

The Power of Perception: Female Inmate Views on PREA Implementation

Sharon Weaver

Troy University, Troy, AL, USA

Margaret E. Shippen¹, Nicholas C. Derzis & Rebecca S. Curtis
Auburn University, Auburn, AL, USA

Angela L. Hall

Alabama State University, Montgomery, AL, USA

Christine L. Fleming

Friends of Disabled Adults and Children, Tucker, GA, USA

ABSTRACT

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA, 2003) mandates zero-tolerance for sexual assault in prisons. Despite the increase in female inmates, the criminal justice system policies remain male-focused. This study, stemming from a settlement agreement between the US Department of Justice and a state Department of Corrections, explores female inmates' perceptions of PREA through three constructs: impressions of (a) PREA, (b) sexual safety, and (c) system efficacy/change. Conducted via Zoom, 44 confidential interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Findings show most participants indicated PREA is weaponized for retaliation. Future research should examine improvements in response to inmate feedback.

KEYWORDS: Women's prison, sexual safety, prisoner perceptions, interviews

Each year, over 80,000 prisoners experience sexual victimization, yet only about 8% of these incidents are reported to correctional authorities (Kubiak, Nnawulezi, Karim, Sullivan & Beeble, 2012; Kubiak et al., 2017a; Kubiak et al., 2017b). This underreporting indicates systemic issues within the prison environment. The restrictive and highly regulated prison environment further complicates accurate reporting of these incidents, as studies that examine reporting behaviors rely on self-reported incidents or hypothetical victimization scenarios (Kubiak et al., 2012; Kubiak et al., 2017a; Kubiak et al., 2017b). Compounding the issue, correctional staff, who make up a sizable portion of perpetrators, often undermine the safety and integrity of these institutions. Sexual victimization within women's correctional facilities ranges from verbal abuse to rape and includes sexual harassment, unwarranted strip searches, inappropriate sexual touching, and coerced or forced sexual intercourse, usually perpetrated by prison staff (Hensley, 2002; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2006).

Female inmates face unique challenges, including heightened vulnerability to sexual victimization due to male-centric policies and practices. Despite representing approximately 7% of

¹ Corresponding Author; 2084 Haley Center, Auburn University, AL 36849. E-mail; shippme@auburn.edu

the U.S. prison population, women disproportionately report staff-on-inmate misconduct (Kajstura, 2018). Historically, scholarly research has focused on male inmates or inmate-to-inmate dynamics, neglecting the critical issue of staff-perpetrated sexual violence against incarcerated women (VanNatta, 2010; Wolff & Shi, 2011). This study addresses this gap by examining female inmates' personal perceptions of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) and its efficacy in fostering safety, additionally paving the way for further research into the experience of women behind bars.

Contextualizing Statement and Study Objectives

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), enacted in 2003, aimed to establish zero-tolerance policies for sexual misconduct in correctional facilities. While the Act broadly addresses inmate-on-inmate and staff-on-inmate assaults, its implementation has faced significant barriers, including inconsistent enforcement and lack of transparency (Smith, 2020). This study investigates female inmates' perceptions of PREA, exploring three constructs: impressions of PREA, sexual safety, and systemic efficacy/change.

By integrating qualitative data from structured interviews with 44 incarcerated women, this research identifies systemic shortcomings and offers actionable recommendations to enhance PREA's efficacy. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on prison reform, emphasizing the importance of gender-responsive and trauma-informed approaches to policy and practice. This research aims to bridge the gap between policy intent and practical application, shedding light on overlooked perspectives to inform meaningful reforms.

Filling a Unique Gap in the Literature

Previous studies have primarily relied on outdated sources or generalized data, often failing to capture the nuanced experiences of female inmates. Recent literature emphasizes the need for gender-responsive reforms in correctional facilities (Surrell & Johnson, 2020). By incorporating firsthand accounts and exploring systemic vulnerabilities, this study critically engages with current thinking and advances understanding of PREA's practical impact. This focus on female inmates' lived experiences sheds light on critical gaps in the implementation of PREA, offering actionable insights to improve safety and equity within correctional facilities (Covington, 2022). As the first study of its kind in this facility, it provides a timely contribution to the broader discourse on prison reform, particularly for underrepresented populations.

The Prison Rape Elimination Act

The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2003, applies to correctional facilities across diverse settings, including prisons, jails, juvenile facilities, military installations, Native American reservation facilities, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities (United States, 2003). The Act establishes a zero-tolerance standard for inmate sexual assault and rape, prioritizing prevention and safeguarding prisoners' Eighth Amendment rights. PREA broadly defines "prison rape" to include both inmate-on-inmate or staff-on-inmate sexual assault; without distinguishing between genders. It encompasses all sexual assaults, no matter the victim or perpetrator, achieved through manipulation, exploitation, violent threats, or when the victim cannot consent because of mental or physical incapacity (United States, 2003). The Act was to "provide for the analysis of the incidence and effects of prison rape in Federal, State, and local institutions and to provide information, resources, recommendations and funding to protect individuals from prison rape" (United States, 2003, p. 1). While PREA was

designed to create safer correctional environments, its practical implementation has faced significant barriers. This study seeks to explore these challenges through the lived experiences of female inmates.

Investigation of Abuse

Despite the 2003 enactment of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) aimed to detect, report, investigate, and prevent incidents of sexual misconduct in correctional facilities, incidents of prison rape and sexual assault remain problematic in many correctional facilities (Smith, 2020). Beck and Johnson (2012) documented that some correctional administrators have failed to implement PREA standards, severely limiting inmates' ability to report incidents of sexual misconduct without fear of retaliation. This failure underscores persistent challenges in enforcing the PREA standards effectively.

The facility in this study has one of the highest rates of reported sexual assaults among U.S. prisons (Equal Justice Initiative, 2012). An official investigation conducted by The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), which included interviews with over 50 female inmates at the facility, revealed pervasive and severe instances of officer-on-inmate sexual violence. Disturbingly, multiple female inmates became pregnant after their incarceration, highlighting the gravity of the situation. Moreover, the EJI investigation found evidence indicating that prison officials were inaccurately reporting the frequency of sexual assaults perpetrated by prison employees. Consequently, in May 2012, the EJI filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ), urging a prompt and thorough federal investigation into the State Department of Corrections' systematic failure to adequately protect prisoners from sexual violence perpetrated by corrections' employees (Equal Justice Initiative, 2012).

Attorneys from the USDOJ Civil Rights Division initiated a formal inquiry into the matter. Federal investigators conducted an on-site inspection at the facility, conducting interviews with staff and numerous prisoners, while also scrutinizing various documents, including incident and investigative reports, along with letters from approximately a quarter of the prison population. The investigation revealed a plethora of troubling issues: malfunctioning security cameras, lack of privacy for toilets, absence of effective grievance procedures, reports from women expressing feelings of physical or sexual insecurity, and instances where male staff members were observed monitoring women during their shower routines (Frank, 2014; Kubiak et.al., 2012; Kubiak et.al., 2017a; Kubiak et.al., 2017b). Additionally, the DOJ uncovered an "unprecedented" level of corroboration for the women's reports (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020).

