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Article:

Evans, E.S., Beail, N., Rawlings, G.H. et al. (2026) Staff's perceptions, attitudes, awareness and understanding of people with intellectual disabilities in the criminal justice system. *Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities*. ISSN: 2044-1282

<https://doi.org/10.1108/amhid-01-2026-0003>

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Abstract

Purpose

People with intellectual disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (CJS) both as victims and perpetrators. This systematic review provides a thematic synthesis of qualitative data on criminal justice professional's perceptions, attitudes, awareness, and understanding of this group of individuals.

Design

A systematic search of four major electronic databases and one grey literature database revealed six qualitative studies and three mixed-methods studies to synthesise.

Findings

Results reflect the experiences of 530 professionals internationally. All studies were quality appraised. Four analytical themes emerged: (i) professionals perceived people with intellectual disabilities as vulnerable and who required adaptations; (ii) professionals recognised change is required considering the additional needs of this group (iii); uncertainty was expressed at how best to support individuals and in particular (iv) when considering issues around responsibility.

Originality

Unlike similar previous reviews in this area that have been more specific with their question or sample, we sought to explore research involving all professionals working across the CJS including police, lawyers, judges, magistrates, and probation officers.

Research Implications

Further training is required alongside research into barriers for criminal justice professionals to effectively implement learnings from training.

Introduction

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (CJS) compared to the general population (Holland, 2004; Murphy & Clare, 2009). In England and Wales, the estimated prevalence of individuals with ID in police custody has ranged from 0.5% - 9%, and 7.1% in prisons (Bradley, 2009). Moreover, research acknowledges that reliable information regarding individuals with ID is scarce; implying the number of individuals with ID in the CJS could be greater than reported due to a lack of available information, or nondisclosure of ID prior to custody for reasons including people being undiagnosed, not identifying with their diagnosis, or *passing* [i.e. intentionally concealing their ID] due to fear of being targeted (Williams *et al.*, 2015). Learning or developmental difficulties remaining unidentified increases the risk of neglecting health, welfare, educational and rehabilitation needs, leading to further disadvantage (Emerson & Hatton, 2008). It also poses challenges to recognising when reasonable adjustments would ensure treatment is consistent with policy and legislation. Without adjustments and communication support, people with ID in the CJS may be further disadvantaged (Department of Health, 2011).

Hayes (2007) has argued the CJS lacks protocols, has inefficient information exchange, and limited training for professionals when engaging with people with ID. These factors may result in individuals receiving inequitable treatment. Criminal justice professionals have reported they do not perceive it is their responsibility to work with these individuals, nor do they consider themselves adequately skilled to do so (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). Professionals lacking confidence or skills could lead to negative, distressing, or discriminative experiences for individuals with ID, and result in a lack of adaptations being made during criminal processes (Hyun *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, a synthesis of four articles from the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) found people with ID

often did not understand what was happening to them in the CJS. Individuals felt alone, did not know who to turn to for support, and were uncertain what to say or do (Hyun *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, people with ID have expressed negative experiences in the CJS, such as feeling vulnerable, not being given enough time, dealing with long wait times, not understanding the situation or processes, feeling they were being treated like they were ‘thick’ [meaning having a low level of intelligence], mistreated and helpless (Department of Health, 2011; Hyun *et al.*, 2014).

Tensions, challenges and lack of adequate skills, knowledge and procedures when working with vulnerable people in the CJS are long standing. In 2009, a widely publicised review of people with mental health difficulties and ID in the CJS in England and Wales led to significant reform across the CJS, particularly in police services (Bradley, 2009). The report suggested changes in how vulnerable people are supported in the CJS and more work needs to be done to adequately identify complex needs and effectively implement adjustments (Young *et al.*, 2013). Despite some of the changes brought about by the Bradley Report, there continues to be ‘hidden harms’ for people with ID in the CJS, including limited understanding of sentences, social exclusion, and repeated victimisation (Gormley, 2022).

This systematic review aimed to provide a thematic synthesis on the available qualitative literature of criminal justice professional’s perceptions, attitudes, awareness, and understanding of people with an ID. Exploring professional’s perspectives may contribute to understanding how practices and policies could be adapted to provide better support resulting in the improved treatment of people with ID in the CJS, and professionals feeling appropriately skilled and confident. The terms perceptions, attitudes, awareness, and understanding were chosen to develop a broad understanding of professionals’ perspectives

of ID, recognising these constructs often exist as precursors to decision making and action (Pickens, 2005).

