

Mental Health & Correctional Facilities

FACT SHEET

Overview

Mental health conditions are common among people who are incarcerated. About **37%** of people in state and federal correctional facilities and **44%** of people in local detention facilities report having a history of a mental health condition diagnosed by a mental health professional.¹ Additionally, **14%** of people in state and federal correctional facilities and **26%** of people in local detention facilities met the criteria for serious psychological distress between 2011-12.² Understanding mental health conditions among survivors of sexual violence in correctional settings can inform advocates and help them provide trauma-informed care.

Key Facts

- Incarcerated individuals with mental health conditions are 9 times more likely to experience sexual victimization than incarcerated individuals without mental health conditions.³
- Incarcerated survivors with mental health conditions frequently experience repeated abuse, physical injury, or threats during the assault.⁴
- The correctional environment, including limited privacy, invasive searches, isolation, and barriers to mental health treatment, can make trauma and mental health symptoms worse.⁵
- Conditions such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, or difficulty trusting others may make it harder to recognize and report abuse or seek support.⁶
- Under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), facilities can only use protective custody as a last resort to protect an incarcerated survivor. Survivors in protective custody must continue to have access to programs, services, and treatment.⁷

Tips for Helping Incarcerated Survivors with Mental Health Conditions

- **Listen without judgment:** Believe the survivor's experience and validate their feelings. Avoid making assumptions based on their mental health condition.
- **Be patient and allow extra time:** Trauma and mental health symptoms can make it harder for survivors to organize their thoughts, communicate clearly, or remember details.
- **Be mindful of how some mental health conditions can affect communication:** Different mental health conditions can affect how someone communicates and process information. Allow extra time for someone with depression. Explain each step of care before it happens to someone with anxiety. Avoid known triggers for someone with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- **Use clear, simple language:** Give information step by step and check that the survivor understands before moving on.
- **Avoid using stigmatizing language:** Do not use words such as "crazy", "non-compliant", "insane", "attention-seeking", or "manipulative". Be respectful and use person-first language that focuses on the survivor.
- **Provide survivors with choices:** Whenever possible, offer survivors choices about what happens next. Even small choices can help incarcerated survivors feel more in control and empowered despite having limited autonomy while being incarcerated.

¹ Bronson, Jennifer and Berzofsky, Marcus, "Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-12" (2017). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/imhprp1112.pdf>.

² See Footnote 1

³ "Mental Illness and Sexual Abuse Behind Bars" (2013). Just Detention International. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://justdetention.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FS-Mental-Illness-and-Sexual-Abuse-Behind-Bars.pdf>

⁴ Bronson, Jennifer and Berzofsky, Marcus, "Indicators of Mental Health Problems Reported by Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2011-2012" (2017). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/indicators-mental-health-problems-reported-prisoners-and-jail-inmates-2011>

⁵ Canada, Kelli et al. "Multi-Level Barriers to Prison Mental Health and Physical Health Care for Individuals with Mental Illnesses" (2022). Front Psychiatry. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.777124>

⁶ Bany-Mohammed, Mo'men et al. "Trauma, Stress, and Mental Health Outcomes" (2025). Journal of Psychiatry and Psychiatric Disorders. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://doi.org/10.26502/jppd.2572-519X0260>

⁷ "§ 115.43 Protective custody" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-43>; "§ 115.68 Post-allegation protective custody" (n.d.). National PREA Resource Center. Retrieved June 2026 from <https://www.prearesourcecenter.org/standard/115-68>

- **Ask clarifying questions when needed:** If something is unclear, summarize what you heard and ask the survivor to correct or add information.
- **Respond to emotions rather than delusions:** If a survivor is experiencing delusions or hallucinations, acknowledge their feelings without confirming or challenging the delusion.
- **Recognize how trauma reactions can overlap with signs of mental illness:** Trauma responses such as emotional numbing, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, or changes in mood can look like symptoms of mental health conditions. Avoid making assumptions about a person's mental health and trying to determine the cause of behavior.
- **Be aware of the increased risk for suicide:** Survivors of sexual violence and persons with mental health conditions are at higher risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Take any statements seriously and connect survivors to appropriate services.
- **Offer hope and support:** Remind survivors that help is available and that healing is possible.