Subsequently, in January 2014, the USDOJ informed state officials of the findings of its investigation, revealing egregious misconduct within the facility, including:

- a. prison staff perpetrated rape, sodomy, fondling, and indecent exposure against prisoners,
- b. coerced prisoners into performing oral sex,
- c. engaged in voyeuristic behavior by observing women while they showered and used the toilet,
- d. subjected women to a "daily barrage of sexually explicit verbal abuse," and
- e. prison officials punished women who reported sexual abuse and did not adequately investigate allegations (United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2014).

The State Department of Corrections entered into a settlement agreement with the USDOJ, as evidenced in the case of *United States of America v. The State and the Department of Corrections* (2015). This agreement comprehensively addresses the underlying causes of the abuses

uncovered by the investigation, drawing upon gender-responsive and trauma-informed principles to supplement the existing framework of the Prison Rape Elimination Act National Standards. These Standards are designed to prevent, detect, and respond to custodial sexual abuse and sexual harassment throughout the nation's prisons. Tailored to specifically target the identified problems revealed at the facility, the agreement aimed to meaningfully redress the harm inflicted upon women prisoners.

Numerous reforms were outlined, including mandates to ensure the safety of women from sexual abuse and sexual harassment by employing qualified staff to operate the facility and supervise prisoners securely. To augment this protection, the agreement stipulates the implementation of a state-of-the-art camera surveillance system. Furthermore, provisions were made to prevent staff from unnecessarily observing prisoners in vulnerable states, such as when they are unclothed or performing bodily functions. Integral to the settlement agreement between prison officials and the USDOJ is the commitment to conduct regular polling with incarcerated women to gauge their perceptions of sexual, physical, and emotional safety.

The investigation underscores persistent systemic barriers to the effective implementation of PREA, with widespread implications for inmate safety and institutional accountability. The settlement agreement represents a critical step toward fostering gender-responsive and trauma-informed environments, yet its success hinges on sustained oversight and adherence to reform mandates. This study builds on these insights, aiming to provide actionable recommendations that align with these principles and directly address the lived experiences and perceptions of incarcerated women.

Gender-Responsive Programming

The United States has approximately 219,000 incarcerated women, constituting the highest female incarceration rate globally (Kajstura, 2018). This significant increase can be attributed to the broadening scope of law enforcement initiatives, stricter drug sentencing laws, and post-conviction barriers to re-entry, which disproportionately impact women and contribute to elevated recidivism rates (The Sentencing Project, 2019). Many women entering the prison system bear extensive histories of physical and sexual abuse, exhibit heightened rates of HIV infection, and grapple with substance abuse disorders, creating complex challenges that necessitate targeted interventions (Mejía et al., 2015; Surrell & Johnson, 2020).

In alignment with feminist social work best practices, which advocate for gender-responsive interventions tailored to address women's unique needs (Hanmer & Statham, 1988), the institution implemented significant reforms. As a part of the settlement agreement with the USDOJ, the position of Women's Services Deputy Commissioner was established in 2014 to lead these efforts. This role spearheaded initiatives, including revisions to policies on haircuts and the availability of makeup, and the creation of the Women's Services Division, which implemented programs aimed at addressing underlying trauma and interpersonal challenges faced by female inmates.

Key gender-responsive programs introduced include:

- Active Adult Relationships
- Beyond Trauma: A Healing Journey for Women
- Beyond Violence: A Prevention Program for Criminal Justice-Involved Women
- Moving On: A Program for At-Risk Women
- Parenting Inside Out

These programs focus on fostering resilience, addressing trauma, and equipping women with skills to navigate interpersonal relationships effectively. Complementing these efforts, staff underwent comprehensive training in gender-responsive disciplinary and conflict resolution methods (Covington, 2022). This training aimed to reduce prolonged periods of segregation and interpersonal conflicts among the inmates, enhancing the overall environment within the facility.

In response to the investigation by the Civil Rights Division of the USDOJ, the State entered into an agreement to ensure that inmates at the main women's prison are afforded constitutional conditions protecting them from sexual abuse and sexual harassment. A key provision of the agreement required routine polling of inmates to assess their perceptions of the implementation of these terms. Areas evaluated included the prevalence of staff sexual abuse, inmate vulnerability, privacy concerns, and the efficacy of reporting and grievance systems (United States v. The Department of Corrections and the Prison for Women).

Building on this foundation, the Department of Corrections expanded the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) polling project to include qualitative data collection through structured interviews. This qualitative approach provided a deeper understanding of inmates' lived experiences, supplementing the quantitative data from routine surveys. Recognizing that survey methodologies capture perceptions rather than empirical facts, this study leveraged structured interviews to explore overarching trends and identify systemic barriers to safety within the prison environment.

The research team conducted these interviews with female inmates to gather firsthand narratives about their physical, emotional, and sexual safety while incarcerated. This article summarizes the insights gained, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by female inmates and highlighting opportunities for reform. These findings not only shed light on systemic vulnerabilities but also provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions that prioritize dignity and safety for incarcerated women. By addressing these challenges, the research underscores the importance of continuous feedback and adaptation to create sustainable and inclusive correctional environments.

Method and Sampling

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) was utilized as the qualitative research design for this study, as it is well suited for synthesizing data from multiple sources. This method enables formal analysis to begin early in the study and continues throughout data collection, culminating in a comprehensive descriptive model that captures the phenomena under scrutiny. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants based on their perceived potential to contribute to the evolving understanding of systemic issues related to PREA. Unlike random sampling, which aims to mirror population characteristics, purposeful sampling prioritizes the inclusion of diverse subject types.

Sampling

The study was conducted at the only female prison under the USDOJ settlement agreement. To gather firsthand accounts and insights, interviews were conducted with incarcerated females to investigate their experiences and perceptions regarding their physical, emotional, and sexual safety. The interviews were structured to provide a safe and confidential space for the participants to share their experiences openly. To ensure every volunteer participant had the opportunity to share her perceptions, the research team collaborated with the Department of Corrections (DOC) personnel to develop a robust data collection implementation plan.

Recruitment involved inviting volunteers to participate in structured interviews, resulting in the consent of 44 women.

Data Collection

During the data collection, structured interviews were conducted with 44 participants. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and followed the same set of open-ended questions to provide consistency and comparability across responses. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing their accounts. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and voluntary participation, were strictly upheld. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring adherence to ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection, interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method. This process involved coding transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns, with continuous comparison across data points to refine findings. Researchers in the study conducted coding to enhance reliability, resolving discrepancies through discussion. This process allowed themes to emerge naturally, reflecting participants' lived experiences.

Reliability and Validity

Efforts were made to ensure the credibility and robustness of the findings:

- **Coding Consistency:** Data coding was conducted by the research team, with regular discussions to ensure consistent application of codes across interviews.
- **Transparency:** The data collection and analysis process were documented to provide a clear account of the study's methodology.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Participants' confidentiality and voluntary participation were prioritized throughout the study to maintain trust and authenticity in their responses.

