

Intro to me and podcast

In our research we call for the inclusion of offenders in the design and development of criminal justice and health and social wellbeing services.

People who are imprisoned are subject to punishment, but we also recognise that many offenders are considered to be vulnerable and many have on-going or resultant mental health problems.

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Our main contention is that including the, often hidden, voice of prisoners in service development is central to transforming the criminal justice, health and social care services working with them. This transformation will promote their rehabilitation and reintegration.

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The centrality of voice and inclusion

There is an on-going debate concerning the terminology used in referring to those who have contact with professional services but in this research, we decided to use the term ‘citizens’ because this acknowledges the value, worth and status of the person. It reminds us that prisoners are still human beings with rights.

The UK understands prisons as having three roles: 1) to protect the public, 2) for retribution and punishment, and 3) to rehabilitate (Norway’s core focus). In the UK, there has been a rise in populist, punitive approaches in criminal justice often supported by and fortifying populist perspectives amongst the general public.

So, we may ask why include the voice of these people who are unpopular, excluded and subject to punishment?

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Firstly, listening to others accords with our professional codes of ethics.

There are also pragmatic as well as moral justifications. Regardless of penal systems and their philosophies, whether concerned with punishment, welfare or rehabilitation, the economic costs of mental ill-health and the incarceration of offenders is significant.

Reducing future offending and reintegrating citizens into society in social and economically productive ways represents positive gains for communities and for the mental health of prisoners.

Thus, finding ways of amplifying their voice is fundamental to future service development that meets prisoners' needs for rehabilitation and the public's need for protection.

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We suggest vulnerability is not something possessed by people but is a social construction, something based on the individual's experiences and interpretations of the world and interactions with it.

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We can all be vulnerable, but some are more susceptible than others because of contexts and circumstances rather than because of their innate characteristics.

In the criminal justice services vulnerabilities are often represented by the prisoners' life histories, susceptibilities to mental health and addiction problems, lack of education, employment, accommodation and so on.

Prison can make people vulnerable by subjecting them to a punitive regime, exposing them to dangers, failing to take into account mental health and physical health problems - although they are in prison to protect others in society from their dangers.

Prison also exposes prison staff to similar vulnerabilities.

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Ways forward for including offenders in service redesign

Prisoner 'vulnerability' has profound implications for service design, delivery and evaluation. To ensure that services develop according to human needs, participation by professionals and imprisoned persons is central to service evaluation.

The impact of socially constructed vulnerabilities may be countered by the engagement of citizens which will reduce stigma and help in the rehabilitation and reintegration of the those having been in prison.

Models of service redesign seek to improve provision in three key ways:

1. enhancement of professional achievement and outcome;
2. reduction of service and social cost;
3. reduction of individual harm, susceptibility to personal wounding and enhancement of social position of those in contact with CJS.

We contend that a central plank in this is the inclusion of voice of those who are excluded and marginalised by their contact with CJS.

Ways of amplifying that voice are varied. If we can enter the world of the other through ethnography, we create the conditions in which different views arise. If we remain open to the possibilities created by different and sometimes conflicting perspectives, we may present novel understandings and ways of developing services that meet our objectives of rehabilitation, reintegration and reducing crime and costs.

This can be achieved through a range of creative approaches - making films, drawing and cartoons, writing poetry and stories as well as through conversation.

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Models to promote service development, could be adapted to better include the voice of the prisoner.

However, we must also add a caveat. These approaches only work if conditions allow the development of democratised approaches to service development.

If a top-down perspective drives service development, then all participants within the system remain excluded and change is rendered less possible.