



Bureau of Justice Statistics Selected Findings

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Prior Abuse Reported by Inmates and Probationers

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In recent surveys completed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 19% of State prison inmates, 10% of Federal inmates, and 16% of those in local jails or on active probation told interviewers they had been physically or sexually abused before their current sentence. Just under half of the women in correctional populations and a tenth of the men indicated past abuse. The survey questions largely relied on respondents to define for themselves physical and sexual abuse.

For women, abuse as children more likely in correctional than general population

Between 6% and 14% of male offenders and between 23% and 37% of female offenders reported they had been physically or sexually abused before age 18. For the general U.S. population, prevalence estimates of child abuse vary, depending on definitions, types of questions, selection of study subjects, and response rates. A review of 16 studies estimated that for the general adult population 5% to 8% of males and 12% to 17% of females were abused as children. (See page 4 for Gorey-Leslie article reference.)

Highlights

Prior abuse of correctional populations, by sex

	Percent experiencing abuse before sentence				
	Total	Ever		Before 18	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Ever abused before admission					
State prison inmates	18.7%	16.1%	57.2%	14.4%	36.7%
Federal prison inmates	9.5	7.2	39.9	5.8	23.0
Jail inmates	16.4	12.9	47.6	11.9	36.6
Probationers	15.7	9.3	40.4	8.8	28.2
Physically abused					
State prison inmates	15.4%	13.4%	46.5%	11.9%	25.4%
Federal prison inmates	7.9	6.0	32.3	5.0	14.7
Jail inmates	13.3	10.7	37.3	--	--
Probationers	12.8	7.4	33.5	--	--
Sexually abused					
State prison inmates	7.9%	5.8%	39.0%	5.0%	25.5%
Federal prison inmates	3.7	2.2	22.8	1.9	14.5
Jail inmates	8.8	5.6	37.2	--	--
Probationers	8.4	4.1	25.2	--	--

--Not available.

- A third of women in State prison a sixth in Federal prison, and a quarter in jail said they had been raped before their sentence. Another 3% to 6% reported that someone had tried unsuccessfully to rape them.
- Among State prison inmates 1 in 20 men and 1 in 4 women said they had been sexually abused before age 18; 1 in 10 men and 1 in 4 women, physically abused.
- Over half of the abused women said they were hurt by spouses or boyfriends, and less than a third, by parents or guardians. Over half of the abused men in correctional populations identified parents or guardians as abusers.
- For State prisoners reporting prior abuse, 89% had ever used illegal drugs: 76% of the men and 89% of the women had used them regularly. Of those not reporting prior abuse, 82% had used illegal drugs: 68% of the men and 65% of the women had used them regularly.

Sources of data In four BJS surveys — the 1997 Surveys of Inmates in State or Federal Correctional Facilities, the 1996 Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, and the 1995 Survey of Adults on Probation — offenders selected through nationally representative samples responded to questions

in hour-long interviews. These offenders reported past physical or sexual abuse, offense histories, drug and alcohol use, and personal and family characteristics. See page 3 for information on obtaining the survey methodologies.

Table 1. Physical or sexual abuse before admission, by sex of inmate or probationer

Before admission	State inmates		Federal inmates		Jail inmates		Probationers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Ever abused	16.1%	57.2%	7.2%	39.9%	12.9%	47.6%	9.3%	40.4%
Physically ^a	13.4	46.5	6.0	32.3	10.7	37.3	7.4	33.5
Sexually ^a	5.8	39.0	2.2	22.8	5.6	37.2	4.1	25.2
Both	3.0	28.0	1.1	15.1	3.3	26.9	2.1	18.3
Age of victim at time of abuse								
17 or younger ^b	14.4%	36.7%	5.8%	23.0%	11.9%	36.6%	8.8%	28.2%
18 or older ^b	4.3	45.0	2.7	31.0	2.3	26.7	1.1	24.7
Both	2.5	24.7	1.3	14.2	1.3	15.8	0.5	12.5
Age of abuser								
Adult	15.0%	55.8%	6.9%	39.0%	12.1%	46.0%	8.5%	39.2%
Juvenile only	0.9	1.0	0.2	0.3	0.8	1.3	0.6	
Rape before admission								
Completed	4.0%	37.3%	1.4%	21.4%	3.9%	33.1%	--	--
Attempted	3.1	32.8	1.0	17.9	3.0	26.6	--	--
Attempted	0.8	4.3	0.3	3.2	0.7	5.6	--	--

--Not available.

^aIncludes those both physically and sexually abused.

^bIncludes those abused in both age categories.

Female inmates and probationers were abused by both intimates and family members. Except for women in jail, most abused women reported their abusers to have been current or prior husbands or boyfriends: 61% of abused women in State prison, 66% in Federal prison, 57% on probation, and 43% in local jails. A parent, guardian, or other relative had abused about a third to a half of the reporting women.

Prisoners' prior abuse related to their family background

Prisoners reported higher levels of abuse if they grew up in foster care rather than with parents, if their parents were heavy users of alcohol or drugs, or if a family member had been in jail or prison.