Instrument

The research team developed questions related to the areas of the PREA settlement that the USDOJ mandated. The nine structured interview questions were as follows:

1. What is PREA? (What is it supposed to do?)
2. Give your first impression that is as honest as you feel you can be: How would you respond to this statement, "I have been informed of my rights to be free from sexual abuse at this facility."
3. Do you feel you are free from sexual abuse/misconduct at this facility? (This can include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, or ongoing sexual relations between inmates and/or staff members.)
 - a. When/where is this most true? Can you describe it?
 - b. When/where is this most not true? Can you describe it?
4. In your opinion, what makes an inmate vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse? As a victim? As a perpetrator?

5. In your opinion, is it the person or the system that makes someone vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse?
6. How could the system be made different or changed to decrease sexual misconduct/abuse? (Are there problem areas or problem times that increase the likelihood of misconduct/abuse occurring? examples: adequate privacy in toilet and shower areas, enough staff members in various areas of the facility.)
7. Finish this sentence, “If I report a PREA incident, then _____.” (What happens? Is it important? Does it change anything? I get in more trouble because of doing so. Does it make a difference? I would do it again if needed.)
8. Do you feel like PREA has helped or hurt inmates and others? (Describe how it has helped? Describe how it has hurt?)
9. If PREA did not exist, what kind of program, rules, or system would you create to decrease/stop sexual misconduct/abuse for inmates and those who work in the system?

Demographics

The survey data reveal the demographic profile of respondents, encompassing various characteristics such as age, marital status, children, length of sentence, ethnic and racial identity, educational background, income level, offense category, length of sentence, sexual orientation, and diagnosed disabilities. Regarding age distribution, most respondents fell within the 36-45 age range (31.8%), followed by the 26-35 age group (27.3%). In terms of marital status, the most common category was “Single, Never Married” (43.2%), followed by “Divorced” (25.0%). Many respondents reported having children (75.0%). Concerning the length of sentence, the most prevalent category was “More than one year” (72.7%), followed by “11 - 20 years” (22.7%). Most respondents identified as not Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin (95.5%) and as White/Caucasian (50.0%). Regarding educational background, the most common categories were “Less than high school diploma or GED” (18.2%) and “Some college undergraduate work but no degree completed” (13.6%). The income distribution showed a large portion of respondents falling within the “\$19,000 - \$45,999” category (34.1%).

In terms of the offense category, most respondents were incarcerated for “Crime against a person” (59.1%). The length of sentences varied, with the highest number of respondents reporting “More than one year” (72.7%). The sexual orientation of respondents predominately identified as “Straight” (65.9%), while 15.9% identified as “Bisexual.” Finally, regarding diagnosed disabilities, mental health conditions were the most prevalent (34.1%), followed by no reported disabilities (47.7%). Other categories included cognitive disabilities (2.3%) and physical disabilities (4.5%). See Demographic Table 1 for an overview of each category.

Table 1
Demographics of Participants

Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male*	0	0%
Female	44	100%
Sexual Orientation		
Straight	29	66%
Bisexual	7	16%
Lesbian/gay	3	7%
Transgender	1	2%
Decline to Answer	2	5%
No response	2	5%
Ethnicity		
African American	6	14%
Black	5	11%
Black; African American	2	5%
Black; White/Caucasian	1	2%
White/Caucasian	22	50%
White/Caucasian; American Indian or Alaska Native	5	11%
No response	3	7%
Age Range		
19 to 25-years-old	2	5%
26 to 35-years-old	12	27%
36 to 45-years-old	14	32%
46 to 55-years-old	9	20%
56 and older	6	14%
No response	1	2%
Marital status		
Widowed	3	7%
Divorced	11	25%
Separated	3	7%
Married	7	16%
Single, never married	19	7%
No response	1	2%
Children		
Yes	33	75%
No	10	23%
No response	1	2%
Educational background		
Less than high school or GED	8	18%
High school diploma or GED	7	16%
Vocational or trade school certificate	7	16%
Some college but no degree completed	6	14%
Graduate work beyond completed degree	4	9%
Less than high school diploma or GED; Vocational or trade school certificate	1	2%

S. WEAVER ET AL.

High school diploma or GED; Vocational or Trade School Certificate	5	11%
High school diploma or GED; Vocational or Trade School Certificate; Some college undergraduate work but no degree completed	2	5%
High school diploma or GED; Some college undergraduate work but no degree completed	2	5%
Some college undergraduate work but no degree completed, Vocational or Trade School Certificate	1	2%
No response	1	2%
Diagnosed Disability		
Cognitive (e.g., learning disability, difficulty thinking, ADHD)	1	2%
Mental health (e.g., substance abuse, depression, anxiety, personality disorder)	15	34%
Physical (e.g., mobility, cosmetic/scarring, injury)	2	5%
Physical (e.g., mobility, cosmetic/scarring, injury) Mental health (e.g., substance abuse, depression, anxiety, personality disorder)	2	5%
Physical (e.g., mobility, cosmetic/scarring, injury); Mental health (e.g., substance abuse, depression, anxiety, personality disorder); Sensory (e.g., vision, hearing, touch/texture)	1	2%
No disability	21	48%
No response	1	2%
Decline to answer	1	2%
Offence Category		
Crime against person	26	59%
Crime against property	4	9%
Drug crime	4	9%
Sex crime	2	5%
Other	2	5%
Crime against person; Drug crime	1	2%
Crime against person; Crime against property; Drug Crime	1	2%
No response	4	9%
Length of Sentence		
1-3 years	2	5%
4-7 years	2	5%
8-10 years	8	18%
11-20 years	10	23%
21-30 years	6	14%
31-50 years	1	2%
Life	5	11%
LWOP or Death Row	6	14%
No response	4	9%

Note. * Male is included as an option for those who identify as male.

Procedures for Analysis

As noted, interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were used for data analysis. Themes were derived by examining the transcript to identify repetitions, to look for original categories, and to classify similarities and differences in responses. By comparing responses, themes surfaced by being present in multiple reactions, which produced insights for analysis.

Quotes selected for inclusion were designed to capture analytical themes derived from the analysis. Multiple researchers reviewed the transcripts of the interviews numerous times, making notes and highlighting themes. Examining the perspectives of incarcerated women was used to determine whether sexual safety was possible. Having multiple researchers review the transcript increased confidence in theme identification.

The open-ended research questions were grouped for conceptual analysis into three (3) sets. Questions 1, 2, and 8 comprised the first set reflecting *Impressions of PREA*. Questions 3 (a) and (b), 4, 5, and 7 comprised the second set reflecting *Impressions of Sexual Safety*. The third and last set of questions were comprised of Questions 6 and 9 *Impressions of the System Efficacy and Change*. See the sets below.

Set I: Impression of PREA

1. What is PREA?
2. Give your first impression that is as honest as you feel you can be. How would you respond to this statement, “I have been informed of my rights to be free from sexual abuse.”
8. Do you feel like PREA has helped or hurt inmates and others?