Method

Search Strategy

This review was registered on PROSPERO (reference: CRD42023461499) and written in accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021).

Search terms ((learning disabilit* OR intellectual disabilit* OR developmental disabilit*) and (police OR law enforcement OR criminal justice) and (perception OR attitude OR awareness OR understanding)) were used to search for relevant articles across four electronic databases (CINAHL, PsychInfo, Scopus, Web of Science) and an additional ‘grey’ (unpublished) database (Proquest dissertations and theses) on 27 October 2023. The search was replicated on 29 December 2025.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed utilising the SPIDER tool (Cooke *et al.*, 2012) and included studies investigating criminal justice professional’s attitudes, perceptions, awareness and understanding of people with IDs where most participants (over 50%) were criminal justice professionals, with qualitative results (or mixed method results where qualitative results could be separated from quantitative), written or translated in English and accessible by the researcher. Only papers published from January 2000 were included to ensure the findings reflect relative current perspectives and practice. Forwards and backwards citation searches of eligible articles, and a grey (unpublished) literature database (OpenGrey) search were completed - neither yielded additional articles.

Quality Appraisal

Studies' quality was appraised using two tools dependent on the design of the study: the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research for qualitative studies (Long *et al.*, 2020) and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) for mixed-methods studies (Hong *et al.*, 2018). The lead researcher quality appraised all included articles, and a second researcher independently appraised 100% of the articles.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The four stages of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) were followed including [1] extracting relevant information, [2] related codes grouped together thematically to create descriptive themes, [3] analytical themes developed, and [4] articles re-read to ensure findings represented appropriately within themes. Quotes selected utilise [“”] for participants and [‘’] for authors. NVivo software (Lumivero, 2023) was used to support data extraction and analysis.

Reflexivity

This review was conducted with a continuous reflexive process including the examination of the assumptions, decisions, contexts, and power dynamics that existed within the research process, including production of a reflexive statement and log.

Results

Search Findings

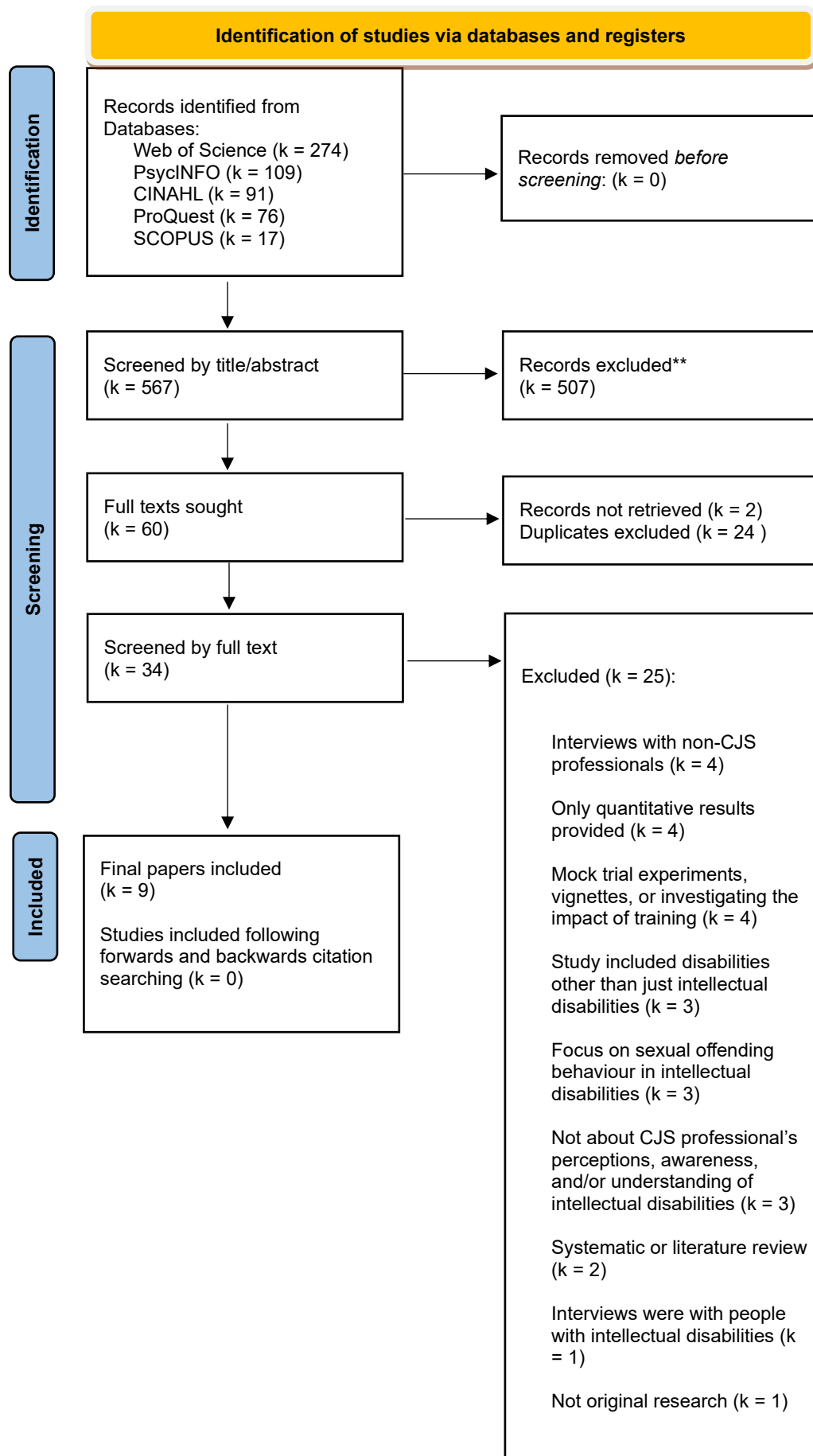
The search yielded 567 articles (Figure 1). Following titles and abstract screening, 34 articles were screened by full text; 9 articles remained. A second researcher screened 10% of records at the title/abstract stage where the inter-rater agreement was 94.74%. 50% of the full texts were also screened by a second researcher; inter-rater agreement was 100%.

