

UQ Winter Research Project Description

Project title:	Safe from Harm: Supporting people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system
Hours of engagement & delivery mode	<p>The hours of engagement will commence from 29 June to 24 July 2026. Scholars will undertake 25 hours per week for 4 weeks. The work will be undertaken on St Lucia campus at the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work. Some tasks may be able to completed from the person’s home, with approval from the supervisor.</p>
Description:	<p>People with cognitive disabilities who come into contact with the criminal legal system are a significantly disadvantaged group. Compared to criminalised people without disabilities in Australia, people with cognitive disabilities are more likely to encounter the criminal legal system at a younger age. Many in this group also have histories of involvement in the child protection system. They have lower levels of education and employment, along with poorer physical and mental health. Relative to the general population, this group experiences higher rates of victimisation, including higher rates of violence and domestic violence related abuse.</p> <p>The social and structural disadvantages faced by people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system is even more profound for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, who endure the ongoing and compounding impacts of colonisation and racial discrimination. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples with cognitive disabilities experience early and frequent contact with the criminal legal system, have disproportionately higher rates of homelessness than non-Indigenous people, and are at greater risk of indefinite detention in the criminal legal system.</p> <p>Alternative processes, spaces and practices that premise safety and healing are needed for criminalised people with cognitive disabilities, those at risk of criminal legal system involvement and the person’s family and informal supports. There is an additional need for culturally safe and responsive practices for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with cognitive disabilities. Creating such practices requires an in-depth understanding of the harms that occur for these groups of people and their networks.</p> <p>The aim of this study is to develop a shared understanding of the harms that occur to people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system and their supporters; and to explore the possibilities for community-based practice with these groups to enhance individual and community safety and prevent criminal legal system involvement. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How is harm perceived and experienced by people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?</i> • <i>How is harm perceived and experienced by family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the implications of these harms for community-based practice with people with cognitive disabilities in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?</i> • <i>What are the implications of these harms for community-based practice with family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?</i>
Expected learning outcomes and deliverables:	<p>Scholars will be involved in thematic analysis of research interviews related to this project. This will involve reviewing and coding transcripts from the study involving people with cognitive disabilities, family members and practitioners using NVivo qualitative software.</p> <p>Scholars will gain skills in qualitative thematic analysis and develop skills in using research software – NVivo (latest version).</p>
Suitable for:	<p>The research team is looking for students who have a background in social work, criminology, sociology, law or related discipline. An interest in people with disability would be highly regarded, and the positions are open to people with lived experience of disability and/or the criminal legal system.</p> <p>The ideal candidate will have competent academic writing skills, be willing to learn, be able to work independently and meet project deadlines.</p>
Primary Supervisor:	Dr Kathy Ellem
Further info:	<p>k.ellem@uq.edu.au</p> <p>I wish to be contacted by students prior to them submitting an application.</p>

Appendix A

Safe from Harm: Anticarceral possibilities for people with cognitive disabilities

Scoping Review

1. Background

People with cognitive disabilities who come into contact with the criminal legal system as alleged offenders are a significantly disadvantaged group. Compared to criminalised people without disabilities in Australia, people with cognitive disabilities are more likely to encounter the criminal legal system at a younger age. Many in this group have histories of involvement in the child protection system. They have lower levels of education and employment, along with poorer physical and mental health. Relative to the general population, this group experiences higher rates of victimisation, including higher rates of violence and domestic violence related abuse.

The social and structural disadvantages faced by people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system is even more profound for people who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, who endure the lasting impacts of colonisation and racial discrimination. First Nations Australians with cognitive disabilities experience early and frequent contact with the criminal legal system, have disproportionately higher rates of homelessness than non-Indigenous people, and are at greater risk of indefinite detention in the criminal legal system.

2. Purpose

Alternative processes, spaces and practices that premise safety and healing are needed for criminalised people with cognitive disabilities, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with cognitive disabilities, those at risk of criminal legal system involvement and the person's family and informal supports. This requires an in-depth understanding of the harms that occur for this group of people and their networks. This scoping literature review will examine how harm is conceptualised within the literature in relation to:

- People with cognitive disabilities (including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with cognitive disabilities) in contact with the criminal legal system
- Family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system
- Mainstream or conventional criminological and sociological research on the criminal legal system¹
- Abolitionist/anti-carceral literature/research

The review will seek to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How is harm conceptualised in relation to people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?

¹ Mainstream research is defined here as literature about criminalised people with cognitive disabilities and other criminalised people that does not have a structural/critical lens or conceptualisation of harm

RQ2: How is harm conceptualised in relation to family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?

RQ3: What is known about community-based practice that promotes safety and facilitates healing from harm for people in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?

RQ4: What is known about community-based practice that promotes safety and facilitates healing from harm for people with cognitive disabilities in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?

Pre-project study

Research aims and questions

The aim of this study is to develop a shared understanding of the harms that occur to people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system and their supporters; and to explore the possibilities for community-based practice with these groups to enhance individual and community safety and prevent criminal legal system involvement. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How is harm perceived and experienced by people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?

RQ2: How is harm perceived and experienced by family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system?

RQ3: What are the implications of these harms for community-based practice with people with cognitive disabilities in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?

RQ4: What are the implications of these harms for community-based practice with family members and informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities in contact, or at risk of contact with the criminal legal system?

Methods

i. In-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews

The primary data collection method with people with cognitive disabilities and family members/informal supports will be semi-structured, in-depth narrative interviews. Two Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander practitioners will also be interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews individually for their specialised cultural expertise.

- Individual interviews with up to 5 people with cognitive disabilities who have been charged with a criminal offence and who have experienced interaction with the criminal legal system (who may request to have a support person and/or interpreter present).
- Individual interviews with up to 5 family members or informal supports of people with cognitive disabilities who have been in contact with the criminal legal system for alleged or actual criminal offences.
- Individual interviews with 2 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander practitioners who have experience supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system.

ii. Focus groups

In addition, two focus groups will be conducted with practitioners (n=10) who support people with cognitive disabilities in contact with the criminal legal system. These focus groups will be provided with a case study which synthesizes the experiences of harm both participants with cognitive disabilities and family member/informal support participants have discussed in the individual interviews.