

END SILENCE: Youth Speaking Up about Sexual Abuse in Custody

Frequently Asked Questions

How prevalent is sexual victimization in juvenile detention centers?

According to a recent study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 12.1% of youth reported being victimized in custody in 2008-2009. In the same study, approximately 95% of all youth reporting staff sexual misconduct said they had been victimized by female staff; additionally, youth with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual reported significantly higher rates of sexual victimization by another youth (12.5%) compared to heterosexual youth (1.3%). (See, *The Bureau of Justice Statistics. SPECIAL REPORT: Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities Reported by Youth, 2008-09*).

What made you want to take on the graphic novel project?

Training materials for youth in custody on how to handle sexual assault and other forms of abuse are scarce. Many youth come into the system with long histories of physical and sexual victimization and/or neglect. Due to this history, often youth normalize abuse, react in ways adults would not expect, and often cannot and do not understand saying no to sex is an option, especially when it is at the hands of an adult. The graphic novels walk youth through reporting abuse, addressing disbelief by staff, and the aftermath of reporting, including investigation, safety concerns, and medical and mental health care. This content is important because youth need to know and be educated about each step in the process. (See, *Resident Education Standard 115.333 of the Prison Rape Elimination Act National Standards*).

What is the purpose of the graphic novels?

END SILENCE: Youth Speaking Up about Sexual Abuse in Custody is a series of graphic novels for youth in custodial settings. These graphic novels are intended to educate youth in custody about how to identify and address incidents of sexual assault. These graphic novels are a first step in reaching out to youth in juvenile justice settings in order to help them identify, address, and respond to incidents of sexual abuse by staff or other youth. We hope that it will deepen the dialogue about strategies to eliminate sexual abuse of youth in custody. The graphic novels are intended to be “stand alone” material to orient and educate youth about the issue of sexual abuse in custodial settings. We also hope it provokes discussions with and between youth.

Why did you choose graphic novels as an educational tool? Are you concerned that the format could be perceived as making light of sexual assault?

These books were created to meet a need in a developmentally appropriate way, while depicting the realities of the risk of sexual victimization in custodial settings. The series of graphic novels was developed by working intensively with juvenile justice agencies and focus groups of youth both in and out of custody for over two years. The Project chose graphic novels as a medium to deliver this message because of their longstanding successful use in community education projects ranging from child abuse to dating violence and HIV/AIDS prevention. Additionally,

youth connect with graphic novels and the medium is developmentally appropriate for most youth in custody. These publications are meant to be only one of tools agencies use to prevent prison rape. Obviously, they cannot substitute for well-trained and deployed staff and appropriate policies and procedures that protect youth from abuse. These materials are not meant to be light-hearted. Rather, they intend to address a serious issue in a developmentally and cognitively appropriate way. The Project wants youth to read these books. To that end, they are visually appealing while discussing this serious issue.

Are the stories depicted in the novels true stories?

Unfortunately, none of the scenarios presented in the graphic novels are fictional. They are based on the facts of actual incidents youth have faced in custodial settings in the United States. Each book presents a situation based on letters we received, news articles about abuse of youth in custody, and witness testimony cited in criminal and civil litigation.

Where are the graphic novels currently being used? Are they a success?

These graphic novels are being used in several large state juvenile agencies as well as local detention centers and community probation departments across the country. Feedback from both staff and youth using these training materials has been phenomenal. Youth have told us that they think they are “a little corny” but overall hit the mark as far as situations they are faced with and the dilemmas about questioning who they are and what they should do. Staff members like the books because they provide training materials that are easily discussed in a productive way and provide adequate discussion questions for youth. Overall, the Project has found the graphic novels help not only youth but staff as well in state and local custodial settings to talk to youth about sexual abuse – and that was the goal.