

A report to congressional requesters

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What GAO Found

Department of Justice (DOJ) preliminary data indicate there were approximately 8,500 reported allegations of sexual abuse in federal prisons from 2014 through 2022, the most recent year that aggregate data were available. These data include allegations of sexual abuse of incarcerated individuals, including alleged abuse perpetrated by other incarcerated individuals and by Bureau of Prisons (BOP) employees.

GAO identified challenges that could limit the effectiveness of BOP's Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) audits, held every three years. These audits assess BOP facilities' compliance with the National Standards to Prevent, Detect, and Respond to Prison Rape (PREA Standards) that were published by DOJ.

Challenges that Could Limit the Effectiveness of PREA Audits



Audit goals



Audit contract



Auditor access

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Justice information; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com (illustrations). | GAO-26-107343

- **Audit Goals.** The goal of the audits is to determine facilities' compliance with the PREA Standards, not for auditors to detect ongoing sexual abuse at the facilities. For example, auditors review whether facilities have PREA policies in place and collect PREA data, but auditors have no specific instructions to detect whether there is ongoing abuse at the facilities. Some BOP facilities passed their PREA audits despite widespread ongoing sexual abuse.
- **Audit Contract.** BOP's current contracting approach for PREA audits may create risks that result in audits not meeting requirements. For example, BOP's contract for conducting PREA audits conflicts with the Auditor Handbook regarding the amount of time to spend conducting the audit. This poses risks that auditors might not have sufficient time for onsite tasks (e.g., interviewing incarcerated individuals and staff).
- **Auditor Access.** GAO identified challenges with auditors accessing BOP documentation during PREA audits. BOP has implemented a new file sharing system, but does not have a plan to evaluate whether the system will address this challenge.

By identifying options for audits to better detect ongoing sexual abuse in facilities, addressing risks in the audit contract, and evaluating its new file sharing system, BOP would be better positioned to ensure the effectiveness of its PREA audits.

The PREA Standards were implemented in 2012. Since their implementation, there have been significant technological advancements, changes to correctional practices, and lessons learned. Despite these developments, GAO found that the PREA Standards have not been updated to reflect these changes. By conducting a review of the PREA Standards, DOJ could identify opportunities to strengthen prevention, detection, and response to sexual abuse in correctional facilities.

Why GAO Did This Study

PREA was enacted to prevent, detect, and respond to sexual abuse in U.S. prisons and jails. BOP oversees about 141,000 incarcerated individuals. However, in recent years, several BOP employees have been convicted of sexually abusing incarcerated individuals at men's and women's facilities. Since 2022, nine BOP employees have been convicted of sexual abuse at one women's facility, for example, including the warden and a chaplain.

GAO was asked to review BOP's efforts to address prison rape. This report examines the (1) number of sexual abuse allegations in BOP facilities from 2014 through 2022, (2) extent that BOP leverages oversight mechanisms to detect sexual abuse, and (3) challenges BOP faces in facilitating the reporting process and reducing sexual abuse.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, BOP policies and documents, and data. GAO also interviewed BOP officials responsible for implementing PREA. In addition, GAO visited four BOP facilities to, among other things, conduct nongeneralizable interviews with incarcerated individuals and staff. GAO selected facilities based on variety in location, gender, and number of sexual abuse allegations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations to DOJ, including improving the PREA audit process; addressing risks in the audit contracts; evaluating its new file sharing system; and reviewing the PREA Standards to better prevent, detect, and respond to sexual abuse. DOJ concurred with our recommendations.