Quality Appraisal

Inter-rater agreement between the two reviewers was 100% following discussion. All qualitative studies (k=7) stated the research aims, methodology and designed the research appropriately. It was clear in most studies that an appropriate recruitment strategy was utilised, and data addressed the research aims; one study did not describe their recruitment strategy nor consider ethical issues (Hellenbach, 2012). All studies clearly stated their findings except for Parsons & Sherwood (2016) where results and discussion were combined resulting in ambiguous findings. We appraised the findings valuable in all included studies. Only Cant & Standen (2007) mentioned reflexivity. Only three studies demonstrated sufficiently rigorous data analysis as evidenced by in-depth analysis process descriptions (Cant & Standen, 2007; Chadwick & Wesson, 2020; Gendle & Woodhams, 2005).

No mixed-method studies adhered to the quality of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Only Henshaw & Thomas (2012) addressed inconsistencies between results. Two studies rationalised a mixed-methods approach (Eadens *et al.*, 2016; Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Two studies integrated study components to address research questions (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012; Modell & Mak, 2008). No studies considered the researcher and participant relationship in data collection or analysis.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.



Study Characteristics

Five of the nine studies were based in the UK, two in Australia and two in the US. Seven utilised a qualitative approach and two were mixed methods. The studies reflected the experiences of 530 CJS professionals internationally. Table 1 displays a summary of the included studies.

Table 1
Study Characteristics

Author (Year)	Location	Methods	Participants
Cant & Standen (2007)	Nottinghamshire and Derby, England, United Kingdom (UK)	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews analysed using grounded theory.	28 professionals: Custody Sergeants ($n=7$), Appropriate Adults ($n=6$), Community Psychiatric/Forensic Liaison Nurses ($n=2$), Magistrates ($n=6$) and Judges ($n=7$).
Chadwick & Wesson (2020)	Northwest England, UK	Qualitative; Focus groups and interviews analysed using thematic network analysis.	46 study participants: Probation (court and community) ($n=12$), Police ($n=6$), Learning disability service professionals ($n=6$), Specialist mental health providers working in courts and custody ($n=5$), Magistrates ($n=5$), Legal advisors/justices clerk ($n=4$), Defence lawyers ($n=3$), Mental health service professionals ($n=3$), Diversion panel member ($n=2$), Prosecution lawyer ($n=1$), Prison worker ($n=1$), Other CJS ($n=1$).
Douglas & Cuskelly (2012)	Queensland, Australia	Qualitative; Focus groups. Qualitative analysis was unclear.	30 Police Officers