While growing up —

	Percent of State inmates reporting abuse	
	Male	Female
Prisoners lived with		
Both parents	14.0%	54.7%
One parent	16.4	57.3
Foster/agency/other	43.6	86.7
Parent abused		
alcohol or drugs	29.4%	75.7%
Did not abuse	10.0	45.9
At any time —		
Family* incarcerated	20.2%	63.9%
Not incarcerated	12.3	46.9

*Includes boyfriends or girlfriends with whom the inmate had lived before admission.

Nonparental care. Forty-four percent of male prisoners and 87% of female prisoners who had spent their childhood in foster care or institutions reported abuse. Many of these inmates may have been removed

Abused males reported being mistreated as children, but females, as both children and adults

For all correctional populations, men who reported abuse generally had been age 17 or younger when they suffered the abuse (table 1). Women, however, were abused as both juveniles and adults. Depending on the correctional population, a quarter to a third of women were abused as juveniles; a quarter to almost a half, as adults. Twenty-five percent of the female State prisoners were abused as both juveniles and adults, as were 16% of women in jail, 14% in Federal prison, and 13% on probation. If abused, almost all persons of both sexes were

victimized by an adult rather than by a juvenile. Only 1% or less reported only being victimized by persons 17 or younger.

Abuse of men was by family members, but abuse of women by family members and intimates

About 9 in 10 of the surveyed persons who reported past abuse also said they had known at least 1 of their abusers (table 2). Family members were the primary abusers of the men: a parent, guardian, or other relative was identified by 57% to 70%. Wives, ex-wives, and girlfriends were identified by 3% to 7%.

Table 2. Relationship to abuser, by the inmate or probationer reporting abuse

Relationship of victim to abuser	Percent of those persons who reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse before admission							
	State inmates		Federal inmates		Jail inmates		Probationers	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Knew abuser	89.5%	90.6%	86.3%	95.4%	87.9%	90.2%	93.9%	93.8%
Family	66.6	40.1	56.7	34.8	64.0	50.5	69.5	50.5
Parent or guardian	54.1	27.2	49.0	24.3	52.7	33.0	62.0	31.0
Other relative	22.9	21.0	15.1	15.4	18.9	28.1	11.9	23.5
Intimate	5.8	61.3	6.5	66.3	3.1	42.8	5.7	56.7
Spouse/ex-spouse	2.2	36.5	1.9	41.0	1.8	25.1	4.9	37.6
Boyfriend/girlfriend	4.4	36.0	4.8	36.0	1.4	26.2	1.7	24.9
Friend/acquaintance	22.6	26.2	24.4	17.2	19.0	23.7	17.8	10.1
Other	17.4	15.8	18.7	10.5	15.6	13.3	11.5	14.3
Knew none of abusers	10.5%	9.4%	13.7%	4.6%	12.1%	9.8%	6.1%	6.2%

Note: Detail does not add to totals because some were abused by more than 1 person.

Table 3. Current and past violent offenses and past alcohol and drug use, by whether abused before admission to State prison, 1997

Offense history and drug and alcohol use	Percent of State prison inmates					
	Reported being abused			Reported being not abused		
	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females
Current or past violent offense	70.4%	76.5%	45.0%	60.2%	61.2%	29.1%
Current violent offense	55.7%	61.0%	33.5%	45.3%	46.1%	20.9%
Homicide	15.9	16.3	13.9	12.7	12.8	7.3
Sexual assault	15.6	18.8	2.0	6.9	7.1	0.4
Robbery	12.5	13.5	7.8	14.5	14.7	6.1
Assault	9.5	9.9	7.6	9.3	9.4	5.7
Used an illegal drug						
Ever	88.6%	88.5%	88.9%	81.8%	81.9%	77.4%
Ever regularly	76.3	75.5	79.7	67.9	67.9	65.0
In month before offense	61.4	59.7	68.6	55.3	55.3	54.0
At time of offense	39.6	38.0	46.2	30.7	30.7	32.0
Drank alcohol						
Ever regularly	66.9%	69.1%	57.5%	59.0%	59.8%	38.2%
At time of offense	41.6	43.6	33.1	36.1	36.6	23.5

from abusive homes. There is little difference in the percentage of abused inmates growing up with one parent and those with two.

Parental drinking. Of those who had grown up with a parent or guardian who drank heavily or used drugs regularly, 29% of the men and 76% of the women reported prior abuse.

Incarcerated relative. Abuse was reported for about 20% of male inmates and 64% of female inmates who had a family member (including boyfriend and girlfriend) who had ever served time.

Reported past abuse associated with violent crime

Abused State prisoners were more likely than those not abused to be serving a sentence for a violent crime (table 3). Among State prisoners, 61% of abused men were serving a sentence for a violent offense, compared to 46% of those reporting no past mistreatment. Thirty-four percent of abused women and 21% of women not abused were in prison for a violent offense.

