

Exploring how to cut the risk of criminal offending by people with learning disabilities

This project is finding that strong personal relationships and the right level of integrated support could make all the difference for protecting this group from criminality.

Around one in four people with learning disabilities will either be convicted, or suspected, of committing a criminal offence at some point in their lives. Whether it's a relatively minor or more serious offence, it's clear that prison is not the answer.

But how best can these offenders be rehabilitated in a way that safeguards their particular vulnerabilities, and allows them to take charge of their own lives, yet addresses public safety concerns at the same time?

It's a challenge for all those involved in providing everyday support and care to learning disabled offenders, says Professor Tony Holland, of the Cambridge Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Group, at the University of Cambridge.

'Staff have to balance human rights and a public policy imperative for social inclusion and choice, with people who are vulnerable and perceived as dangerous, or who are engaged in problematic behaviour. Those things are incompatible and create real tensions,' he explains.

The result is often an 'all or nothing' approach, where those committing petty crime, such as shoplifting, repeatedly 'drift in and out of services,' while those whose

crimes are more serious, or who are perceived to be threat, are sent to distant secure units, often for protracted periods, at a cost to the taxpayer of around £200,000/year.

He hopes that his research, which is looking at how adult social care services can best support learning disabled offenders to live safely in the community, will help staff to manage those tensions more effectively, and cut the very high personal and financial costs attendant on repeat offending and out of area placement.

Multiple issues to address

'These are a group of people at significant social disadvantage,' he says. 'They come from chaotic family backgrounds, often have mental health problems and a history of alcohol misuse, so there are multiple issues to address,' he says.

Because their disabilities are mild, they live independently and don't access formal services, which makes them harder to reach and engage, but it doesn't stop them from being vulnerable to abuse and exploitation themselves, he adds.

His research is timely, because recent policy documents from both the Department of Health and the Ministry of

'I do want him to be as independent as possible and as close to not needing me as possible, but if you take your foot too much off the brake, he will press the accelerator, so you've got to be very careful, for both of us, that I don't do that because his behaviours outside of the house have been recorded as being the ones that would get him into trouble with the law...and [could] have him removed from his independent living.'

Care support worker

Justice have emphasised a shift away from prison regimes to work orientated and community based treatment and rehabilitation.

'Generally, social care services are aware that the needs of this group are not well served,' Professor Holland explains. 'But most of the research has focused on captive populations in hospitals and secure units, etc. What's absolutely the missing piece is a look at those in the community.'

Interviews with offenders

His research includes an in-depth analysis of 90 interviews carried out with learning disabled offenders living in the community, family members, and direct support staff, to get a handle on the issues they face and how they have managed them.

And 27 case studies, drawn from among the interviewees, plus a further 10 drawn from three advisory groups of service users and carers, practitioners, and service managers working with the project, will

be used to build a detailed picture of what does and doesn't work, and to inform a cost effectiveness analysis.

It's too early to draw firm conclusions, but initial indications are that it is the quality of personal relationships and level of social support that are critical to reducing the risk of offending and boosting inclusivity, and that it's not only the complexity of individual need, but the complexity of the support system itself which may work against successful rehabilitation, he suggests.

'Those who offended were aimless and had little structure to their lives. And even if they had a support worker they found it difficult to engage, and were disengaged from their family. Those who didn't offend had really involved and supportive families,' he says.

'The question is,' he asks: 'If you could recreate that close, caring and structured environment, could you reduce the risk of offending? And if you put the investment in at local level, could you prevent substantial costs later on?'

Project: Supporting people with learning disabilities, who have offended, to live safely in the community: negotiating policy and practice to promote social inclusion and rehabilitation

Lead: Professor Tony Holland (ajh1008@medschl.cam.ac.uk)

Institution: Cambridge Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Group, University of Cambridge

Completion: Spring 2014