Set II: Impressions of Sexual Safety

3. Do you feel you are free from sexual abuse/misconduct? This can include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, or ongoing sexual relations between inmates and/or staff members.
 - a. When is this most true? Can you describe it?
 - b. When is this mostly not true? Can you describe it?
4. In your opinion, what makes an inmate vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse? As a victim? As a perpetrator?
5. In your opinion, is it the person or the system that makes someone vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse?
7. Finish this sentence, “If I report a PREA incident, then _____.”

Set III: Impressions of the System Efficacy and Change (6 and 9)

6. How could the system be made different or changed to decrease sexual misconduct/abuse?
9. If PREA did not exist, what kind of program, rules, or system would you create to decrease/stop sexual misconduct/abuse for inmates and those who work in the system?

Findings and Analysis

In addition to these findings, it is crucial to consider the broader implications of female inmate perceptions of PREA on criminal behavior and justice policies. This research underscores the need for policy changes that address gender-specific needs within correctional facilities. The following section presents the findings and integrated analysis grouped by conceptual perspective. Participant quotes are offered to support and illustrate the findings, highlighting the importance of addressing both individual experiences and systematic issues within the correctional environment.

Analysis and Discussion of Set I Questions (1, 2, & 8) Impression of PREA

1. What is PREA?

Responses ranged from being clear to ambiguous about their understanding of inmates’ rights. Inmate responses indicate that there appears to be a general understanding of PREA, that it stands for Prison Rape Elimination Act, and is a way to report unwanted sexual contact,

harassment, sexual assault, and/or rape to help eliminate such activity between inmates and/or inmates and officers. Inmate responses indicate a general understanding that PREA stands for Prison Rape Elimination Act and serves as a mechanism for reporting unwanted sexual contact, harassment, sexual assault, and/or rape, with the goal of eliminating such activity between inmates and/or inmates and officers. Examples of such comments included: “It’s supposed to be a thing that’s supposed to help you stay safe in prison.” and “What PREA does is protect us from abuse and letting us know our rights; what people can and cannot do.” Finally, “It’s against sexual assault on an inmate - whether it’s an inmate and an officer or an inmate and an inmate. It’s a way to protect the victim.”

As perceived by some inmates, PREA was considered as increasing safety and protecting both inmates and officers. However, there was inconsistent knowledge regarding exactly how PREA works. For example, a minimal number of responses indicated that PREA is about being gay and/or having “gay” sex in prison or experiencing fights about same-sex partners, such as, “Well, I think it would be about gay and seeing gay things go wrong in a lot of it, fights all the time over women.”

Statements like “Doesn’t do what it’s supposed to do.” or “Unfair based on sexual identity” reflect this skepticism. These varied perceptions suggest that while PREA is recognized as a protective measure, its implementation and effectiveness are not universally understood or trusted among the inmate population.

2. Give your first impression that is as honest as you feel you can be: How would you respond to this statement, “I have been informed of my rights to be free from sexual abuse at the prison.”

Inmate responses to this item were primarily *positive*, such as “This statement is true.” “Agree” and “I have been informed of my rights.” A minority of responses, however, were *negative* in nature and served to expound upon how PREA can be abused by inmates. “So, I hadn’t really seen anything out of the ordinary since I’ve been here. Like most people just use it to get back at somebody, for real, like, people don’t take it serious.” and “It’s supposed to help officers and inmates. - Some people play games, aren’t serious, try to control someone else.”

Fewer inmates indicated their overall disagreement and/or mistrust of the PREA system. For example, “PREA is not taken seriously,” “[The guards] Don’t understand sexual abuse versus sexual preference,” and, finally, “I would say that it’s kinda bullshit because you could be informed of something but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s true.”

8. Do you feel like PREA has helped or hurt inmates and others?

Inmate responses to this question were *split into positive* and *negative* comments, indicating that PREA has both *helped* and *hurt* inmates and others in the system. For example, positive comments included: “[It has] helped with officer-to-inmate abuse incidents.” and “Now, before I got here, they said that people used to be sexually molested by the officers and stuff like that but when I got here, I don’t see it happening now.” Finally, PREA was described in the following way: “It hasn’t fixed everything, but it’s working.”

Negative comments regarding PREA were based on more specific circumstances and individuals, such as: “Helpful if not misused for retribution and confidentiality is observed.” and “It’s hurt because inmates can use PREA to their advantage. Inmates will PREA if they don’t like you or an officer.” A final statement explained how it could be used more effectively, “It has helped, but it would be better if they would investigate it further before just separating inmates.”

Inmate responses indicate the perception that PREA is used to help inmates as well as misused for both retaliation and manipulation by inmates and officers. Responses were more evenly split into positive and negative comments, indicating that PREA has both *helped* and *hurt* inmates and others in the system.

Positive comments include the following:

- “Inmates have confidence to reject unwanted advances because now a process is in place for reporting/investigating allegations.”
- “I think PREA’s intimidating to officers and that’s a good thing.”
- “Inmate to inmate sex still happens but to a lesser degree.”

Negative comments were based on more specific circumstances:

- “Not helpful because of false reporting”
- “Reports/calls by inmates ignored”
- “Mistrust of cameras”
- “Bad shower situation”

Specific abuses of PREA were identified by inmates, including retaliation and manipulation. For example, the following comments illustrate using PREA for retaliation: “Used as a method of retaliation against officers and inmates,” “Retaliation and intimidation by officers if/when accused by inmates,” and “Inmates written-up for lying” about PREA incidents. Comments illustrating manipulation include, “When inmate wants to be moved to a different area/dorm.” and “used to hurt officers for being too strict with inmates.” Additional comments that were expressed, but somewhat difficult to categorize include “misconduct is wide open” and “This place is a Playboy mansion!”

Analysis and Discussion of Set II Questions (3, 4, 5, and 7) Impressions of Sexual Safety

3. Do you feel you are free from sexual abuse/misconduct? This can include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, or ongoing sexual relations between inmates and/or staff members.

a. When is this most true? Can you describe it?

b. When is this mostly not true? Can you describe it?

Overall, responses indicate that most inmates do feel free from sexual abuse with several exceptions. Multiple inmates indicated they do NOT feel free from sexual abuse/misconduct in the *bathroom areas*. Problems identified in this area include little to no privacy, low staffing, and inmates often experiencing inappropriate boundaries from officers.

For instance, inmates observed that abuse/misconduct was less likely during busy periods, such as during posts or shifts when guards were occupied with their duties. This suggests that the presence and attentiveness of staff play a crucial role in preventing incidents of abuse/misconduct. Participants noted that abuse/misconduct did *not* seem to happen when there was *little, or no opportunity* based on *time, place, and level of activity occurring*. For example, it was stated that abuse/misconduct did not occur during posts or shifts when guards were busy.

Some inmates indicate that they feel free from sexual misconduct and/or abuse. However, responses to this question indicate that, overall, inmates do *NOT feel free* from sexual abuse/misconduct. Responses range from incidents of *verbal abuse* to general “*misconduct*” because of *time, place, and/or situation*. The complaint of unfair treatment based on one’s *sexual identity* as well as *race/ethnicity* was additionally voiced. Verbal abuse was mentioned by inmates as well. Complaints were made against officers, commonly using inappropriate language to or about inmates as a way of abusing their authority.

