

BREAKING CHAINS MENDING MINDS

POST-INCARCERATION SYNDROME

PICS · FACT SHEET

The psychological aftermath of incarceration — what it is, who it touches, and what helps

WHAT IS PICS?

Post-Incarceration Syndrome (PICS) describes the cluster of psychological, emotional, and social difficulties that follow people home from prison: depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, difficulty adjusting to life outside, and difficulty forming and maintaining relationships. First described by relapse-prevention specialist Terence Gorski in 2001, PICS is not yet a recognized diagnosis in the DSM or ICD — but researchers, practitioners, and justice-impacted communities use it daily, and Congress has asked NIMH to formally study it. Also called Post-Traumatic Prison Disorder (PTPD) or Post-Carceral Syndrome.

THE SCALE

600,000+

people released from U.S. prisons every year

~40%

estimated to experience PICS — 240,000 people a year

5+ years

depression and anxiety can persist after release

1.9M+

people incarcerated in the U.S. today — tomorrow's returners

Sources: NIA Definitive Guide to PICS; Bureau of Justice Statistics

THE FIVE SYNDROMES OF PICS

The framework BCMM teaches in every workshop — five interlocking injuries:

- 1

Institutionalized Personality Traits
Learned helplessness and survival rules from living under total control — decisions, schedules, and identity surrendered to the institution.
- 2

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
Flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, and avoidance — the alarm system that will not shut off after release.
- 3

Antisocial Personality Traits
The armor of distrust and aggression that protected a person inside, and costs them relationships, jobs, and freedom outside.
- 4

Substance Use Disorders
Self-medication of untreated trauma — why relapse after release is a PICS story, not a willpower story.
- 5

Social Sensory Deprivation Syndrome
The lasting effects of isolation and under-stimulation — crowds, choices, and open spaces become overwhelming.

COMMON SIGNS

Depression sadness, hopelessness, loss of interest in life	Anxiety worry and fear out of proportion to the moment
PTSD symptoms flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance of triggers	Difficulty adjusting work, relationships, and systems feel foreign
Social isolation withdrawing rather than risking connection	Hypervigilance eyes on every wall and every moving thing

Signs vary person to person — not everyone who has been incarcerated experiences PICS.

THE SIX-STAGE PROGRESSION

Untreated, PICS tends to follow a six-stage path that ends where it began — behind bars. Interrupting the early stages is the whole point of intervention.

1	Helplessness & hopelessness	no reentry plan, no funding for treatment or training
2	Immobilizing fear	intense, paralyzing — the world feels unsurvivable
3	Free-floating anger & rage	flashbacks and PTSD symptoms surface
4	Impulse violence	minimal provocation triggers outsized reactions
5	Severe self-isolation	withdrawal to avoid the triggers of violence
6	Breakdown & acting out	nightmares, insomnia, impulse-control collapse — arrest and reincarceration

WHY IT MATTERS TO EVERYONE

RECIDIVISM

Untreated mental health struggles after release are linked to higher reoffending — PICS feeds the cycle that fills prisons.

WORKPLACES

Unrecognized PICS looks like turnover and conflict. Recognized, it becomes retention and loyalty.

FAMILIES

Children, spouses, and parents absorb the economic, emotional, and mental strain when a loved one comes home injured.

COMMUNITIES

Failed reentry costs the public in social services, healthcare, and safety. Successful reentry pays everyone.

WHAT HELPS

- ✓

Mental health support
therapy and treatment that names the injury and manages symptoms
- ✓

Reentry resources
housing, employment, and service connections in the critical first months
- ✓

Education & job training
skills and credentials that rebuild self-sufficiency — access to education sharply reduces recidivism
- ✓

Peer support & mentorship
guidance from people who have walked the road — firsthand knowledge of the path and its pitfalls
- ✓

Reducing stigma
communities, employers, and families that treat returning citizens as people, not records

PICS is not a life sentence. With treatment, support, and community, people manage symptoms, rebuild relationships, and thrive.

PICS vs. PTSD — what's the difference?

PTSD is a recognized psychiatric diagnosis tied to traumatic events. PICS is broader: it can include PTSD symptoms, but adds institutionalization, antisocial adaptations, substance use, and sensory deprivation — the full signature of the carceral experience. Researchers describe PICS as a discrete subtype of PTSD resulting from long-term imprisonment.

WHAT BCMM DOES ABOUT IT

PICS Workshops 6-week cohorts for returning citizens — general & intense	Professional Training 1-day PICS training for employers & agencies	Family Workshop half-day for families & support networks	Free Support Group weekly live video chat — open to all
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Every workshop includes the PICS Workbook · outcomes measured on every engagement · built from 25 years of lived experience

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SOURCES & FURTHER READING

National Incarceration Association, “The Definitive Guide on Post Incarceration Syndrome” (joinnia.com/post-incarceration-syndrome) · T. Gorski, “Post Incarceration Syndrome and Relapse” (2001) · Bureau of Justice Statistics, Correctional Populations in the U.S. · Liem & Kunst, “Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released lifers?” (2013) · Reps. Pressley & Napolitano, letter to NIMH on PICS research (2023). This factsheet is educational, not medical advice. If you or a loved one is struggling, connect with a qualified mental health professional.