Eadens <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Central Florida, Southeastern United States of America (USA)	Mixed methods: A modified social distance questionnaire (Haring <i>et al.</i> , 1983) and a qualitative data collection instrument analysed using theme analysis from 22 surveys.	22 Police Officers
Gendle & Woodhams (2005)	Humberside, England, UK	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews analysed using content analysis	8 Police Sergeants
Hellenbach (2011)	Cheshire, Merseyside and Greater Manchester, England, UK	Qualitative; unstructured interviews analysed using grounded theory.	14 Custody Sergeants
Henshaw & Thomas (2012)	Melbourne, Australia	Mixed methods; Qualitative analysis utilised thematic analysis	229 Victoria Police members: Senior Constable ($n=62$), Leading Senior Constable ($n=62$), Constable ($n=55$), Sergeant ($n=34$), Senior Sergeant ($n=8$), Protective Services Officer ($n=3$) and Inspector ($n=2$).
Modell & Mak (2008)	Northern California, USA	Mixed methods; a survey. Analysed utilising content analysis.	124 Police Officers

Parsons & Sherwood (2016)	Hampshire, England, UK	Qualitative; individual interviews following a 4-week pilot of a Widgit system to communicate effectively with people with IDs. An inductive method creating meaningful categories that contained evidence of possible meanings behind responses linked to the role of a professional and a detained person was utilised in qualitative analysis.	26 participants: Custody Personnel including Sergeants and Inspectors ($n=14$), Appropriate Adults ($n=4$), Managers within the youth offending team ($n=2$), Defence Solicitors ($n=2$), People involved in the magistrate service ($n=2$), Family Court Barrister ($n=1$) and a Legal representative ($n=1$).
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Descriptive Themes

Five descriptive themes emerged:

Theme 1: Identifying people with an ID in a CJS setting

There appeared to be a consensus amongst most professionals that people with IDs could be identified through their communication, appearance, or behaviour (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012; Hellenbach, 2011; Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Professionals ascertained that you could identify people with an ID “by the look on their face,” or “how they look and how they walk” (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012; Gendle & Woodhams, 2005; Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Others described difficulties identifying ID based on appearance, reporting they “may be well dressed” and would not be able to identify such individuals “until you start talking to them” (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Participants viewed people with IDs as having unpredictable behaviour and differences to the general population that are difficult to conceal, such as them being “...adults with child-like behaviours” (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012).

Some professionals believed people with IDs would be detected in the CJS (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005), whereas others felt they may be overlooked and “swept aside” (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). Professionals self-identified they have a lack of knowledge and awareness of ID, particularly when understanding the differences between mental health difficulties and ID (Hellenbach, 2011). Participants described people with IDs as reluctant to identify themselves and felt they may not want to disclose their disability due to not wanting “to be labelled” due to “stigma” (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020).

Theme 2: Feelings towards people with IDs

Some participants felt guilty about how they treated people with IDs, particularly when they did not identify individuals earlier in the system (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Police reported feeling concerned and needing help earlier in the process to identify individuals' needs (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). Professionals reported lacking confidence working with individuals with IDs (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020;). Some expressed a feeling of responsibility wanting to ensure they “understand and take seriously [the person’s] issues” (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Others reported fear working with this group, particularly due to the perception presenting with unpredictable behaviours which make it “difficult to plan a response” (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Professionals felt it was important “that [people with ID] feel safe and heard” (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012).

Theme 3: Perceived need for adapting practices

Police officers felt that communication skills, patience, resources, referral systems, and training in recognising signs of disability were important to help them, indicating a need to adapt practices for people with ID (Modell & Mak, 2008). Professionals acknowledged people with ID need and **do** receive adaptations in the CJS (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). A perceived need for flexibility arose due to the CJS being described as “not [being] designed for people with ID” (Cant & Standen, 2007). Adaptations included placement and support during court sessions, tailored communication and additional **assistance and the perceived need for adaptations typically came from a sense that individuals may lack the ability to function in the CJS without them** (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020).

Individuals shared beliefs that people with IDs are “not bright” [meaning below average intelligence] (Hellenbach, 2011) and saw them as suggestible and vulnerable to false confessions, indicating susceptibility to pressure and coercion (Cant & Standen, 2007). One

individual spoke of putting people with IDs “in the children’s room” and reported they lack an ability to understand processes (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Participants reported people with IDs can be understood by using adapted communication methods, demonstrating a belief that adaptations are effective when interacting with people with IDs.