Do you feel you are free from sexual abuse/misconduct?

a. When is this most true? Can you describe it?

Some inmates emphasized the importance of personal agency and self-protection, noting that maintaining a certain demeanor could deter potential misconduct. For example, statements highlighting this initiative-taking approach include: “You have to make a stand with guards and inmates,” “I stay to myself mostly, but I also have a good support system,” and “I feel like I personally keep myself safe.” These responses suggest that inmates who actively assert boundaries and cultivate supportive networks may reduce their vulnerability to abuse.

Do you feel you are free from sexual abuse/misconduct?

b. When is this mostly not true? Can you describe it?

Participants voiced that when abuse/misconduct DID occur, it was often during times of slow or low activity, such as “during 3rd shift,” when supervision might be less rigorous. Additionally, inmates reported that abuse/misconduct frequently occurred when it served a specific purpose, often to achieve a desired outcome within the system. For example, incidents were sometimes “used against officers to get rid of them” or to facilitate “to get moved or be with someone [another inmate].” Inmates also noted that “officers show a lot of favoritism and have a lot of control,” which could contribute to an environment where misconduct is strategically employed. Overall, it appears that *time, opportunity, and results* are significant factors influencing the occurrence of sexual abuse/misconduct.

4. In your opinion, what makes an inmate vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse? As a victim? As a perpetrator?

Responses indicate that what makes inmates vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse as a victim includes things that make one *weak and/or vulnerable or appear to be so*. Examples included individuals who are new to the system, individuals who are perceived as fearful and/or show weakness such as being “too nice,” naïve, or exhibit a lack of self-esteem; as well as those who abuse and/or manipulate drugs. Additional comments included: “Being in a state of fear, not knowing who to trust in here - inmates and staff.” “Being bullied and harassed, being a drug addict, not being able to have commissary.” “I’m scared and I just want to get back home to my life.”

Additionally, if inmates lack resources and support, inside or outside of the prison, don’t have access to goods (commissary, food items, etc.) or money, they appear poor and/or vulnerable and often become targets for abuse. For example, “If someone needs something from the outside and cannot get it inside,” or, “Doesn’t have a lot of support on the outside, doesn’t have a lot of support on the inside.” Alternatively, having resources on the inside can increase the risk of someone becoming targeted because of their real or perceived resources. As stated by one inmate, “People that have money, drugs, canteen and others want to use them for what they have, or they can benefit from.”

Finally, several factors were identified that may increase the likelihood of an inmate becoming a perpetrator and engaging in *sexual misconduct/abuse*. One notable observation was that “Individuals who don’t have moral or financial support from home are often victims and victims often become perpetrators.” Additionally, inmates noted vulnerability associated with certain relations or roles within the prison, such as “Vulnerable because in lesbian relationship in prison.” Another role mentioned was “May be a ‘prison princess,’” a term used to describe inmates

who might receive certain privileges in exchange for favors. One inmate noted, “There’s usually a payment plan for that privilege or to ‘not be a witness.’”

Responses to this question also revealed that inmates might be vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse because “they get something out of it,” whether from the perspective of a perpetrator or a victim, with outcomes that could be either “positive” or “negative.” For instance, some responses suggested that inmates with unmet emotional needs might inadvertently make themselves targets for victimization. Examples include inmates who want to be noticed and might “wear skimpy clothing at night in the dorm,” or those who are “first-timers” who are “young and naïve.” Additionally, inmates described others who are “lonely, desire love, act ‘flirty’ for attention,” thereby unintentionally opening themselves up to sexual abuse/misconduct. Victims were typically characterized as powerless and vulnerable, often the poorest and the weakest among the inmate population.

Furthermore, it was noted that some inmates might engage in or become targets of misconduct due to a lack of funds, using sex as a form of payment, or seeking “protection” through sexual exchanges. Finally, it was emphasized that perpetrators often “see/seek” vulnerability in others and exploit it to their advantage to obtain what they want. Many respondents also highlighted that those who become perpetrators may have a history of being abused themselves as inmates, perpetuating a cycle of victimization and abuse within the prison system.

5. In your opinion, is it the person or the system that makes someone vulnerable to sexual misconduct/abuse?

Responses to this question were evenly split between three options: “both the system and the person,” “the person,” and “the system.” Responses indicated that variations of these may make inmates vulnerable to sexual abuse. For example, participants stated, “A combination of both.” “The person is here for a reason, but the system isn’t doing enough.” “There aren’t enough officers, 200 women to 1 officer in a dorm.”

Some statements related to the person being vulnerable. For example, “The person won’t stand up for themselves.” and “The person, if they are flirting or having sexual relations with someone, that’ll make them vulnerable to harassment.” The following comment was especially impactful regarding the role of the system creating vulnerability:

Well, I think it’s the system because I just feel like it’s a lot of people that’s being locked up in the system for years, for a really long time. So, then, they become institutionalized. They don’t know anything else other than the system, so they play the system. That’s just their thinking process. That’s just how they think. That’s all they know.

Finally, some individuals indicated that it’s not the system or the person; however, PREA is often misused, abused, or used to circumvent the system. At times, there is no actual sexual misconduct or abuse involved:

What I think as far as like there’s a lot of people here use it for the wrong reasons. And they just do false allegations for whatever reason. To get someone moved away from a girl they like. Or, if they’re having problems with them, they’ll fall out, they’ll fill out or call a hotline, or send in a request stating this happened. And they they’ll move that person. It, so you know, that’s not right I’ve seen it numerous times.

Overall, responses to this question primarily fell into the “system” category or “both system and person” category. Complaints were made that “the system doesn’t enforce the rules or changes them all the time,” “training doesn’t impact treatment,” “facility conditions in showers/toilets make

abuse easy to occur,” “some places in prison don’t have cameras that work.” Witnessing abuse in some situations appears to be just as harmful/dangerous as experiencing it one’s self - “should have just left it alone and not gotten involved.”

7. Finish this sentence, “If I report a PREA incident, then _____.” What happens? Is it important? Does it change anything? I get in more trouble as a result of doing so. Does it make a difference? I would do it again if needed.

Responses indicate that when a PREA incident is reported, it is typically taken seriously and investigated. If the “offending party” is found guilty, they are usually relocated to another dorm or facility. However, among inmates, such incidents can escalate tensions, leading to confusion, arguments, fights, or retaliation.

Consider the following comments:

“It will cause a fight. There will be confrontation which will lead to issues and fighting. There will be retaliation.”

“Some inmates understand that if the PREA is considered a “sexual situation” someone will be moved to protect the reporting inmate. “

“If the facts are true, the inmate will get reprimanded. But other than that, its just a whole bunch of mouth. Just spread around. They spread lies about you and all that and try to make other inmates not talk to you and pretty much segregate you. If the incident is true, it will make you feel heard and feel like you are protected. If it’s true, they do everything they can. But if it’s not, it just creates havoc and makes it hard for the ones who are going through it because they see the backlash from that, and it wasn’t even real.”

“As long as no one finds out, you’re ok, but inmates and officer’s gossip. It’s a small city.”

