

Federal Funding Cuts Target Efforts to Reduce Sexual Abuse in Prisons

The Justice Department's grant terminations endanger incarcerated people and corrections staff alike.



Josephine Wonsun Hahn



Tiffany Sanabia

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Prisons are in [crisis](#) [link-1] across the country. For years, they have struggled with high rates of violence and trauma, inadequate health care and resources, overcrowding, and severe staffing shortages. These conditions affect both the [people behind bars](#) [link-2] and [corrections staff](#) [link-3], who generally experience high rates of health

issues and substance use, as well as lower life expectancy.

Federal investment in [prison reform](#) [link-4] in recent decades has helped promote better conditions. Examples include grants to implement evidence-based programs in [education](#) [link-5] and [reentry](#) [link-6]. Nowhere is this truer,

though, than in curbing sexual violence behind bars. The [Prison Rape Elimination Act](#) [\[link-7\]](#) (PREA), passed with unanimous bipartisan support and signed by President George W. Bush in 2003, established zero tolerance for prison rape and provided funding and resources to address conditions that [foster](#) [\[link-8\]](#) sexual violence.

In the two decades since, the Department of Justice has built a national infrastructure for funding, information, training, and external partnerships to help correctional institutions implement and comply with the law. But in April 2025, the Trump administration abruptly canceled an estimated [\\$16 million](#) [\[link-9\]](#) in DOJ funding for the Prison Rape Elimination Act,

decimating that infrastructure. These were just a subset of the department's cuts to grants initially valued at more than [\\$76 million](#) [\[link-10\]](#) for corrections, reentry, and community supervision programs around the country.

In this [Brennan Center series](#) [\[link-11\]](#), we explore how these and other federal cuts have imperiled long-standing bipartisan work to improve public safety. This piece highlights the need for addressing sexual violence in prisons and explains how federal funding cuts will further degrade already inhumane conditions for [more than 1.2 million](#) [\[link-12\]](#) incarcerated people and [360,000](#) [\[link-13\]](#) corrections staff.

Progress Under the Prison Rape Elimination Act

Congress passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act in response to the [high prevalence](#) [\[link-14\]](#) of sexual abuse in prisons, with estimates suggesting that [at least 13 percent](#) [\[link-15\]](#) of incarcerated people had experienced sexual abuse. Congress also identified several [compounding safety challenges](#) [\[link-16\]](#) in correctional facilities: limited incident reporting and data, inadequate training for staff, and lasting effects of victimization, including trauma and

violence during and after incarceration.

PART OF



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Effects of Federal Funding Cuts on Public Safety ▶

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[Social and Economic Harm](#)

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As required by the law, the DOJ established [comprehensive standards](#) [\[link-20\]](#) in 2012 for preventing, detecting, and responding to sexual abuse and

harassment across different types of confinement facilities. These include all state and federal prisons, local jails, juvenile facilities, and community confinement. The federal standards outline protocols for investigations, establish reporting mechanisms, institute accountability measures for staff misconduct, and improve access to victim services and treatment. Together, these practices aim to more effectively protect the human rights of incarcerated people.

The DOJ also established the [National PREA Resource Center](#) [\[link-21\]](#) as a hub for resources, training, and technical assistance to support correctional agencies' compliance with the standards. Among other responsibilities, the center developed comprehensive staff training and guidelines to strengthen reporting practices, prevent retaliation, improve security, and connect facilities to

external victim services organizations. Additionally, the center offered training and technical assistance to facilities preparing for mandatory periodic audits intended to ensure compliance with federal standards.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act has brought many [benefits](#) [\[link-22\]](#). Starting in 2004, [national data reporting](#) [\[link-23\]](#) on sexual violence in custody has helped quantify the scale of abuse. Systemic changes to safety practices and increased partnerships with victim services groups have helped [improve conditions](#) [\[link-24\]](#) for incarcerated people and corrections staff. Implementing the law has also [reinforced](#) [\[link-25\]](#) wider efforts to improve prison conditions, as audits and corrective action plans target staff assignments, training and supervision, facility design, and

ways to expand treatment and resources for incarcerated people.