Theme four: Perceived need for improvement

A common view arose that the CJS needs to improve to support individuals with ID as they were described as ‘neglected’ and ‘underserved’ (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). Participants described individuals as not always having access to information that makes it easier to negotiate the CJS, and having support needs that the CJS ‘was not well equipped’ for (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). When discussing ID, ‘confusion was evident’ and “the police [were seen to] have little understanding of learning disabilities” as reported by a Learning Disability Health Professional (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). Police officers were interested in understanding the experiences of those with IDs, implying a current lack of understanding but motivation for developing understanding (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020).

Training and networking were seen to foster positive attitudes resulting in CJS improvement for service users (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). This suggests that training and networking could foster positive attitudes towards those with IDs, particularly in professionals who felt they could identify people with IDs based on appearance and communication (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2011).

Theme five: Appropriateness of the CJS for people with IDs

Professionals described uncertainty whether the CJS was appropriate for those with IDs including professionals feeling people with IDs “could be more easily influenced” (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). They reported people could not be expected “to go through the legal procedures if they... have a mental deficiency” and that “[prison] cells could never be

the right place” (Cant & Standen, 2007). Difficulties with the CJS adapting for individuals with IDs were attributed to the way the CJS is designed; “The systems are not set up to be accessible, people are blocked at every level.” (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020)

Participants spoke of people with ID being “far more likely to get a discharge” (Cant & Standen, 2007). In contrast, some professionals thought people should not be treated differently due to the immutability of the law, educational and/or therapeutic benefits of the CJS, insisting everyone has a right to due process (Cant & Standen, 2007).

Analytical themes

Theme one: Navigating responsibility: ethics and adaptations

Uncertainty was reflected in professional’s descriptions regarding whether people with IDs should be involved within the CJS. Participants spoke of prison cells not being the “right place” for an individual with ID (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). Other professionals questioned whether people with ID should be processed in the CJS (Cant & Standen, 2007) or sent home (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). However, there was also a sense of justice from many professionals, whereby everyone should be “treated equally under the law” and held accountable (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020).

Ethical considerations were evident concerning the fair treatment of people with ID and protection of their rights. Parsons & Sherwood (2016) identified criminal justice professionals in their study held attitudes consistent with a social model of disability. In this case, some professionals did not hold people responsible for their lack of understanding. Professionals found it difficult to explain and support people with IDs to understand the system.

Uncertainty also existed regarding who is responsible for people's actions and their understanding of procedures. There was a sense of responsibility from professionals; however, the uncertainty of who should be responsible for coordinating adaptations to procedure and practice emerged.

Theme two: People with IDs are vulnerable due to social pressures and systemic biases

An overarching theme that people with IDs are vulnerable arose. Professionals described people with IDs as vulnerable in society contributing to offending and due to existing in systems not designed for this group (Cant & Standen, 2007). Where participants did not explicitly refer to these individuals as being vulnerable, they alluded to it such as referring to this group as marginalised, overlooked and misunderstood (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). Professionals overestimated rates of victimisation (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005) – further suggesting a perception that these individuals are vulnerable. People were explicitly referred to as ‘...more vulnerable to pressure and coercion in interviews’ (Cant & Standen, 2007) and that sentences could differ due to having an ID. One participant stated, “I think they have to be treated as vulnerable and therefore they can’t be [given] the same level of punishment as their more intelligent compatriots.” (Cant & Standen, 2007). The data provided more subtle suggestions of vulnerability, including that they were suggestible, which could potentially obstruct justice (Cant & Standen, 2007).

Theme three: It is unclear what needs to change in the CJS

Uncertainty existed regarding when it is appropriate for people with IDs to be involved in the CJS, what needs to be adapted in the CJS, and how professionals can become better equipped to work with people with an ID. There was further uncertainty around identifying people with an ID. Participants had conflicting statements, such as viewing

individuals as a homogenous or heterogenous group (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Whilst some believed IDs were obvious stating “if those defending the accused are even halfway competent, they will have identified the learning disability by the time it’s reached Crown Court”, others found identification challenging, stating that it may not “strike one sitting in court that someone has a learning disability” (Cant & Standen, 2007). Discrepancies in criminal justice professionals finding identification of ID obvious versus others finding identification nuanced, suggests inconsistent understanding of ID. Participants were uncertain about when it would be appropriate to remove people with IDs from the CJS versus when they should be legally responsible for their actions.