Some inmates do not agree and state, “Sometimes, women here don’t even report stuff because they know ain’t nothing gonna happen.” However, most inmates indicated that *something would happen* if a PREA incident is reported at the very least, an investigation will begin. Many comments indicated that the perpetrator and the victim will be separated with the “victim” typically being moved, therefore PREA incidents often are filed as a means to an end.

Other inmates appeared bitter in their response, such as: “It’s a joke” or “No recourse even if found ‘not guilty’.” Alternatively, some inmates indicated that “A PREA is easy to file but not to undue” and “I think it’s just for show. PREA ain’t shit. It doesn’t work.”

Analysis of Set III Questions: Impressions of System Efficacy and Change: (6 and 9)

6. How could the system be made different or changed to decrease sexual misconduct/abuse? Are there problem areas or problem times that increase the likelihood of misconduct/abuse occurring? (Examples: adequate privacy in toilet and shower areas, enough staff members in various areas of the facility, adequate security equipment including cameras, etc.?)

The age of prisoners was considered significant, as older inmates were often ignored, mistreated, or neglected due to differential treatment based on age. Many respondents noted that older women in the prison system appear to become invisible, with little to no voice in their treatment in the prison’s operations. This lack of attention and respect for older inmates often leads to their needs being overlooked, exacerbating their feelings of isolation and helplessness within the prison environment. The perception that they have “literally no voice” underscores the systemic

issues that contribute to their marginalization, making it difficult for them to advocate for themselves or receive adequate support. Additionally, some responses diverged significantly from the general observations and were unique to the individual speaker. For example, one inmate expressed,

Well, I think they need a top warden that's a man. I think that is a lot of our problems. I think these women really don't know how to run this prison for real. They're trying, bless their hearts, they are.

Another inmate suggested a more radical solution, stating, "If they fire the whole staff and just get everybody new in here—just fire the whole staff, from the warden down." Most of the respondents seem to believe "better" and more staff are needed. Some inmates indicated a need for female only officers in the prison, especially in areas that are considered "trouble spots" (i.e., showers, toilets, dorms). It was noted that there is only one PREA officer and one phone for PREA calls. Respondents identified the shower, toilet, and dorm areas as problematic for misconduct/abuse.

9. If PREA did not exist, what kind of program, rules, or system would you create to decrease/stop sexual misconduct/abuse for inmates and those who work in the system?

Also included were suggestions/recommendations for programs, rules, and systems that could be implemented or become the focus of change. These suggestions encompassed a variety of approaches aimed at improving the safety and well-being of inmates. Among the recommendations were the introduction of accountability programs and behavior modification programs which would help address the underlying causes of misconduct and promote behavioral changes. Inmates also suggested the creation of an in-person "Anonymous programs/groups that would serve as a 'safe' place for inmates to talk."

Additionally, the idea of female-only guards was proposed to create a safer environment, particularly in sensitive areas such as showers and dormitories. Other recommendations included the implementation of counseling and/or other programs for inmates who are victims of rape or who have experienced trauma, whether emotional, mental, and physical abuse. To ensure continuous support, an "after-hours" hotline with access to counselors was also suggested, along with the need for *consistency across all* dorms and settings to prevent discrepancies and ensure fairness.

Comments specific to the PREA program highlighted included the importance of proper implementation, with inmates noting that "PREA is a very good thing, you know. I just don't think it should be used wrongly" and "Good system that needs to be used the right way." These insights underscore the necessity of not only having robust systems in place but also ensuring that these systems are applied correctly and fairly so that they achieve their intended purpose of protecting inmates.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore female inmates' perceptions of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), and focus on its impact on their physical, emotional, and sexual safety within a correctional facility. The findings reveal a complex landscape where PREA is simultaneously viewed as a critical protective measure and a system prone to misuse and mistrust. These insights highlight the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of incarcerated women, underscoring the need for targeted reforms and systemic accountability.

Key Findings

The findings demonstrate that while many inmates recognize PREA as an essential tool for reporting and addressing sexual misconduct, inconsistent knowledge about its mechanisms and skepticism about its efficacy persist. For example, some participants described PREA as a means to ensure safety, stating that it has reduced officer-to-inmate abuse. Conversely, others perceived it as a system open to manipulation, used for retaliation or to achieve personal goals, such as transfers.

A significant finding relates to structural vulnerabilities within the facility, such as inadequate privacy in bathroom and shower areas, insufficient staffing, and malfunctioning security cameras. These factors exacerbate the risk of abuse and contribute to inmates' sense of insecurity. Additionally, the findings reveal that personal characteristics, such as being new to the system, lacking resources, or appearing vulnerable, can increase inmates' susceptibility to misconduct.

Comparison to Previous Research

These findings align with earlier studies that emphasize the critical role of PREA in fostering safer correctional environments (Smith, 2020; Surrell & Johnson, 2020). However, they also expand on previous research by illustrating the dual nature of PREA—both as a safeguard and a system that can be exploited. Prior literature has primarily focused on the administrative implementation of PREA, detailing policies and procedural guidelines for compliance. This study contributes a unique perspective by centering the lived experiences of female inmates, highlighting gaps in knowledge, trust, and systemic enforcement that influence PREA's effectiveness (Covington, 2022). By examining these nuanced perceptions, this research underscores the importance of integrating inmate voices into the evaluation and refinement of correctional policies.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The study underscores the importance of implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed interventions to address systemic barriers to inmate safety (Covington, 2022). Recommendations include increasing staffing levels, particularly female officers in sensitive areas, improving facility infrastructure to ensure privacy, and providing consistent training for staff on PREA protocols. Additionally, there is a need for programs that address both the misuse of PREA and the underlying causes of sexual misconduct, such as accountability and behavior modification initiatives.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, its focus on a single facility under a USDOJ settlement limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could examine perceptions of PREA across multiple facilities to identify broader trends. Longitudinal studies could also explore the long-term impact of PREA on inmate safety and well-being. By capturing the voices of incarcerated women, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on correctional reform and highlights the critical need for policies and practices that prioritize safety, fairness, and accountability within correctional facilities.

Summary

The summary of this research project is structured into three distinct yet interrelated areas, each designed to address critical aspects pertaining to the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) and its implications within one women's correctional facility. The first area, examined through Questions 1, 2, and 8, *Impressions of PREA*, explores inmates' foundational understanding of PREA, including its principles and overarching objectives. The second area, comprising Questions 3, 4, 5, and 7, *Impressions of Sexual Safety*, examines the prevalence of, the power dynamics involved, and the institutional response to sexual abuse and misconduct within the correctional setting. This segment not only scrutinizes the occurrence and reporting of such incidents but also examines the efficacy of PREA-mandated measures in mitigating these challenges. Finally, the third area, Questions 6 and 9, *Impressions of the System Efficacy and Change*, explores pathways toward positive change to include policy reform, institutional change, and contemplating strategies to enhance PREA's effectiveness and foster a rehabilitative, safe, and equitable environment.

