

# New Study Estimates Annual Cost of Incarcerating Adults Convicted of Child Sex Crimes Topped \$5.4 Billion in 2021

The findings highlight financial cost of not preventing child sexual abuse

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The U.S. government spent an estimated \$5.4 billion last year at the state and federal level to incarcerate adults convicted of sex crimes against children under age 18, according to a new study led by a Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health researcher.

The study calculated annual spending on incarcerated adults convicted of sex crimes against children under age 18 in U.S. federal and state prisons and sex offender civil commitment facilities. The findings, published online March 23 in the journal *Sexual Abuse*, highlight the cost of what is considered a preventable public health problem.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that about 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys under age 18 experience sexual abuse during childhood. Research suggests that about 12 percent of the world's children will experience some form of sexual abuse before they turn 18.

“The costs for this incarceration are extraordinary,” says study author Elizabeth J. Letourneau, PhD, professor in the Bloomberg School’s Department of Mental Health and director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. “We spend billions of dollars on criminal justice remedies after child sexual abuse has already occurred, and yet there are very limited resources for preventing this abuse from occurring in the first place.”

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The study notes that the U.S. federal government budgeted \$1.5 million in 2021 to support child sexual abuse prevention research. Research aimed at identifying ways to reduce child sexual abuse has focused on the importance of perpetrator prevention. Promising prevention efforts include online self-help intervention programs for people with sexual attraction to minors and middle school education programs designed to reduce child sexual abuse by promoting responsible behaviors with younger children and with peers.

For their study, the researchers used publicly available sources—including U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Prisoner Statistics data—to calculate annual cost estimates for incarcerating adults convicted of sex crimes against children under age 18. The study estimates there were 127,282 incarcerated in 2021 in state prisons for sex offenses involving children, at an average annual cost of \$34,191, for a total of \$4.4 billion in spending at the state level. At the federal level, the study estimates there were 12,850 inmates incarcerated in federal prisons for child sex offenses in 2021, at an annual average cost per inmate of \$39,521, a total of \$508 million in spending. For the estimated 4,321 inmates with child victims in high-security sex offender civil commitment facilities, the study estimates an annual average cost per inmate of \$139,489, a total of \$538 million in annual spending after adjusting for individual cost fluctuations.

The authors note that the estimated costs of incarcerating adults convicted of sex crimes against children are conservative, since they did not include costs related to the justice process—including investigation, prosecution, and adjudication in their analysis.

Based on average periods of imprisonment and commitment—an average of eight years—the researchers found that the U.S. stands to spend nearly \$49 billion on the cohort of about 144,453 people convicted of sex crimes against children currently in prison and sex offender civil commitment facilities: \$33 billion for state prisoners, \$5 billion for federal prisoners, and \$10.7 billion for inmates in sex offender civil commitment facilities.

The authors note that incarcerating adults for harmful and violent behavior, including for the sexual abuse of children, can be an appropriate component to a comprehensive national response. At the same time, research suggests that incarceration in and of itself fails to prevent new incidents of child sexual abuse, nor does it reduce or prevent recidivism. And longer sentences do not make incarceration more effective at preventing violence.

The authors recommend developing effective, proactive strategies aimed at child sexual abuse prevention as well as improving reactive strategies like incarceration for sex crimes. Letourneau also notes that evidence-based interventions for people returning to their communities following incarceration for sex crimes should be more broadly disseminated.

“Child sexual abuse is indisputably both a criminal justice problem and a public health problem,” Letourneau says. “We need to develop, evaluate, and disseminate effective sex crime prevention strategies and these efforts—like reactive strategies—also require more resources.”

Letourneau conducted the study after hearing from many elected officials and staff that they supported the concept of child sexual abuse prevention research but cited federal budget caps and deficits as barriers to funding new prevention initiatives. She and her coauthors thought estimating how much federal and state governments spent on incarceration for child sexual abuse offenses would underscore potential savings associated with preventing child sexual abuse in the first place.

“If we really want to prevent harm, then it is going to require more government investment,” Letourneau said. “We are not going to reduce rates of child sexual abuse with just \$1.5 million in federal research funding. It’s time for more significant government investment in prevention.”

“No Check We Won’t Write: A Brief Report on the High Cost of Sex Offender Incarceration” was written by Elizabeth J. Letourneau, Travis T.M. Roberts, Luke Malone, and Yi Sun.

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Note: This news release was updated on April 15 to correct the following: the number of people incarcerated for sex crimes against children each year; inmate, annual cost figures and cost totals for 2021; the current cohort figure and select estimated total spending figures for this cohort.