Theme four: Drive for change

Problems for people with IDs within the CJS and **an urgency for how** to reconcile these arose. Systemic challenges and gaps in support were evident throughout studies, including challenges in identifying, understanding and supporting people in the CJS, **and there was an underlying motivation to change this.** Challenges identifying and supporting people with IDs in the CJS begins with their identification, which partly relies on professionals’ knowledge. Despite receiving training, professionals demonstrated confusion between ID and mental illness (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Training was identified as being crucial for improving professional’s awareness and knowledge (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). However, barriers to training arose, such as professional’s sense of a lack of responsibility when identifying and working with this group. Consistency in professional training across different institutions was suggested (Hellenbach, 2012).

People with IDs were referred to as underserved and a desire to include individuals in processes was prevalent (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). Findings explored unhelpful ways of professionals communicating with people with IDs alongside time pressures and challenges

within the CJ environment (Parsons & Sherwood, 2016). It was identified that the CJS should change to consider disabilities, however barriers including the way the CJS is designed prevent this (Cant & Standen, 2007).

Discussion

The first analytical theme reflected issues regarding responsibility around identification of, and adaptations made for people with IDs in the CJS. Historically in the UK, identification was individual professionals' responsibility despite a lack of training and education (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005), subsequently some professionals have diverted responsibility to the courts (Furlong, 2018), however the judiciary have also expressed concern that working with disability is outside their remit (Chadwick & Wesson, 2020). The issue of which agencies are responsible for identifying ID and providing adjustments remains unclear and complex across the Western world, though is vital in the push for equality in the CJS for people with ID and victims (Chester, 2018).

Another aspect of responsibility was whether participants believed people with ID should be processed through the CJS at all, due to issues of culpability and vulnerability. England and Wales have sought to divert people with ID from CJS and towards health and social services where possible (Bradley, 2009). Despite this model being relatively advanced however, there remain barriers to equal access to legal proceedings and rehabilitation for offenders with ID (Chester, 2018).

Studies reviewed highlight the tension between reducing crime while also protecting the rights of people with ID. England and Wales demonstrate one example of how roles and responsibilities across agencies can be made clearer and more structured in relation to vulnerable adults suspected of committing crimes, through formal reviews such as the

Bradley Report (Bradley, 2009). Introductions of such initiatives as Problem-Solving Courts which consider peoples' complex health and social needs (Ward, 2019) and criminal justice liaison and diversion services have improved how vulnerable adults are supported in CJS, though the effectiveness of these specifically for people with neurodevelopmental and intellectual disabilities is less clear and requires further exploration (Chaplin et al., 2024).

The second analytical theme resulted from perspectives that people with ID are vulnerable. Professionals referred to "feeling bad" for how they treated service users and perceived them to face challenges, suggesting underlying empathy (Douglas & Cuskelly, 2012). Previous interviews explored people with IDs' experiences of the CJS and confirmed their vulnerability and inability to understand the legal process and access measures to support their understanding (Talbot, 2009). Professionals may perceive people as vulnerable due to their perceptions of them shaped by perspectives including cultural and historical contexts. Their vulnerability could be compounded from societal perceptions and biases, whereby they are perceived as marginalised and overlooked.

People with IDs are at an increased risk of neglect and ill treatment in mental health settings and may be at a higher risk of maltreatment (Horner-Johnson & Drum, 2006). Whilst recognising their vulnerability can lead to helpful adaptations, it may hinder empowerment. Labelling individuals as vulnerable raises ethical concerns, potentially influencing researchers' and professionals' decisions and reinforcing inequality (Snipstad, 2022). Although trauma-informed practice (TIP) has grown in the CJS (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021), research rarely addresses it in relation to IDs (Lindsay & Taylor, 2018). Developing TIP could help adapt the CJS and future research should explore its application.

The third analytical theme reflected uncertainty supporting people with IDs in CJS. Research has documented an association between contact and awareness with reduced stigma

towards people with IDs (Scior *et al.*, 2013). Training and interactions may overcome barriers to changing unhelpful attitudes, awareness, perceptions and understanding (Modell & Cropp, 2007). Three significant barriers to training arose in one study: resistance to change, the warrior mindset, and social isolation (Modell & Cropp, 2007). If professionals feel their attitudes are justified, training may be rejected. Future research should explore how to overcome training barriers across criminal justice agencies.

