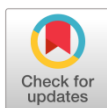


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A Global View of the Social Drivers and Consequences of Coercive Sexual Acts and Victimization of Inmates in Prisons

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Abstract

Over the past two decades (2004–2025), the international community has increasingly emphasised the importance of treating all persons with dignity, including awaiting-trial inmates or convicts serving prison terms within the criminal justice system. Despite this emphasis, the rising incidences of coercive sexual acts and victimization of inmates in prisons and correctional facilities worldwide remain a major concern for policymakers, scholars and professionals. This article presents a global view of the social drivers and consequences of coercive sexual acts and sexual inmate victimization in global prison systems. Drawing on secondary sources and existing literature within the framework of routine activity theory, the discussion highlights the drivers and consequences of these practices. Findings from the review reveal that the deprivation of sexual desires among inmates and prison officials, alongside the lack of strict enforcement of prison curfews, significantly contributes to coercive sexual activities and victimization of inmates. These acts lead to serious consequences, including the spread of sexually transmitted infections and long-term psychological trauma among victims. The article stresses the urgent need for policymakers to strengthen prison laws and regulations that criminalize and deter both officials and inmates from engaging in coercive sexual practices. It further argues that lasting change requires stricter enforcement of prison regulations, consistent monitoring of correctional environments, and the prosecution of offenders to serve as deterrence. Addressing these challenges is essential for promoting safer correctional facilities, protecting inmate dignity, and ensuring prisons fulfil their rehabilitative and corrective roles in society.

Keywords: sexual behaviour, inmates, prison regulations, victimization, coercion

Introduction

In the last three decades specifically 2004-2025, the international

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community have continued to emphasise the need to see and treat all humans with dignity and fairness irrespective of one's socio-economic status in the society. This emphasis covers all individuals as they get into the criminal justice system as a victim, awaiting trial member or as a convicted offender that have been sentenced to serve a jail term (Ahlin, [2019](#); Dunton et al., [2025](#)). Similarly, coercive sexual relations and victimizations of inmates have been a source of worry in prisons or correctional facilities in several countries. Some of these countries where the issue is a source of worry are United States, Peru, Columbia, Brazil and European countries like United Kingdom, France and Germany. The issue is also a source of serious concern for policy makers, intellectuals, experts and professionals in Asian and African countries (Roberto & Claudia, [2023](#)). Furthermore, coercive sexual acts and victimizations which stay as sexual assaults of inmates in correctional facilities around the globe. The coercive sexual acts and victimizations of inmates is perceived by intellectuals as a strong symptom of prevailing negative social change sweeping through correctional facilities (Dunton et al., [2025](#)).

Belknap and Wilson ([2025](#)) averred that traditionally, sexual violence commonly affects women in prisons and these unfortunate circumstances are perpetrated mostly by prison officials who are entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the rights of incarcerated persons. They added that though the victimization rates is higher among female inmates, yet there are also growing reports of coercive sexual relationship and victimizations of male inmates.

Similarly, the exact prevalence rates of coercive sexual relationship and victimizations of inmates in prisons around the world are difficult to elicit. This is as a result of difficulty in having access to such documented records and because some prison officials are also involved in the unfortunate act (Allen, [2013](#)). However, Allen ([2013](#)) and Sage ([2021](#)) revealed that 4%-13% of prison inmates have reported being sexually victimized in the past 12 months in their stay in prisons. Allen ([2013](#)) and Sage ([2021](#)) indicated that these figures that do not include inmates who have also experienced sexual victimization but chose not to report the abuse or participate in the data collection exercise.

Sexual violence on incarcerated persons have assumed a new and disturbing dimension because a recent large-scale data report which was generated from National Probabilistic Survey of the Bureau of Justice



Statistics (BJS) revealed that 10% of youths or juveniles being incarcerated in juvenile detention centres have experienced sexual victimization and are facing the threats of coercive sexual victimization (Ahlin, [2019](#)).

Considering how coercive sexual relationship and victimizations of inmates in prisons have become an issue of great concern, several governments such as the United States, United Kingdom among others have initiated several strategies to mitigate the issue (Dunton et al., [2025](#)). Among these strategies are strictly enforcing curfews in prisons and embarking on reforms to decongest correctional facilities such as the utilization of alternatives means of incarceration like probation. Another significant strategy to the fight against this criminality is legislation and enactment of Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) (Ahlin, [2019](#); Sage, [2021](#)). The PREA and other stance taken were to serve as effective mechanism against the sexual abuses of inmates in correctional centres. Also, the strategies are that serve as a basis for the collection of scientific data. Nevertheless, coercive sexual relations on inmates in correctional centres still persist. Furthermore, the issue is seriously violating the morals of humanity and the sexual dignity of incarcerated individuals around the globe. It is on this premise the article sought to carry out a sociological review on the social drivers and consequences of coercive sexual acts and victimization of inmates around the globe.