A past of abuse is specifically linked to sexual assault and homicide. Among men reporting abuse before prison, 19% were serving a sentence for sexual assault, including rape, compared to 7% of the men not

abused. Higher percentages of prisoners had committed homicide if they reported abuse (men, 16%, and women, 14%) than if they reported no abuse (men, 13%, and women, 7%).

When the category of violent crime overall is broadened to include both current and past offenses, an association between abuse and violent offenses remains. Among male State prison inmates, 77% of those reporting past abuse and 61% of those without that history had ever been sentenced for a violent crime. About 45% of abused women in State prison and 29% of those not abused had served at least one sentence for a violent crime.

The reported use of illegal drugs and alcohol higher among abused

Illegal drug use and regular drinking were more common among abused State prison inmates than among those who said they were not abused. An estimated 76% of abused men and 80% of abused women had used illegal drugs regularly, compared to 68% of men and 65% of women who had not been abused. About 69% of abused men and 58% of abused women reported drinking regularly at some time in their lives, compared to 60% of men and 38% of women who were not abused.

Abused State inmates were more likely than those reporting no abuse to have been using alcohol or illegal drugs at the time of their offense. This pattern occurred especially among female inmates. Forty-six percent of the abused women committed their current offense under the influence of illegal drugs; 33% were drinking. Among women who were not abused, 32% committed their offense while on drugs and 24%, while drinking.

Inmates and probationers answered surveys about their abuse

Data for this report were taken from four BJS surveys: the Surveys of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1997; the Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996; and the Survey of Adults on Probation, 1995. In all four surveys nationally representative samples of inmates or probationers were interviewed about their current offense and sentence, criminal history, personal and family background, and prior drug and alcohol use and treatment.

Descriptions of methodology, sample design, and standard error calculations can be found in the following: *Substance Abuse and Treatment of State and Federal Prisoners, 1997* (NCJ 172871); *Profile of Jail Inmates, 1996* (NCJ 164620); and *Substance Abuse and Treatment of Adults on Probation, 1995* (NCJ 166611).

Appendix table. Weighted totals of persons reporting in tables 1 and 2

	Total number*	
	In population (table 1)	Reporting prior abuse (table 2)
State inmates		
Male	984,320	158,729
Female	65,425	37,391
Federal inmates		
Male	81,607	5,850
Female	6,347	2,530
Jail inmates		
Male	450,099	57,915
Female	50,298	23,777
Probationers		
Male	1,630,117	163,676
Female	428,644	176,454

*Missing data are excluded from totals.

In the probation and jail inmate surveys, past the interview's midpoint, each respondent was asked, "Have you ever been physically or sexually abused?" Inmates in the surveys in State and Federal correctional facilities were asked if "anyone ever pressured or forced you to have any sexual contact against your will, that is, touching of genitals" and for females, "breast, or buttocks, or oral, anal, or vaginal sex?" and for males "or oral or anal sex?" In a separate question they were asked if they had "ever been physically abused?"

Question wording and respondent sensitivity affect level of reported abuse

The BJS survey questions rely on respondents to define abuse within the context of their own lives, to recall their pasts, and to report what they remember. Factors can intervene so that the reported experiences do not match the actual experiences. For example, respondents may be unwilling to admit that sensitive events occurred, may be reluctant to report abuse to others, may distrust interviewers or surveys, may forget, or may purposefully misrepresent.

In contrast, most studies of abuse in the general population have used a battery of questions listing specific

kinds of experiences, some of which are then classified as abuse by the analyst. These questions elicit events respondents may not recognize as abuse and impose the analysts' definitions of abuse upon respondents' experiences. These differences in definition and measurement should be taken into account when comparing the results of various surveys.

Low response rates, as well as broad definitions, have been found to produce high estimates of abuse, while high response rates and narrow definitions produce low estimates. For a discussion of the effects of question wording and response rates on estimates of abuse in the general population, see Kevin M. Gorey and Donald R. Leslie, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse: Integrative Review Adjustment for Potential Response and Measurement Biases," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 21, pp. 391-98, 1997.

Gallop Poll estimates of abuse for the general population are based on questions similar to those asked in the correctional population surveys. See the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1990, 1993, and 1995, for tables from the poll. The following were general adult population responses about childhood experiences: 9%, raped by an older child or an adult; 5% of men and 10% of

women, kicked, punched, or choked by a parent or guardian; and 13% of men and 10% of women, physically abused by their parents.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics is the statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. Jan M. Chaiken, Ph.D., is director.

BJS Selected Findings present findings from diverse data series. This report was written by Caroline Wolf Harlow under the supervision of Allen J. Beck. Thomas P. Bonczar assisted with analysis of the Survey of Adults on Probation and general statistical review. Tom Hester produced the report. Marilyn Marbrook administered final report production, assisted by Yvonne Boston.

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This report, as well as other reports and statistics, may be found at the Bureau of Justice Statistics World Wide Web site:
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>

Data from the surveys can be obtained from the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data at the University of Michigan, 1-800-999-0960. The archive can be accessed through the BJS Web site.