reported sexual coercion rate (19%) was not as high as the inmate estimated rate (41%), inmates did have a basis for their fears. Some of the most brutal and recent rapes reported in our study came from this facility. One security officer wrote that he had witnessed a "young boy" brought to the infirmary after being raped by seven Blacks. The inmate was crying, bleeding, and hurt badly inside. Showing no compassion, the infirmary staff "patched him up" and sent him back to the same barracks where he



had been attacked. Many other surveyed staff agreed that there was a need for more staff, better pay, and training.

Facilities 1 and 3 had the highest statewide sexual coercion rates (24% and 26%), and high facility rates (18% and 21%). However, both facilities had a lower rape rate (8% and 9%) than Facility 2. The high sexual coercion rates in both facilities appeared to be related to having a large inmate population size (above 1,000) in conjunction with understaffing. As evidence, inmates gave their facilities low protection-level ratings. Responding staff gave higher protection-level ratings to their facilities but expressed the need for more staff and tighter security.

Racial dynamics contributed to the problem in both facilities. For example, in Facility 1, 72% of the incidents involved White targets, whereas 71% of the incidents involved Black perpetrators. Many older inmates in these facilities wrote that gang rapes were not as frequent as they were in the "old days." Modern-day rapes, in their opinion, were caused by racial conflicts, gang politics, and a new breed of violent young offenders.

Facility 4 had a medium level of sexual coercion—a 16% statewide rate, a 14% facility rate, and a 6% rape rate. The lower rates in Facility 4 most likely reflected its smaller population size (less than 1,000 inmates) and its racially homogeneous population (primarily White). Compared with Facilities 2 and 3, Facility 4 had a smaller percentage of violent offenders. In addition, Facility 4 had recently undergone several months of "lockdown"—a procedure that limits sexual coercion opportunities. Despite the lower rates, several inmates reported serious gang rapes in recent years. A contributing factor appeared to be inadequate or lax security by the staff. Inmates gave a low to medium protection-level rating to the facility. Surveyed staff perceived the protection level as high, but many noted that there was a need to hire more guards.

Facility 6 had very similar rates of sexual coercion to Facility 4. It shared similar features of having a small population size, being racially homogeneous, and having a lower proportion of inmates who had committed crimes against persons. Nonetheless, several inmates had reported serious rapes in recent years. The administration could not understand how rapes could be occurring because their prison had a reputation for good management and few problems with violent inmates. This was supported by the favorable protection-level ratings given by inmates and staff. One likely explanation was that the prison had recently begun to import violent offenders from other states for financial reasons. According to several survey respondents, some of these transfer offenders were raping the local inmates.

Facility 7 had one of the lowest facility rates for sexual coercion (4%). Only 1 of 25 respondents reported being raped (4%). The low rates were a reflection of the facility's small population size (100) and the low proportion of violent offenders present in this minimum-security unit. Good security was also a factor, as inmates gave a medium-high rating to the protection level of the facility.

Facility 5 was unusual in that it had a very low 4% facility rate and a 0% rape rate, even though it was a maximum-security unit with a population of about 1,000 inmates and had a high proportion of offenders who had committed a crime against persons. The 24-hour lockdown procedures routinely used in the facility appeared to have eliminated nearly all opportunities for rape of inmates by other inmates. The small number of incidents that were reported had minor sexual outcomes. The majority of perpetrators were male and female prison staff.

#### LIMITATIONS

We cannot be sure that a sexual coercion rate reported by only 25% of the total population of inmates in a facility reflects the "true" sexual coercion rate. We know that the return sample for Facilities 1, 3, and 5 had an overrepresentation of better educated inmates and a moderate underrepresentation of Black inmates. It is possible that these characteristics may be related to sexual coercion rates. For example, because Whites are more likely to be victims of sexual coercion than Blacks, the rates for these facilities may be overestimates. However, if less educated inmates are more likely to be sexually coerced than inmates with more education, the rates for these facilities may be underestimated.

The study is also limited in that the results were based on anonymous written surveys that could be falsified. Although we screened the surveys of target inmates looking for inconsistencies and duplications, it is likely that some falsified surveys were analyzed. However, we believe that the results from Facility 5 support the credibility of our data. Although 18% of the inmates from this facility said that they had been sexually coerced in another facility in their state, not one reported being raped in their current facility. Thus, they were not using the survey as an opportunity to make their facility "look bad." In our opinion, inmates were generally truthful in reporting incidents.



## CONCLUSIONS

About 21% of 1,788 male inmates who responded to the survey reported at least one incident of sexual coercion in their state prison system. Sixteen percent had experienced an incident in their facility, and 7% had been raped in their facility. Seven percent said that their worst-case incident had happened in the past 2½ years. Four percent of all male inmates said that they had been raped in the past 26 to 30 months.

Many of the results were similar to the findings of the Nebraska prison study (Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996). For example, the statewide sexual coercion rates for inmates in the largest facilities in the present study ranged from 21% to 26%. The statewide sexual coercion rates for two Nebraska facilities with the same custody levels were 22% and 23%.

Sexual coercion rates varied among the facilities. Factors that appeared to be related to higher rates of sexual coercion were having an inmate population size greater than 1,000, the existence of conflict among Black and White inmates, the use of barracks housing, and having a greater proportion of inmates who have committed a crime against persons. The presence of a sufficient number of motivated security staff and tight security measures appeared to limit sexual coercion among inmates. For example, we found that a facility that used lockdown procedures had a zero rape level. Finally, our study suggested that a substantial portion of sexual coercion incidents (about 20% in larger prisons) involved prison staff perpetrators.

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