

# Great Wardens Project

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## The Importance of Prison Leadership

Good leadership makes a difference in the safety of the people within any institution. Whether in a school or church, a sports team or a workplace, the right person at the helm can create a positive environment for everyone. Wardens and superintendents are especially influential when it comes to keeping people safe. Prison officials have a great deal of power over the people in their custody; they make decisions around what people eat, what classes they attend, and where they sleep. Corrections leaders can monitor people's movements — both the people in their care and their staff — to an extent that is practically unheard of in any other profession.

In fact, prisons are plagued by violence. One of the most prevalent forms of violence behind bars is sexual abuse. A common misperception is that sexual abuse behind bars is inevitable — a natural byproduct of housing large groups of people, some with a history of committing violence, in close quarters. Yet prisoner rape is preventable. And the main difference between prisons that are dangerous and those that are safe is leadership. This factsheet — the first in

a series from the Great Wardens Project — spells out what we know about the role of strong prison leaders in keeping people safe.

### What Makes a Prison Dangerous?

Research supports the belief that leadership is the primary factor in determining a prison's safety. Since 2006, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has released five studies based on surveys of formerly and currently incarcerated adults about their experiences with sexual abuse.<sup>i</sup> The surveys were conducted anonymously, to ensure that people felt safe participating; in total, hundreds of thousands of people have responded. The findings across these surveys are remarkably consistent, which is a clear indication that the data is sound. Advocates and corrections officials alike recognize the BJS studies as the gold standard in research on sexual abuse in detention.

In one study, BJS looked at the factors that distinguish dangerous prisons from safe ones. By cross-referencing data from its sexual victimization surveys

against known facility characteristics — such as size, staffing ratios, security level, and how crowded it is — researchers were able to tease out the possible factors at play. Many common explanations for why a facility has high rates of prisoner rape appeared to play no role at all. Prisons that were overcrowded had similar rates of sexual abuse to facilities that were not overcrowded; a facility’s age, its security level, and staff-to-prisoner ratio also appeared to have little effect on violence in the prison.<sup>ii</sup>

To be clear, the point is not to minimize any of these issues; overcrowding and short staffing, in particular, are real and devastating problems that harm people in custody and dampen staff morale. But it is clear that in order to determine why prisoner rape flourishes, the answer lies elsewhere.

### **Is There Data on Leadership and Prisoner Rape?**

Leadership is a notoriously difficult thing to measure. The effectiveness of a warden or superintendent — their commitment to protecting the safety and dignity of people in their custody — is not easily captured in any chart or graph. Yet there is ample evidence to suggest that leadership is key. The Department of Justice’s Review Panel on Prison Rape — a body tasked with highlighting policies and practices that result in high and low levels of sexual abuse — underscored the central role

of top officials. Specifically, it found that facility leaders were responsible for culture-building, and that culture led to “environments that either prevent or permit sexual victimization.”<sup>iii</sup>

New data coming out has further highlighted why good leaders matter. In 2016, BJS put out a study showing that by educating youth in custody on prevention and providing safe ways for them to report, facility staff were able to reduce sexual violence dramatically.<sup>iv</sup> It is certainly true that robust reporting mechanisms and strong education programs depend in part on facility resources; in addition, youth and adult facilities are different enough that a perfect comparison is not possible. But it is hard to imagine a youth detention facility — or any detention facility, for that matter — building a safe and open culture without a committed person in charge.

Beyond any quantitative measure, perhaps the most persuasive argument for the importance of strong leadership comes from people in custody.

“In the end, the data suggest that institutional culture and facility leadership may be key factors in determining the level of victimization.”<sup>v</sup>

– Allen J. Beck, Senior  
Statistical Advisor,  
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Every year, Just Detention International receives some 2,000 letters from incarcerated people who were raped in detention. These letters catalog many of the institutional failures that resulted in their assault — unsafe housing practices, a lack of reporting options, rampant harassment, and a culture of impunity, to name a few. In every instance, the failure stemmed from a problem that started at the top.

### **Great Wardens Project**

In 2020, JDI launched the Great Wardens Project — an initiative that aims to build a corrections culture based on safety and dignity. Recognizing the vital role of prison leaders, the initiative provides wardens and superintendents with leadership resources — including this factsheet series. The initiative is made possible by funding from Arnold Ventures.

### **For more information about the Great Wardens Project,**

sign up for email updates at [www.justdetention.org/gwp](http://www.justdetention.org/gwp) or scan the QR code below by opening your smartphone's camera app and holding your device's camera over the code.



## Endnotes

- i Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Inmate Surveys, available at [bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/national-inmate-survey-nis](https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/national-inmate-survey-nis)
- ii Allen J. Beck, Ph.D. and Candace Johnson, Ph.D., *Sexual Victimization Reported by Former State Prisoners, 2008*, (BJS, May 2012), [bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/svrfsp08.pdf](https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/svrfsp08.pdf)
- iii Review Panel on Prison Rape, *Report on Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails*, edited by G.J. Mazza (Department of Justice, April 2012), available at [ojp.usdoj.gov/reviewpanel/pdfs/prea\\_finalreport\\_2012.pdf](https://ojp.usdoj.gov/reviewpanel/pdfs/prea_finalreport_2012.pdf)
- iv Leanne Heaton et al, *Facility-level and Individual-level Correlates of Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities, 2012* (BJS Working Paper Series, June 2016), available at [bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/flilcsvjf12.pdf](https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/flilcsvjf12.pdf)
- v Quoted in “Prison Rape: Obama’s Program to Stop It,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 11, 2012), by David Kaiser and Lovisa Stannow; available at [www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/10/11/prison-rape-obamas-program-stop-it/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/10/11/prison-rape-obamas-program-stop-it/)