Conceptual Clarification

Sexual Victimization

The World Health Organization ([2015](#)) define sexual violence as any act that is perpetrated against someone's will regardless of the relationship with the victim in any setting which can be in the form of rape or attempted rape, sexual slavery, unwanted touching, threatening sexual violence and verbally harassment of an individual.

Cook et al. ([2011](#)) and Usman ([2019](#)) conceptualised sexual victimization as any act of subjecting an individual without his or her consent to experience sexual act, attempt to force the individual go into sexual acts, exposing the person to sex-based utterances or making advances to coerce the person to have sex in an environment that include work place, public place and at home.

Coercive sexual acts and victimization in prisons involve forced sexual activities among inmates or prison officials and administrators forcing

inmates to have sex with them or as a form of entertainment. Sometimes, inmates are sexually victimized by force and are oppressed and illicit chain of command is created (Usman, [2019](#)).

Risky Sexual Behaviours

Usman ([2019](#)) defines risky sexual behaviours as those increased negative activities that increase the likelihood which can lead to the rise of incidents of contracting and spreading diseases and unwanted pregnancy. Risky sexual behaviours involve the frequent changing of sexual partners and the use of multiple sexual partners at a time through oral, vaginal and anal sexual contact without protection. Similarly, Usman ([2019](#)) averred that risky sexual behaviours involve the use of unreliable methods of birth control, sharing unclean needles, the abuse of hard drugs and substances among others.

Issues in Sexual Coercion

The issue of inmates being forced to engage sexual interactions is not a new criminality as it has existed long before the 21st Century (Sage, [2021](#)). Policy makers and authorities of prisons or correctional facilities have in the 21st Century come under serious pressure. The pressure is meant to draw the attention of policy makers to create sustainable policies that will address coercive sexual interactions among inmates. This is because coercive sexual victimization does not only violate prisons rights to dignity, but also result to widespread Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted diseases (Allen, [2013](#)).

Neal and Clements ([2010](#)) noted that coercive sexual activities and sexual victimization of inmates such as rapes are not only criminal in nature but they live a long lasting psychological trauma on victims. Also, Wolff et al. ([2007](#)) noted that coercive sexual relationships is not only criminal in nature but a disdain and contradiction to the stance of the human society's morals. They averred that this is because these deviant acts occur in prison institutions that are founded, funded and operated by the same society that is responsible for the protection of the dignity of all humans either incarcerated or not confined.

Though, the Supreme Court of United States (US) recognized the existence of the violent criminal behaviours of coercive sexual acts such as rape in 1994, it was until 2003 that the country and other countries legislated laws criminalising the acts and prosecuting it perpetrators (Belknap &



Wilson, [2025](#); Neal & Clements, [2010](#)). The various legislated Acts known as the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) were also meant to prosecute and punish prison officials that sexually abuse inmates and officials that aided in coercing inmates into sexual activities (Neal & Clements, [2010](#)).

Conversely, even with the enactment of PREA in some countries like the United State, Canada and United Kingdom (UK), courts in these countries often handle cases of prison rapes and other sexual assaults with technicalities; making it difficult for victims of coercive sexual acts to get justice. More worrying is that even with the enactment of PREA, courts remain uncooperative in using the laws to duly punish correctional officials that evidences and facts clearly proved that they were involved in coercive sexual acts with inmates (Sage, [2021](#)).

Theoretical Framework: Routine Activities Theory

The article is framed around the Routine Activities Theory by Cohen and Felson ([1979](#)) underlined that the theory falls under the Rational Choice Perspective of Criminology (Beine & Messerschmidt, [2006](#)). The Routine Activities Theory is a revision of Cesare Beccaria' (1764) Rational Choice Theory which was the first attempt to explain crime from a social and economic perspective (Akers & Sellers, [2004](#)). Some proponents of the theory are Clarke ([1992](#)), Landa and Fridman ([1993](#)) and Messner et al. ([2001](#)).