Fostering positive attitudes towards people with IDs is crucial for impartiality and dignity within the CJS and training has previously reduced outdated, unhelpful attitudes whereby professionals considered ID to indicate having less value (Bailey *et al.*, 2001). In England and Wales, Lord Bradley proposed professionals within the CJS receive ID training to promote understanding and collaboration (Bradley, 2009). However, research supports that ID knowledge in the CJS remains low, and recommendations for professionals to receive awareness training continues (Durcan & Zwemstra, 2014).

The fourth analytical theme highlighted the perceived need for change. A lack of guidance regarding effective adaptations were described (Klinge *et al.*, 2010). Professionals suggested that identifying ID could lead to different CJS outcomes, such as opting for discharge over adaptation. Some believed the CJS is unsuitable for individuals with ID (Gendle & Woodhams, 2005). Further research is needed to understand this perspective and the barriers to implementing adaptations. A UK Prison Reform Trust report found inconsistent police responses to people with ID, with inconsistent enforcement and diversion decisions due to challenges in identifying needs (Henshaw & Thomas, 2012). Improving professionals' ability to recognise and respond to disability whilst addressing barriers to awareness and training could support meaningful change.

Overall, the current review's findings appear to have various potential implications for practice both in criminal justice processes and health and social care services. Standardised training programmes enhancing awareness and understanding of intellectual disabilities (and other forms of neurodivergence) could be helpful for criminal justice staff. Such standardised training could help to challenge myths, educate, and reduce the risk of people with ID not being identified and supported. The introduction of Criminal Justice Liaison and Diversion services in police custody and criminal courts in England and Wales appears to have been a significant step forward in improving timely assessment, liaison and diversion of people with ID (and other complex needs) in contact with CJS. However, optimal use of CJLD services is often dependent on police and courts identifying the need for a CJLD assessment and making the appropriate referral. Additionally, ongoing evaluations and reviews of these initiatives are crucial to ensure such services are appropriately resourced, function consistently across different geographical areas, and are able to make a meaningful difference.

Additionally, clarification regarding which agencies and professionals are responsible for identifying and providing adjustments for individuals with ID could support their identification and adaptations in the CJS. Furthermore, more detailed guidance around how criminal justice staff can effectively adapt to support people with ID should be developed. Of course, a balance will need to be struck between providing standardised guidance and leaving flexibility for individualised adjustments depending on individual needs.

This review has several limitations to acknowledge. Reflexivity is essential for qualitative rigour, however only one of nine studies mentioned its use. Reflexivity occurred throughout this review; however, the Western standpoint of the authors and studies reviewed alongside biases from the author's perspective present limitations in generalisability to other parts of the world. Study quality was assessed through CASP and MMAT tools which may introduce intra-rater variation whereby there were potentially inconsistencies by the same

rater at different times, though a second rater increased reliability. One researcher managed data extraction and coding, potentially limiting diverse perspectives and introducing potential bias to the interpretations of the findings. Two researchers managed screening and contributed to theme development, enhancing rigour. This review contains a UK study bias: five of the nine studies reviewed were from the UK. It is acknowledged that the aims of the current review were specific to criminal justice professionals' views of people with ID, however conducting and reviewing studies exploring the views of people with ID themselves is of course vitally important also. Although reviewing studies exploring the views of people with ID was beyond the scope of the current review, it is hoped that such primary studies and reviews will be conducted and will ultimately compliment such reviews as the current one.

Finally, our initial systematic search was conducted in 2023. When we repeated the search, we identified three additional relevant studies demonstrating the growing interest in this area. Due to the iterative nature of a thematic synthesis, we are unable to meaningfully incorporate these data post-hoc into the analysis. A review addressing similar aims to ours was also identified (Powell *et al.*, 2025); however, their focus was less broad, exploring beliefs/attitudes about individuals with ID in the CJS in the context of judgements about them.

In conclusion, this review highlights the varied perceptions professionals have about identifying and treating individuals with IDs within the CJS. A key issue is the inconsistency in identification, with some relying solely on observable traits including communication, appearance, and behaviour. Such perceptions may lead to overlooked individuals not receiving necessary adaptations. Concerns were raised about the suitability of the CJS for these individuals. Professionals expressed uncertainty about their role in identification and adaptation, emphasising a need for specialised training to identify and make adaptations for

people with IDs in the CJS. More work needs to be done to develop understanding, identification and support of people with ID in the CJS.

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