[In 2025](#) [\[link-26\]](#), 25 states and the District of Columbia certified that they were in full compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, and 22 states submitted assurances, meaning that they were working toward full compliance. That is meaningful progress compared to 2015, when only [10 states](#) [\[link-27\]](#) were in full compliance. Experts from Just Detention International, an organization that works to end sexual abuse in detention, assert that corrections officials show a strong demand for resources to implement the law, reflecting [broad recognition](#) [\[link-28\]](#) of its value.

Still, more work is needed to continue implementing federal standards against sexual abuse in detention and strengthen accountability mechanisms. [In 2020](#) [\[link-29\]](#), more than 36,000

sexual victimization allegations were filed, with 2,351 substantiated reports in federal and state prisons. A [recent report](#) [\[link-30\]](#) found that the federal Bureau of Prisons failed to implement the Prison Rape Elimination Act and documented high rates of sexual violence in federal women's facilities and poor corrections responses that enabled ongoing abuse. These estimates [understate](#) [\[link-31\]](#) the true scope of sexual violence in prisons. Many cases go [unreported](#) [\[link-32\]](#) due to limited agency transparency, weak internal procedures, and insufficient staff buy-in and intervention. Overreliance on incarcerated victims reporting incidents and their fear of staff retaliation also contribute to underreporting.

Though there have been steps in the right direction over the past two decades, sexual violence in custody remains an entrenched problem

that requires robust federal oversight as well as expanded resources for effective implementation and compliance. As state and local budgets often lack capacity and resources to address sexual violence on their own,

federal funding has been essential to equipping corrections agencies with universal tools that promote sexual safety and offering facilities technical assistance to tailor implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Act.

The Impact of Federal Cuts

The DOJ's April 2025 cuts affected three key priorities under the Prison Rape Elimination Act: support for training and technical assistance, auditing capacity, and external partnerships with victim services providers that serve populations who experience disproportionate harm, such as incarcerated [women](#) [link-33], [youth](#) [link-34], [people with disabilities](#) [link-35], and [LGBTQ+ people](#) [link-36].

Training and Technical Assistance

The DOJ's funding cuts terminated the National PREA Resource Center's funding, causing the center to [temporarily shut down](#) [link-37]. Part of the funding has since been reinstated, but the center's focus is now solely on [auditing operations](#) [link-38], which

entails training and certifying auditors and operating the audit management system. Additionally, challenges to implementing the Prison Rape Elimination Act are exacerbated by the remaining funding cuts to other congressionally mandated work that supported jurisdictions in providing training and technical assistance and forming partnerships with victim services.

Audits

The Prison Rape Elimination Act requires [more than 2,000 facilities](#) [link-39] to be audited every three years by DOJ-certified auditors, who undergo rigorous training to conduct [independent evaluations](#) [link-40] that measure the scope of sexual abuse, compliance with federal standards, and gaps. Experts at Just Detention International shared that even before the funding reversals, there was a shortage of qualified auditors

due to a lack of auditor training classes in recent years. To date, there are currently only 253 certified auditors, tasked with evaluating thousands of facilities. The DOJ's funding cuts further jeopardize these mandatory audits.

While the DOJ recently restored funding to the National PREA Resource Center to support the auditing process, there is still a critical need for additional qualified auditors. Further, the recent rollback of federal support for training and technical assistance critically hinder facilities' ability to respond to any corrective actions that may result from those audits, as well as to continue efforts to stay in compliance.

Victim Services Partnerships

The DOJ's cuts to victim services will exacerbate risks to vulnerable incarcerated populations, especially [LGBTQ+](#)

[people](#) [\[link-41\]](#). Federal data shows that transgender people are 10 times more likely to

[report](#) [\[link-42\]](#) experiencing sexual violence during incarceration. The Prison Rape Elimination Act requires that agencies enter into written agreements with external victim services groups to provide crisis intervention and support through forensic examinations and abuse investigations. However, facilities will now be unable to partner as readily with rape crisis and victim advocacy organizations to treat incarcerated people at further risk of harm.

