INTRODUCTION

• Mass incarceration disproportionately affects people with mental illnesses.
• The experience of incarceration poses several physical and mental health risks due to the stresses and circumstances associated with imprisonment.
• People with mental illnesses are more likely to experience physical and sexual victimization and attempt suicide while incarcerated.
• They also may have difficulty following rules or act inappropriately due to their psychiatric symptoms drawing attention from correctional officers.
• Little is known about the prison experiences of people with mental illnesses, their interactions with corrections officers, and the impact of these experiences on their overall physical and mental health.

METHOD

37 participants:
• Released from prison in the past 3 years
• Have serious mental illness
• In prison in NY, MO, or PA in USA
• Framework methodology analysis, content analysis, and descriptive statistics
• 60-90 minute interviews, audio-recorded, transcribed
• Short survey

RESULTS

➢ Variation of themes both within and across sites.
➢ Stigma was predominant causing some to conceal the need for treatment while others felt they were punished for exhibiting psychiatric symptoms.
➢ Mental health treatment ranged from medication only to medication with counseling or supportive services.
➢ Across sites, participants discussed the variability in correctional officer interactions with some officers showing compassion and concern and others overusing their power.
➢ Participants referenced how the strength of rapport with officers can help or hinder entrance to treatment.
➢ For the participants who spent time in solitary confinement, the reasons for segregation were mixed with some noting they were on watch for suicide, under investigation for an alleged violation, or being punished.
➢ Participants perceived being in prison exacerbated their psychiatric symptoms
  ➢ However -- Participants also reported that being in prison provided an opportunity to access mental health treatment which they had difficulty accessing in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Stigma towards mental illness is a common experience in prisons and efforts to educate prison staff and other inmates is needed to ensure those needing help are willing to ask for it so that all people in need have access to treatment and services.

Mental health services in prison remain highly focused on behavior control and symptom abatement with little focus on counseling and supportive services for participants in this study.