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Sharpened Stigma and Double Exclusion: An Exploration of the Reintegration Journeys of Formerly Imprisoned Deaf People in England and Wales

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No previous study has comprehensively considered the post-prison reintegration experiences of Deaf people in England and Wales. This article explores these experiences, presenting data from Deaf former prisoners and practitioners supporting them. Findings show that many Deaf former prisoners experience multifaceted exclusion, manifesting in a lack of adjustment from probation and other services to meet their needs, and in isolation from the Deaf community due to their conviction. In addition, because of poor community provision, Deaf former prisoners are over-institutionalised in mental health settings. Although some good practice exists in supporting this population, this is sporadic. In presenting these findings, the article contributes to a deeper criminological understanding of the experiences of Deaf people who encounter the criminal justice system.

KEY WORDS: reintegration, probation, deaf, exclusion, prison, stigma

INTRODUCTION

There is a significant body of literature relating to desistance and reintegration (McNeill and Weaver 2010; Mourão *et al.* 2025; Nugent and Schinkel 2016; Weaver 2015), with existing literature showing that individuals often face many obstacles post-release from prison. Despite this, a gap remains about how culturally and linguistically Deaf[1] people negotiate these obstacles, and how an individual's Deafness impacts their post-prison reintegration journey. This article addresses this gap in existing academic knowledge in the context of England and Wales.

[1] Whilst deaf refers to the broader audiological condition of having less than full hearing; Deaf refers to a culturally distinct group of people (Baker and Padden 1978). In this article, we use Deaf to refer specifically to Deaf people. Where we use d/Deaf, we are referring to both deaf and Deaf people.

The Deaf community is a culturally distinct minority group comprised of people who, although not homogenous (Chapple 2019), commonly share Deaf-specific life experiences, a language [British Sign Language (BSL) in England and Wales], and cultural norms and values. They often place great value on their Deafness, perceiving it as fundamental to their identity (Bauman and Murray 2014). The Deaf community can represent a sort of 'family', being 'collectivist and close-knit', and providing a sense of belonging and acceptance (Cue 2024: 3). This contrasts sharply with their experiences of the hearing world, which are commonly characterised by isolation, confusion, and stigma (Snoddon 2014), and which tend to be underpinned by ableism. Ableism refers to the notion that 'nondisabled ways of doing things are normalized and shape places, institutional structures and expectations' (Evans *et al.* 2024: 6). This is tied to the medical model of disability, which positions disability as a deficit that needs to be 'fixed' by the individual (Macdonald and Peacock 2024). Although Deaf people may not perceive their Deafness to be a disability, the structural dominance of ableism means that it is usually positioned this way (Lundberg and Chen 2023).

Although the Deaf world can provide liberation from oppression and ableism, it does not exist autonomously, meaning that everyday life can be filled with challenges, difficulties and discrimination, particularly if Deaf people do not have access to important resources such as relevant communication support (for example BSL interpreters, lipspeakers or lipreaders) and relevant sound converting equipment (Ladd 2003; Snoddon 2014). Literature about Deaf people's experiences of the criminal justice system is limited, but most is known about the lives of Deaf people in prison, where their lives are characterised by disproportionate pain and isolation, and where policy, culture and practice are oriented around hearing people (Cobb 2016; Kelly 2017, 2018; Kelly-Corless 2022; McCulloch 2012; Zidenberg 2021).

This article provides new and significant contributions to the limited existing literature about Deaf people's experiences of, and beyond, the criminal justice system. It presents findings from an explorative qualitative study that looks at the lived realities of Deaf people in England and Wales after their release from custody. The article begins with an overview of key relevant literature, followed by a discussion of the methods used in the study. Key findings are then presented and discussed in relation to the following themes: the legacy of prison, experiences of probation, experiences of other state and community-based services, institutionalisation, exclusion from the Deaf community and existing good practice.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE: DEAF PEOPLE, CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND REINTEGRATION