Current [federal standards](#) [\[link-43\]](#) lay out health and safety considerations specifically for incarcerated transgender people, including whether they are housed in men's or women's facilities. But recent federal directives diminish these protections. In January 2025, President Trump signed an

[executive order](#) [\[link-44\]](#) directing the attorney general to eliminate protections for transgender and nonbinary people in custody, ending the requirement for case-by-case housing determinations. A December 2025 [DOJ memo](#) [\[link-45\]](#) previews formal [revisions](#) [\[link-46\]](#) the DOJ is likely to make that significantly weaken existing standards under the Prison Rape Elimination Act. In fact, the memo directs certified auditors to stop using standards specifically designed to keep LGBTQ+ people safe in confinement facilities.

What's more, it may be difficult to see the full scope of how these changes will affect LGBTQ+ people behind bars, as [federal data removals](#) [\[link-47\]](#) have targeted gender identity data. The Bureau of Justice Statistics has eliminated gender identity questions from its [Survey of Sexual Victimization](#) [\[link-48\]](#), which is

mandated under the Prison Rape Elimination Act to monitor sexual abuse in correctional facilities nationwide. The loss of this data [erases](#) [\[link-49\]](#) victimization experienced by transgender and nonbinary people and makes it harder for facilities to serve the needs of abuse survivors.

Just Detention International Executive Director Linda McFarlane said the [collapse](#) [\[link-50\]](#) of these protections “will also cause direct and immediate harms to those most vulnerable and put all incarcerated people and staff in greater danger.” These actions worsen the impact of recent funding cuts that targeted support for correctional agencies and limited their ability to build partnerships with service providers, along with [cuts](#) [\[link-51\]](#) to victim services overall.

Thus, recent DOJ funding cuts jeopardize these coordinated

efforts and create unnecessary safety risks for both incarcerated

Urgency of Renewing Federal Funding

In sum, both [federal cuts](#) [\[link-52\]](#) and [recent directives](#) [\[link-53\]](#) have made it harder to implement the Prison Rape Elimination Act and will potentially cause confusion among correctional facilities about whether the law remains in force or what it now requires.

To be clear, the Prison Rape Elimination Act is still federal law. However, without adequate funding, resources for implementation, and comprehensive protections, the Trump administration risks unraveling decades of progress toward zero tolerance for sexual violence in confinement facilities. Already overextended corrections staff working with tight budgets will

people and staff.

face additional strain, making it increasingly difficult to track and respond to sexual abuse, let alone its lasting consequences to both affected incarcerated people and staff. It may also reduce effective oversight and accountability when sexual violence does occur.

Full reinstatement and renewal of DOJ funding for the Prison Rape Elimination Act is essential to ensure that correctional institutions can keep both incarcerated people and staff safe from sexual abuse. Independent oversight, training for staff and auditors, and technical assistance and resources for corrections, including site-based grants, are all necessary to meet the law's mandate, as well as strong partnerships with victim advocates who can respond to sexual violence and improve safety for all.

Links

link-1: crisis <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/how-atrocious-prisons-conditions-make-us-all-less-safe>

link-2: people behind bars <https://www.vera.org/news/mass-incarceration-is-a-public-health-crisis>

link-3: corrections staff <https://www.mdpi.com/2813-1851/3/1/5>

link-4: prison reform <https://perma.cc/L3Y2-VBB4>

link-5: education https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html

link-6: reentry https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/84_1_1_0.pdf?inline=1

link-7: Prison Rape Elimination Act <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/1435/text>

link-8: foster <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Fact-sheet-The-Very-Basics-about-Sexual-Abuse-in-Detention.pdf?inline=1>

link-9: \$16 million <https://counciloncj.org/doj-funding-update-a-deeper-look-at-the-cuts/>

