

Mental Illness in Correctional Facilities

In the 1980s, incarceration rates of individuals with mental health issues skyrocketed after deinstitutionalization (the closing of psychiatric hospitals). Individuals with a mental health disorder are **three times** more likely to be incarcerated rather than hospitalized.¹ Prisons have become de facto psychiatric facilities, with little resources to equip them to serve in this role. The criminalization of individuals with mental illness leads to disconnection from their loved ones and communities, inability to access appropriate treatment and care, and worsen mental illness.¹

Mental illness and prison rape:

According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, inmates with serious psychological distress (SPD) were more likely to experience sexual victimization than inmates without SPD.²

- **6.3%** of adult state and federal prison inmates with SPD reported they were sexual victimized by another inmate. **0.7%** of inmates with no indication of mental illness reported the same thing. The numbers reported for staff sexual misconduct were **5.6%** and **1.1%** respectively.
- In jails, **3.6%** of inmates with SPD versus **0.7%** of inmates with no indication of mental illness reported inmate-on-inmate sexual victimization. The numbers reported for staff sexual misconduct were **3.6%** and **1%** respectively.
- Compared to inmate-survivors with no indication of mental illness, inmate-survivors with SPD were **more likely** to be victimized multiple times, experience force or threats from their perpetrator, and be injured as a result of the assault.

The prison environment exacerbates trauma. Prisoners have essentially no privacy and are often subjected to invasive searches. The prison environment is loud and frequently conducive to further contact with the perpetrator. In many cases, the default response to reports of sexual assault (and often the default response to inmates with mental illness) is to house the survivor in isolation, which has been shown in a number of studies to be extremely detrimental to mental health, and further exacerbates the symptoms of those already ill. Isolation also limits opportunities for treatment. Prison Rape Elimination Act Standard 115.43 addresses the use of protective custody as a response to sexual assault.

§ 115.43 Protective custody

(a) Inmates at high risk for sexual victimization shall not be placed in involuntary segregated housing unless an assessment of all available alternatives has been made, and a determination has been made that there is no available alternative means of separation from likely abusers. If a facility cannot conduct such an assessment immediately, the facility may hold the inmate in involuntary segregated housing for less than 24 hours while completing the assessment.

Tips for helping incarcerated survivors with mental illness:

- **Be patient.** Their trauma and symptoms may cause their speech to be slurred, rambling, or otherwise unintelligible. It may take some time to fully hear and understand their story.
- **Try to use simple, clear, and concise language.** Prisoners with mental health issues may be experiencing intrusive thoughts or symptoms of trauma that make it difficult to focus.

¹ Torey, E.F., et al. (2010). More Mentally Ill Persons Are in Jails and Prisons Than Hospitals: A Survey of the States. The Treatment Advocate Center and National Sheriffs' Association. Retrieved from http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/final_jails_v_hospitals_study.pdf

² Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2013). Sexual Victimization in Prisons and Jails Reported by Inmates, 2011–12. U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/svpjri1112.pdf>

- **Repeat back what you think they are saying.** If their story is unclear or you don't understand them, ask questions and repeat the parts you understand. This may help them clarify.
- **Actively listen without judgment.** Prisoners frequently report that this was the single most helpful thing an advocate or counselor did for them. They have very limited resources to get help, and having someone to listen and validate their feelings is extremely important. This is especially true for inmates with mental illness, who are frequently told they lack credibility.
- **Don't argue with delusion.** If a survivor is delusional, try to identify and validate the feelings without validating the delusion.
- **Share messages of hope and recovery.**