

Mental Illness in Incarceration



American prisons house a large number of mentally ill people. In fact, an individual diagnosed with a mental health disorder is three times more likely to be incarcerated rather than hospitalized (Torey et al., 2010). The incarceration rate of the mentally ill skyrocketed in the 1980s after deinstitutionalization (the closing of psychiatric hospitals). Prisons have since become de facto psychiatric facilities, with almost no resources to equip them to serve this role. Crimes committed by the mentally ill tend to be non-violent and directly related to their illness. Often their behavior is a manifestation of their symptoms.

Mental illness and prison rape:

According to data from the *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (2013), inmates with serious psychological distress (SPD) were more likely to experience sexual victimization than inmates without SPD.

- 6.3% of adult state and federal prison inmates with SDP 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 more than once, experience force or threats from their perpetrator, and be injured as a result of the assault.

Generally, the prison environment exacerbates trauma. Prisoners have essentially no privacy, are often subject to invasive searches, and the 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 mentally ill inmates) is to house the survivor in isolation. Isolation 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 response to sexual assault.

Tips for helping mentally ill survivors of prison rape:

- **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.** Mentally ill prisoners may be experiencing intrusive thoughts, or symptoms of trauma that make it difficult to focus.
- **Repeat back what you think they are saying.** If their story is unclear, or you don't understand them, try to fill in the blanks by asking questions, or repeating the parts you get. This may help them clarify.
- **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 the mentally ill, 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.**

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>

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