

Who Watches the Watchmen: Prison guards rape female inmates [wordpress.com](#)



New measures are being introduced to combat rape in prisons in the US. The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) was passed in 2003 and has finally been officially implemented. The issue of rape and sexual assault in prisons is largely ignored in public beyond the occasional joke about not dropping the soap. In the UK even our prison officials turn a blind eye and strenuously avoid investigating allegations of male rape despite the best efforts of the Howard League for Penal Reform. However in places like the notorious Tutwiler women's prison in Alabama, inmates are constantly under threat of sexual violence and of 50 inmates interviewed by Charlotte Morrison for a report by the Equal Justice Initiative almost all had been assaulted or had seen someone being assaulted. In the wider American penal system 9.6% of former inmates reported being sexually victimised.

Unfortunately these statistics do not really surprise me. What did surprise me was how many of these assaults were perpetrated by staff. Almost half of the assaults reported by former inmates were by guards or people working at the prison. Back at Tutwiler the BBC interviewed Monica Washington who was raped and impregnated by a guard while in prison. Another woman was raped by a male nurse. The EJI report also knew of three more women who had become pregnant by guards since 2009.

The line between sex and rape among inmates can be complex and full of traps. Although I don't like it I understand it is problematic. When the assault involves a prison guard however I fail to see the gray area. Yet Monica Washington's rapist was given a slap on the wrist sentence of 6 months in jail and four others, who also worked at Tutwiler, convicted of the euphemistic 'criminal sexual misconduct' never spent any time in jail.

Surely guards have a responsibility to the inmates. No matter how much contempt they may feel for individuals or how much they dislike their job they have a duty of care. Maybe it is hard to think about a duty of care within prisons. Many of the inmates have done terrible things to end up in prison. Perhaps the guards feel, as many do, that they deserve whatever they get. However as a society we have decided how we punish people who do terrible things and nowhere in the penal code of the US or the UK is there mention of rape. Nor is there mention of being indebted

to your guards or legal precedent of trading sex for favours in jail.

The American courts have allowed these guards to abuse the trust and responsibility given them with barely any repercussions. These men rape vulnerable women and many are not even convicted. Those that are face the less serious charge of 'criminal sexual misconduct' and a lenient sentence far from commensurate with their crime. This is rape pure and simple and should be treated as such by the courts. While these men go free, the women they abused continue to suffer and be victimised. Monica Washington will face suspicion from inmates and guards for the rest of her sentence and when she is released she will have to tell her daughter the story of her conception.

PREA should help to make prisons safer. It allows rape to be reported to an external hotline rather than internally and includes protection for LGBTQ inmates for the first time. Tutwiler is currently under investigation following the EJI report though tellingly the Alabama Department of Corrections would not allow the BBC access to any facilities to check the implementation of PREA. However none of this will matter if guards continue to be allowed to get away with raping their charges. Preventing rape in prisons is admirable but more needs to be done to punish those who commit these terrible acts. Particularly when those people are the very people who are supposed to protect inmates from harm.

PREA to the rescue

- The women raped by guards in US prisons (bbc.co.uk)
- Obama Executive Order Officially Implements Prison Rape Elimination Act (thinkprogress.org)
- DHS Finally Addresses Rape in Detention Facilities (newamericamedia.org)
- Op-Ed: Words of Hope From a Prison Rape Survivor (christinedecleene.wordpress.com)
- DHS Working to Eliminate Prison Rape (pinkbananaworld.com)

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