

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Sexual Coercion and Violence in Federal Custody: 2021-2022

*Reported SCV incidents most often occurred in men's medium security settings and involved a single instigator.***What we did**

Incidents of Sexual Coercion and Violence (SCV) are a pressing issue within correctional environments. To examine reported SCV incidents in Canadian federal custody in 2021-2022, an incident-based search of CSC's computerized database, the Offender Management System (OMS), was conducted. There was a total of 63 incidents identified, including offender-on-offender, offender-on-staff, and staff-on-offender cases. Thematic analysis was undertaken of offender-on-offender SCV incidents ($n = 39$). Details were drawn from incident reports, Warden Situation Reports, and case documents in OMS. Information was coded pertaining to the nature of the assaultive incidents, the circumstances surrounding the SCV, the profile of victims and instigators, and strategies of incident management.

As SCV incidents are generally underreported, official incident numbers may not be reflective of actual prevalence. In addition, analysis was limited by discrepancies in incident categorization and inconsistencies in the nature of documented information. Due to delays in reporting, not all incidents occurred within this timeframe, and current numbers are subject to change.

What we found

In 2021-2022, 39 offender-on-offender SCV incidents were reported in federal custody. Incidents varied in terms of the circumstances surrounding and nature of assaultive actions; most commonly, however, incidents involved some type of unwanted touching. In some cases, the SCV was not an isolated incident, but rather, occurred over an extended period of time (e.g., in the context of an intimate relationship or ongoing contentious dynamic).

Reported SCV incidents most often occurred in men's medium security institutions and involved a single instigator. SCV incidents were reported in all regions, but were most common in the Prairie region (i.e., where 39% of such incidents were reported). Most incidents involved a single instigator (though in seven cases, more than one instigator was identified) and all involved a single victim. In eight cases, it was noted that the allegation of SCV was unfounded or had inconclusive reliability.

Victims did not always report incidents immediately following the incident; in some cases, weeks or months had passed. Several victims did not wish to involve police, although police were contacted in all cases. At women's institutions in particular, some victims reported fear of backlash or forms of retaliation in response to SCV disclosure.

Victims and instigators in SCV incidents were most often men, with smaller subgroups of women and gender diverse persons. Indigenous representation was pronounced among instigators (i.e., 69%) and victims (57%). Instigators often had histories of sexual aggression against other inmates, while victims often demonstrated previous vulnerability in the inmate population. Histories of sexual victimization and/or offending were relatively common among both instigators and victims.

What it means

The institutional social environment shapes the context of SCV, both in terms of the nature of incidents and practices of reporting. SCV incidents appear to be tied to underlining dynamics marked by vulnerability and aggression within the inmate population. Ongoing coercive relationships, combined with victim hesitancy in disclosure, can mean that the duration and scope of victimization are broadened. Prior histories of sexual victimization and/or offending also appear to shape SCV within custodial settings.

Given the challenges presented by gaps in available information and the underreporting of incidents, further research is needed in correctional settings to discern the larger scope of SCV, as well as risk factors and impediments to reporting.

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