link-10: \$76 million <https://counciloncj.org/doj-funding-update-a-deeper-look-at-the-cuts/>

link-11: Brennan Center series <https://www.brennancenter.org/series/effects-federal-funding-cuts-public-safety>

link-12: more than 1.2 million <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html>

link-13: 360,000 <https://perma.cc/35LR-JG7D>

link-14: high prevalence <https://perma.cc/2HQ7-3JFH>

link-15: at least 13 percent <https://perma.cc/BJ83-AKVV>

link-16: compounding safety challenges <https://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/senate-bill/1435/text>

link-17: Image </series/effects-federal-funding-cuts-public-safety>

link-18: Effects of Federal Funding Cuts on Public Safety </series/effects-federal-funding-cuts-public-safety>

link-19: Social and Economic Harm <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/criminal-justice/social-and-economic-harm>

link-20: comprehensive standards <https://perma.cc/KP9W-BYPZ>

link-21: National PREA Resource Center <https://perma.cc/CFB8-349F>

link-22: benefits <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/17/opinions/prison-rape-20-years-prea-reforms-judge-walton>

link-23: national data reporting <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/pdca22.pdf?inline=1>

link-24: improve conditions <https://perma.cc/TXV4-3MWU>

link-25: reinforced https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/sites/default/files/content/prisonsandjailsfinalstandards_0.pdf?inline=1

link-26: In 2025 <https://perma.cc/H2HV-TRG5>

link-27: 10 states <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/departments-justice-announces-50-states-and-territories-have-committed-ending-prison-rape>

link-28: broad recognition <https://perma.cc/TXV4-3MWU>

link-29: In 2020 <https://perma.cc/A4L4-ABAN>

link-30: recent report <https://perma.cc/9KQL-DHC9>

link-31: understate <https://perma.cc/AX3R-EF9X>

link-32: unreported <https://perma.cc/J2QZ-V9G7>

link-33: women <https://counciloncj.org/womens-justice-a-preliminary-assessment-of-women-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>

link-34: youth <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2023/03/Why-Youth-Incarceration-Fails.pdf?inline=1>

link-35: people with disabilities <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PREA-and-Beyond-Making-Detention-Facilities-Safe-and-Accessible-for-People-with-Disabilities.-pdf.pdf?inline=1>

link-36: LGBTQ+ people <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf?inline=1>

link-37: temporarily shut down <https://imprintnews.org/top-stories/fast-sudden-unexplainable-and-potentially-catastrophic/265230>

link-38: auditing operations <https://perma.cc/3M6K-JDHQ>

link-39: more than 2,000 facilities <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2025.html>

link-40: independent evaluations <https://perma.cc/7U7T-VZDF>

link-41: LGBTQ+ people <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/10/Incarcerated-LGBTQ-Youth-and-Adults.pdf?inline=1>

link-42: report <https://perma.cc/U254-5XCK>

link-43: federal standards <https://perma.cc/DVH7-ZP5Z>

link-44: executive order <https://theappeal.org/trump-executive-order-trans-prisoners/>

link-45: DOJ memo <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/04/nx-s1-5630490/prison-doj-safety-memo-changes-trans-lgbtq-inmates>

link-46: revisions <https://perma.cc/JK8D-WL6Y>

link-47: federal data removals <https://counciloncj.org/federal-data-in-the-crosshairs-whats-at-stake-for-public-safety/>

link-48: Survey of Sexual Victimization <https://perma.cc/EM72-HNMC>

link-49: erases <https://theappeal.org/trump-doj-erases-trans-people-from-crime-data-surveys/>

link-50: collapse <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/04/nx-s1-5630490/prison-doj-safety-memo-changes-trans-lgbtq-inmates>

link-51: cuts <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/justice-department-slashes-essential-services-crime-victims>

link-52: federal cuts <https://theappeal.org/trump-doj-defunds-national-prison-rape-resource-center/>

link-53: recent directives <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/04/nx-s1-5630490/prison-doj-safety-memo-changes-trans-lgbtq-inmates>