Impressions of PREA

Within this domain, inmates demonstrated a varied understanding of PREA and its purpose. Most interviewees articulated the primary objective of PREA: to detect, report, and address sexual assault, harassment, unwanted sexual contact, or rape within correctional facilities. However, divergent perspectives emerged regarding PREA's efficacy. While some inmates expressed confidence in its capacity to safeguard individuals, others harbored reservations, suggesting that PREA might inadvertently endanger or disadvantage fellow inmates. Additionally, concerns were raised about the potential for false reporting or misunderstandings regarding PREA's purpose, highlighting the complexities in its implementation and reception. For instance, a subset of responses mistakenly associates PREA with matters related to sexual orientation, such as being gay and/or engaging in same-sex relationships within prison walls. As revealed by inmates' perceptions within correctional settings, PREA's impact remains both pivotal and contested, a delicate balance between protection and potential pitfalls.

Impressions of Sexual Safety

Within this domain, inmates interviewed were asked about their perceptions of safety concerning sexual abuse and misconduct. Overall, most inmates indicated they do feel free from sexual abuse, albeit with notable exceptions. Many inmates expressed feeling unsafe, particularly within the bathroom areas, citing concerns related to privacy, insufficient staffing levels, and instances of inappropriate officer behavior. Furthermore, verbal abuse and misconduct within the dormitories emerged as prominent areas of concern. Additionally, interviewees asserted that factors such as race and sexual identity wielded influence over the incidence of abuse, underscoring the intersectional dynamics at play within the correctional environment.

Inmates emphasized the significant power wielded by officers within the correctional system, noting a pattern wherein inappropriate language and misconduct were frequently utilized as means of asserting authority and control. Observations for the inmate population suggested that the occurrence of sexual abuse and misconduct was influenced by various factors, including timing, opportunities, and motivations. Furthermore, inmates underscored those instances of abuse and misconduct typically served a specific purpose or functioned as a means to an end within the prison environment, highlighting the power play dynamics and institutional cultural shaping of such behaviors.

This section also explored an inmate's vulnerability to abuse and misconduct, probing whether vulnerabilities were attributed to individual traits or system deficiencies. Responses revealed a multifaceted concern, wherein vulnerability stemmed from several factors, both individual and systemic. Among these factors were substance use and abuse, the targeting of new or perceived weaker inmates, low self-esteem, fear, and a lack of resources. Inmates lacking financial resources both within and outside the correctional system were identified as particularly vulnerable, often becoming targets for abuse. Additionally, those lacking moral or financial support from external networks frequently fell prey to victimization, with some victims eventually assuming the role of perpetrators. Replicating the behavior they endured, thus perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

It was generally conveyed that reporting a PREA incident would trigger some form of response. However, the nature of this response varied considerably among respondents. At the very least, it was indicated that an investigation would be initiated to address the complaint. Many inmates also mentioned that in certain cases, the perpetrator and the victim would typically be separated, with the "victim" being relocated to a different area of the prison. Additionally, some comments reflected inmates' negative perceptions of reporting a PREA complaint, highlighting underlying skepticism and disillusionment regarding the efficacy and consequences of reporting such incidents within the correctional system.

Impressions of System Efficacy and Change

Inmates were asked for suggestions on strategies to mitigate sexual misconduct and abuse within the prison, as well as to identify problem areas and times for such incidents. Most responses highlighted the imperative recruitment of "better" staff, emphasizing the need for personnel equipped with specialized training pertaining to sexual abuse and misconduct, particularly female staff. Additionally, there was a resounding call for an increase in the number of PREA officers to bolster oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

Inmates expressed a strong desire for expanded opportunities to earn money while incarcerated, suggesting that such initiatives could reduce the reliance on engaging in "sexual favors" to obtain basic necessities or to gain influence within the prison hierarchy. The ability to earn money could empower inmates by providing them with legitimate means to meet their needs, thereby decreasing the vulnerability that comes from financial dependence on others. Additionally, creating more opportunities for financial independence could help to foster a sense of self-worth and reduce the desperation that often leads to exploitation.

Furthermore, respondents identified specific areas within the prison, such as the shower, toilet, and dormitory spaces, as being particularly prone to misconduct and abuse due to a lack of surveillance cameras. These areas, where privacy and security are most needed, were highlighted as high-risk zones that require enhanced monitoring and security measures. The lack of surveillance in these spaces not only increases the likelihood of abuse but also makes it difficult for victims to seek justice, as incidents go unrecorded and unreported. Addressing these security gaps with improved monitoring could play a crucial role in preventing misconduct and ensuring a safer environment. These recommendations encapsulate the insights and perspectives of inmates, offering proactive measures aimed at fostering a safer and more equitable environment within prisons. By highlighting the need for enhanced staff training, gender-specific staffing considerations, and improved monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, inmates advocate for fundamental changes to mitigate instances of sexual misconduct and abuse. Moreover, their suggestions underscore a collective endeavor to address systemic deficiencies and uphold the principles of safety and justice enshrined in the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). In

advocating for these measures, inmates not only seek to safeguard their own well-being but also endeavor to effectuate a positive transformation of PREA's efficacy and impact, paving the way for a more humane and secure correctional system.

This summary captures the comprehensive findings from interviews conducted with incarcerated females, shedding light on the challenges they encounter in maintaining safety within the prison system. The findings underscore pervasive concerns regarding physical, emotional, and sexual safety, with many participants reporting feeling unsafe due to the threat of violence from both fellow inmates and correctional officers. Instances of sexual harassment and assault by both inmates and staff members highlight the vulnerability faced by incarcerated females. Moreover, there is a significant lack of trust in the reporting and handling of incidents by prison staff, exacerbating fears of retaliation or negative consequences for seeking help.

Many participants reported a lack of resources and support for their emotional well-being during their incarceration, noting limited access to counseling or mental health services within the prison environment. Some participants expressed frustration with the lack of preventive measures and safety protocols in place to mitigate the risk of violence and abuse within the prison environment. Additionally, several participants highlighted the negative impact of overcrowding in prisons on their safety, citing increased tension and conflicts among inmates as a result. Many incarcerated females expressed the need for more comprehensive training and education on personal safety and self-defense strategies to empower them to protect themselves within the prison setting. The findings underscore the urgent need for improved safety measures and support systems within the prison system to ensure the well-being of incarcerated females. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of addressing power imbalances and promoting a culture of accountability within correctional facilities to prevent physical, emotional, and sexual violence against incarcerated females. The findings also emphasize the necessity of creating a safe and supportive environment that allows incarcerated females to report incidents without fear of retaliation and to receive appropriate resources.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore female inmates' perceptions of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), focusing on its role in fostering physical, emotional, and sexual safety within correctional facilities. The findings reveal a dual narrative: while many inmates view PREA as a vital protective measure, its effectiveness is limited by systemic vulnerabilities and inconsistent implementation. These challenges undermine its potential to create safer environments and highlight the need for targeted reforms.

By centering the lived experiences of female inmates, this research underscores the importance of addressing structural barriers within correctional facilities. Inadequate staffing, poor facility design, and mistrust in reporting mechanisms contribute to feelings of insecurity among inmates. Addressing these issues requires prioritizing gender-responsive reforms that enhance privacy, fairness, and accountability within the prison system.