The central assumptions of the Routine Activities Theory is that all potential criminals are rational actors who subjected themselves to conscious decision making out of their free-will of human action (rational choice). The theory further argued that they simultaneously work towards achieving the maximum benefits with minimum cost of being caught and prosecuted of the crime about to be committed. The theory further argued that crimes are committed when there is a presence of a situation that is accompanied by routine opportunity. The theory also posited that crime is predisposed by an opportunity and this opportunity could be related to cost benefits, socio-economic position, risk of detection, dependent on situational circumstance, nature of offence and access to external profits. Cohen and Felson ([1979](#)) also elucidated that potential criminals who are rational actors create a routine of committing crimes through being influenced with circumstances that provide the opportunity to commit crimes. Cohen and Felson ([1979](#)) argued that the Routine Activities Theory

of crime is hinged on three basic cues which are:

- There must be an appropriate target, either persons or properties, in respect to its value;
- There must be a target whose guardian, (such as police, guard and passers-by) can be easily overcome by the potential criminal and;
- There must be a criminal or offender who will consciously and deliberately plan to find a suitable target or else stumble across it with specific motivation that is germane for criminal activities. In this case, the criminal is likely to pick on victims who are physically feebler or outnumbered or otherwise at a disadvantaged situation.

Applying the Routine Activities Theory to explain coercive sexual acts and victimization of inmates in prisons implied that individuals who engage in this criminality are rational actors who routinely always make use of the available opportunity to sexually victimize inmates by subjecting themselves to conscious decision making out of their free-will of human action. Furthermore, applying the theory implies that the perpetrators of the criminality simultaneously work toward getting away with their criminality. The perpetrators commit this crime to achieve maximum benefits and with minimum costs of being caught or apprehended, prosecuted and punished for sexually victimizing inmates.

Also, perpetrators of sex coercive acts and victimizing of inmates engage in this criminality because some of the inmates already vulnerable thereby making an appropriate targets. Secondly, the perpetrators of the criminality have realised that prison guards and other administrators of their prison can be easily overcome. This is evident as the guardians are neither unable to strictly enforce curfews in prisons nor are they willing to collaborate with government efforts on reforms of enforcing any legislation and enactment that prohibit sexual victimization in prisons.

Thus, the perpetrators of this criminality consciously and deliberately plan to find inmates that are suitable target or stumble across the vulnerable inmates with specific motivation that is suitable for their criminal activities.

Methodology

This paper adopts a desk review methodology to examine the social drivers and consequences of coercive sexual acts and the victimization of inmates



in prisons worldwide. The review is based on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, official reports, and credible online resources. In addition, content analysis of publications by international and regional authorities was carried out to provide context and to support the arguments presented in the paper.

Social Drivers of Coercive Sexual Acts and Victimizations in Prisons

Several social factors contribute to the persistent coercive sexual acts and victimizations in prisons globally. These include:

Deprivation of Sexual Desires

Worldwide, sexual abuse of inmates in prisons has often been attributed to the recurrent deprivation of sexual satisfaction among inmates and even prison administrators (Gear, 2010; Lawan et al., 2016). For instance, Lawan et al. (2016), in a study conducted at Kano Central Prison in Kano State, Nigeria, found that 82.5% of inmates reported having active sexual desires. The inability to satisfy these desires within the facility was found to contribute to non-consensual sexual activities. Their findings further revealed that such non-consensual sex often took the form of exploitative encounters, homosexual gratification, sexual abuse, and victimization. The study reported that sexual abuse victimization was prevalent among 14.9% of inmates.

Deprivation and Transactional Survival Needs

A study conducted in Malawi revealed that coercive and transactional same-sex activities were closely tied to deprivation and harsh prison conditions (Sikwese *et al.*, 2019). Inmates frequently received only one meal per day, primarily with beans or peas, leading to widespread malnutrition. Prisoners without family support were especially vulnerable, as many were coerced into providing sexual favours in exchange for food and other basic necessities. Here, deprivation transformed sex into a form of currency, trapping vulnerable inmates in cycles of exploitation.

Overcrowding and Unsafe Prison Conditions

The same Malawi study reported that extreme overcrowding forced inmates into sham sleeping arrangements, where dozens were crammed into small cells with little space to move (Sikwese *et al.*, 2019). In these unsafe conditions, newly admitted and younger inmates often exchanged sexual compliance for more favourable sleeping positions or protection. The

absence of family or external support exacerbated dependency on stronger, resource-rich inmates, institutionalizing sexual exploitation as part of prison life.

Socio-Demographic and Behavioural Vulnerabilities

Empirical evidence from a study conducted at Katsina Central Prison, Nigeria, highlighted significant socio-demographic correlates of risky sexual behaviour among inmates (Usman, [2019](#)). The findings showed that nearly two-thirds of inmates were below the age of 35, the age group most likely to engage in risky sexual activity. Furthermore, the study revealed that 75.9% of inmates were awaiting trial, reflecting delayed detention linked to systemic judicial inefficiencies. Prolonged pre-trial detention intensified vulnerabilities by exposing inmates to extended periods of coercive environments. In addition, more than three-quarters of inmates reported drug use, with marijuana being the most commonly used substance. Substance abuse not only increased vulnerability to exploitation but also lowered inhibitions, thereby facilitating coercive sexual acts.

