

Helping prisoners with learning disabilities on the outside could cut crime, save money and improve lives

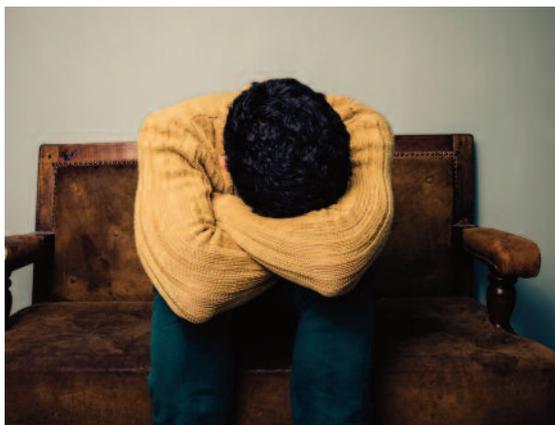
Ex-offenders with mild learning disabilities often fall through the cracks between support services. Our unique research details the costs and benefits of catching them before they fall further.

'Charlie, in his early twenties, has learning difficulties. That's led to communication problems and a hot temper. He couldn't make himself understood and would get into fights. He would be arrested and end up in jail.'

So explains Glynis Murphy, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Disability at the Tizard Centre, University of Kent. Charlie's is a familiar story of poor support from health and social care resulting in a problem being shifted, at high cost, into the criminal justice system – but not tackled properly there either.

Professor Murphy explains: 'Charlie was in care as a child and had no real family contact, so he had few informal supports. He lived alone in a flat without any help from social services and suffered from poor health. He would end up in police station. Even in court, he found it difficult to keep his temper. Once in prison, people could not understand him and he was considered a trouble maker whereas, actually, what he needed was some personal support.'

Yet, there was a more effective approach. 'Eventually Charlie was lucky and was diverted out of prison into a secure service where he received Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in the form of anger



management and a care manager who found him a supported living placement that suited him. He is now a happily settled young man, engaged in college and training as a mechanic in a garage. He is not re-offending.'

This is a common story, says Professor Murphy. 'We could help lots of people like Charlie and really make a difference. The overall cost could be minimal to the tax payer. It might even save money.'

Professor Murphy's team is analysing the economics of small interventions that could prevent people like Charlie falling through the cracks between services. The research, funded by the School for Social Care Research, is unique, she says, in

'I was homeless and an alcoholic, as I was mentally abused at home; they told me I wasn't wanted and that they didn't love me. I got no outside help. I needed more support before I got into that situation.'

Young offender, potentially with learning difficulties

calculating the economic costs and benefits. 'We have good data on what happens to people with learning difficulties who commit offences. We know their vulnerabilities and some of their pathways. We know some treatment programmes – such as CBT – help but we know little about which other interventions are effective.'

The study is interviewing 120 ex-offenders with mild learning difficulties, plus care managers and probation officers, as offenders leave prison and nine months later. The team logs help they receive and analyses how well these supports prevent re-offending and maintain psychological well-being.

The picture is likely to be mixed. Professor Murphy describes what can happen: 'Sometimes, a community learning disabilities team will say the person is not eligible for help. So they may be referred to a mental health team, which might refuse because they are not ill enough. Forensic services might refuse because the person is not dangerous enough or because they have a learning disability.'

Some then go on to commit another offence.

'They often do not understand the police caution,' says Professor Murphy. 'Often people with learning difficulties are not spotted because they have learned to hide a stigmatising disability. There is a very high rate of false confessions. In prison, they have trouble filling in so many forms – for meals, going to see a doctor, booking a visit. They become more depressed than most and are segregated more often.'

'We want to estimate the cost to health and social care of minimally filling the gap in services and to estimate the potential savings to the Criminal Justice System per year of reduced recidivism. We are also looking at morbidity – we expect to find that, when better cared for, people are less depressed and have a better quality of life.'

'We want to show the Government how to save money, while reducing crime, taking pressure off the Criminal Justice System and improving people's lives.'

Project: Costs and benefits of social care support for ex-offenders with learning disabilities

Lead: Professor Glynis Murphy (g.h.murphy@kent.ac.uk)

Institution: Tizard Centre, University of Kent

Completion: Spring 2014