The findings also emphasize the importance of consistent and equitable enforcement of PREA protocols. Recommendations include increasing the presence of trained staff, particularly in sensitive areas, and providing resources to ensure all inmates understand their rights under PREA. These changes could significantly improve the perception and effectiveness of PREA among the incarcerated population.

Future research should expand on these findings by examining perceptions of PREA across diverse correctional settings. Longitudinal studies are also needed to evaluate the long-term effects

of PREA reforms on safety, institutional culture, and inmate outcomes. Such efforts will be critical to advancing the field of prison reform and ensuring policies better serve vulnerable populations.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on prison reform by shedding light on the successes and shortcomings of PREA. By revisiting the claims made in the introduction, it reinforces the importance of centering inmate voices in the evaluation and implementation of correctional policies. Finally, this research offers actionable pathways for fostering dignity, equity, and justice within the correctional system.

References

- Beck, A. J., & Johnson, C. (2012, May). *Sexual victimization reported by former state prisoners, 2008* (Report NCJ 237363). U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Bureau, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/svrfsp08.pdf>
- Covington, S. (2022). Creating a trauma-informed justice system for women. In Gelsthorpe & S. Brown (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook on what works with girls and women in conflict with the law: A critical review of theory, practice, and policy* (pp. 172–184). John Wiley & Sons Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119874898.ch12>
- Frank, D. W. (2014). Commentary: Abandoned: Abolishing female prisons to prevent sexual abuse and herald an end to incarnation. *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 29(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38M03XW7R>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Publishing Company.
- Hanmer, J., & Statham, D. (1988). *Women and social work: Towards a woman-centered practice*. Macmillan.
- Hensley, C. (2002). *Prison sex: Practice, and policy*. Rienner Publisher.
- Kajstura, A. (2018). Women’s mass incarceration: The whole pie 2018. *Prison Policy Initiative*. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2018women.html>
- Kubiak, S. P., Nnawulezi, N., Karim, N., Sullivan, C. M., & Beeble, M. L. (2012). Examining disclosure of physical and sexual victimization by method in samples of women involved in the criminal justice system. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 51(3), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2011.618528>
- Kubiak, S. P., Brenner, H. J., Bybee, D., Campbell, R., Cummings, C. E., Darcy, K. M., Fedock, G., & Goodman-Williams, R. (2017a). Sexual misconduct in prison: What factors affect whether incarcerated women will report abuses committed by prison staff? *Law and human behavior*, 41(4), 361–374. <https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000239>
- Kubiak, S. P., Brenner, H. J., Bybee, D., Campbell, R., Cummings, C. E., Darcy, K. M., Fedock, G., & Goodman-Williams, R. (2017b). Do sexually victimized female prisoners perceive justice in litigation process and outcomes? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 23(1), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000100>
- Mejía, B., Zea, P., Romero, M., & Saldívar, G. (2015). Traumatic experiences and re-victimization of female inmates undergoing treatment for substance abuse. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention & Policy*, 10(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1747-597X-10-5>
- Smith, H.P. (2020). Evaluating the implementation of the Prison Rape Elimination Reform Act (PREA): A “lessons learned” approach. *Evaluation & Program Planning*, 83, Article 101855. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2020.101855>
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press.

- Struckman-Johnson, C., & Struckman-Johnson, D. (2006). A comparative of sexual coercion experiences reported by men and women in prison. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*, 1591–1615. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260506294240>
- Surrell, A., & Johnson, I. M. (2020). An examination of women’s experiences with reporting sexual victimization behind prison walls. *The Prison Journal, 100*(5), 559–580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885520956328>
- The Equal Justice Initiative. (2012). *Tutwiler Prison for Women: EJI investigated and exposed the widespread sexual abuse of women at Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama*. <https://eji.org/cases/tutwiler/>
- The Equal Justice Initiative. (2020). *Tutwiler prison for women*. <https://eji.org/cases/tutwiler/>
- The Sentencing Project (2019, June 19). *Incarcerated women and girls*. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>
- United States (2003). *Prison rape elimination act of 2003*. U.S. G.P.O.
- United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. (2014, January). *Finding letter: Julia Tutwiler Prison for women*. Washington, DC. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2014/01/23/tutwiler_findings_1-17-14.pdf
- United States of America v. The State of Alabama and the Alabama Department of Corrections* (2015, May). <https://cases.justia.com/federal/district-courts/alabama/almdce/2:2015cv00368/57474/10/0.pdf?ts=1434705561>
- VanNatta, M. (2010). Conceptualization and stopping state sexual violence against incarcerated women. *Social Justice, 31*, 27–52.
- Wolff, N., & Shi, J. (2011). Patterns of victimization and feelings of safety inside prison: The experience of male and female inmates. *Crime & Delinquency, 57*(1), 29–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128708321370>

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Sharon M. Weaver is an Associate Professor in the Department of Counseling, Rehabilitation, and Interpreter Training and Coordinator of the Rehabilitation and Disabilities Undergraduate Program at Troy University. She holds a certificate in Rehabilitation and Leadership Management. Her research focuses on enhancing programs for incarcerated women, fostering independent living for individuals with significant disabilities, and advancing equity for marginalized communities.

Dr. Margaret E. Shippen is a Professor of Special Education in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling at Auburn University. Her research interests include social justice and improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities and the incarcerated.

Dr. Nicholas C. Derzis is a Clinical Professor of Rehabilitation and Disabilities Studies in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling at Auburn University. He has conducted prison research and outreach for nearly two decades and coordinates the undergraduate program in Rehabilitation and Disability Studies.

Dr. Angela L. Hall earned her PhD in Rehabilitation and Special Education from Auburn University in 2016. After finishing her PhD, she worked for Auburn as a Research Professor until coming to Alabama State University as Assistant Professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Studies in January of 2020. Dr. Hall has previous work experience as a school counselor and as a transition specialist inside of the Alabama Prison System. Her research interests include how congenital versus acquired impacts disability identity development and incarcerated women with undiagnosed disabilities.

Dr. Christine Fleming, FODAC Director of Program Development, develops and supports programs to further the organization's mission – to provide medical equipment for those in need at little to no cost. Dr. Fleming has worked in the rehabilitation profession for over thirty years. Dr. Fleming previously worked at Auburn University where she successfully secured over eight million dollars in grants and contracts. Christine earned her PhD in Rehabilitation and Special Education from Auburn University, MS in Rehabilitation Counseling from Boston University, and BA in Psychology/Sociology from Washington & Jefferson College. She kept her Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRC) since 1990.

Dr. Rebecca S. Curtis is a retired Associate Professor from the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation and Counseling at Auburn University. She previously served as Lead Faculty for Rehabilitation programs and program coordinator for the master's and doctoral programs. Dr. Curtis is a qualitative research expert. She conducted research in the prison system for multiple projects.

ORCID

Sharon M. Weaver, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9271-3045>

Margaret E. Shippen, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6583-9072>

Nicholas C. Derzis, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5839-4948>

Dr. Angela L. Hall, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6032-1138>

Christine Fleming, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2470-9280>