The Consequences of Coercive Sexual Acts in Prisons

Recent data on world inmates' statistics revealed that there are about 11 million individuals in the custody of correctional facilities, of which 3 to 7% are females (Roberto & Claudia, [2023](#)). Although specific data on women inmates remain scarce, there is a growing trend in the number of women and youths incarcerated globally. The increasing number of inmates being subjected to coercive sexual acts has serious health implications, as it contributes to the continued spread of HIV, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), tuberculosis, and hepatitis B and C (Roberto & Claudia, [2023](#)). The prevalence of STDs is reported to be 2 to 10 times higher among prison inmates compared to those who have never been incarcerated, particularly in Latin America and Africa (Roberto & Claudia, [2023](#)).

One major consequence of coercive sexual practices in prisons is the limited or complete absence of HIV and STD prevention and treatment programmes, especially in Latin America and Africa. Even in countries where such interventions exist, they are often not fully integrated into broader national HIV and STD campaigns (Roberto & Claudia, [2023](#)). The situation is particularly severe for women, who are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and face the added risk of unwanted pregnancies as a result of coercive sexual acts (Dunton et al., [2025](#)). In some contexts, female



inmates are denied access to emergency contraception or abortion services, thereby compounding their health and social vulnerability (Avalon, [2011](#)).

Beyond physical health risks, coercive sexual violence in prisons also produces significant psychological consequences. Survivors often experience feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and shock, which may lead to long-term mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and a persistent sense of insecurity. The trauma is further reflected in behavioural and cognitive difficulties, including sleep problems, poor concentration, and intrusive memories. In severe cases, the absence of adequate psychological support may result in self-harm or suicidal behaviour. While some interventions are designed to assist women and girls, male victims rarely have access to specialized psychological services, thereby worsening their suffering. The lack of adequate psychosocial care within prisons not only intensifies the enduring impact of coercive sexual acts on survivors but also undermines rehabilitation and reintegration efforts (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [ODIHR], [2019](#)).

Conclusion

This article has examined the social drivers and consequences of coercive sexual acts and victimization of inmates in prisons across the globe. Evidence from extant literature reveals that coercive sexual practices in prisons are not isolated incidents but structural realities shaped by deprivation of sexual desires, survival needs, overcrowded prison conditions, and individual vulnerabilities such as age, delayed detention, and drug use. These factors create environments where inmates, particularly the young, weak, and unsupported, are highly vulnerable to coercion and exploitation.

The consequences of these practices are severe, ranging from the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections to unwanted pregnancies and long-term psychological trauma among victims. Beyond health-related outcomes, coercive sexual acts undermine the dignity of incarcerated persons, erode the rehabilitative purpose of prisons, and contradict international human rights standards. Despite existing interventions such as the PREA and reforms in various regions, coercive sexual acts and victimization of inmates around the globe remain pervasive, largely due to weak enforcement, institutional complicity, and entrenched prison hierarchies. Therefore, tackling this issue requires a multidimensional

approach that combines stricter enforcement of prison laws, consistent monitoring, empowerment of inmates through education, and cultural shifts that reject the normalization of sexual violence in correctional facilities.

Finally, protecting the dignity of incarcerated persons is not only a moral and legal imperative but also essential to achieving the broader goals of correctional institutions: rehabilitation, reintegration, and social justice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

- It is recommended that policy makers should strengthen their legislations and prison laws against prison officials or inmates that engage in coercive sexual relationships with inmates. This can be achieved by enforcing strict curfews in prison while erring prison officials should be punished through prosecutions to serve as deterrence to others that would attempt to engage in the acts.
- The paper recommended that policy makers should ensure that prisons and correctional facilities around the globe must educate prison administrators, wardens and inmates about the implications of coercive sexual relationships.
- It is also recommended that female inmates who are victims of coercive sexual conducts should be given access to abortion services that will prevent them from getting pregnant or they should be given full rights to abort pregnancy conceived from rape incidents.
- Policy makers should ensure that administrators of prison and wardens are trained and retrained to possess the knowledge and skills on how to prevent incidences of coercive sexual relationships inside prisons.
- It was further recommended that policy makers should work towards changing public perception against normalising sexual abuse in correctional facilities. This can be achieved by increasing national campaigns against the scourge on national television stations, websites of affected prisons and social media handles to inform the public about the depth and extent to which the dignity of incarcerated people are violated.
- Finally, it is further recommended that policy makers should fully offer HIV and STDs prevention programmes where these have not been fully



integrated with national campaign programmes against HIV and STDs

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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