With very few exceptions (for example Letico *et al.* 2022), there is little discussion of Deafness within criminology. Like Letico *et al.* (2022), we reject the notion that Deafness and disability are synonymous. As they note, 'With respect to criminology, the "disability" label creates a hindrance to criminological investigations of Deaf … people as a unique and independent demographic' (Letico *et al.* 2022: 446). Similarly, Kelly-Corless (2022) highlights the limitations of disability studies for Deaf people in the context of prisons, as Deaf people's culturally distinct experiences are not sufficiently accounted for within disability studies. Having said this, criminology's treatment of disability is relevant to consider, given that this is where d/Deafness is often positioned in literature and criminal justice policy and practice (Kelly-Corless 2022). Scholars have problematised criminology's privileging of the perspectives of white, male, heterosexual, Global North and able-bodied people, which has the effect of situating populations—including disabled people—as 'other' (Stockdale and Sweeney 2022). Thorneycroft and Asquith (2021: 188) have argued that the criminal justice system and criminology are 'institutionally and theoretically ableist', introducing the concept of 'crip criminology' which involves 'challenging

practices and expectations that the abled body is the normal body' (Thorneycroft and Asquith 2021: 191). We believe that exploring the experiences of Deaf people in the criminal justice system similarly challenges the dominance of ableism within criminology.

There is a lack of literature about Deaf people's post-prison engagement with the Deaf community. However, existing literature does provide relevant broader insights about exclusion and hierarchy within the Deaf community. An individual's position within the Deaf community has been shown to depend on a variety of complex factors, including whether they were brought up by Deaf or hearing parents, their communication preference and whether they attended a Deaf or mainstream school (Wright 2020). Fisher *et al.* (2018: 154) reflect on the 'inner community dynamics' within deaf[2] communities, and the impact that social hierarchies have on these dynamics. They focus on topics that they describe as taboo, and reflect that 'sticky' (Fisher *et al.* 2018): 140 subjects within deaf communities (in this context, crime) tend to be under-researched or acknowledged. They state: 'Deaf communities typically present themselves to outsiders (hearing) as inclusive communities that welcome all deaf—a united front. That means that discussing hierarchy within these communities is walking in a minefield' (Fisher *et al.* 2018: 151).

However, literature relating to hierarchies and social dynamics is growing. For example, in their study about the lives of the deaf[3] gay British men, Beese and Tasker (2022) suggest that sexuality can impact someone's position within the Deaf community, with participants raising concerns about being doubly stigmatised because of the intersection of the multiple marginalised positions. Findings included negative discussions around the deaf gay community, with one participant stating that they are 'always in groups, backstabbing each other. Bitching about each other' (Beese and Tasker 2022: 2428). This stigmatisation of difference raises questions about the impact that having a conviction would have on someone's position within the Deaf community, an issue we explore later in this article. While there is a lack of research on this issue, Lundeberg and Breivik (2017) highlight a case in Sweden where violent crimes (including assaulting, robbing and abusing hearing people) were carried out by a group of Deaf youths in the late 1990s. Concerned that these actions would negatively impact the reputation of the Deaf community, the response from the Deaf community comprised of 'disapproval and silence' (Lundeberg and Breivik 2017: 46).

Despite the lack of literature regarding the reintegration of Deaf former prisoners, there is a large body of research relating to the reintegration of people released from prison and related ideas about desistance. This literature highlights an array of complex obstacles that individuals face upon release from prison, including the negotiation of the stigma caused by their imprisonment and conviction (Denver *et al.* 2017), difficulties securing employment (Ministry of Justice 2013), and a lack of permanent residence (Low *et al.* 2023). These difficulties have been framed by some scholars as 'pains', with Nugent and Schinkel (2016) citing social isolation, a lack of hope, and failure to achieve one's own goals as pains of desistance. Similarly, Durnescu (2019) suggests several pains of re-entry, including pains of adjusting to the post-prison environment, isolation and stigma, fighting bureaucracy and poor health and poverty. He highlights that 'these pains of release were interrelated: one pain leads to another. … Moreover, these pains seem to create real exclusion traps or vicious circles' (Durnescu 2019: 1493). Relatedly, in their systematic review of the literature relating to reintegration, Mourão *et al.* (2025: 1174) note that 'Reintegration is a complex and multifaceted process influenced by factors at different levels'. They adapt Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory to develop a model in which the factors relating to reintegration are placed into four broad categories: individual factors (such as physical and mental health, drug and alcohol abstinence and a desire for personal change), interpersonal factors (family relationships, social support and community involvement), institutional factors

[2] The authors of the original publication chose not to capitalise deaf.
[3] The authors of the original publication chose not to capitalise deaf.

(access to support services), community factors (stable employment, stable housing, financial stability). Their review highlights that many previous studies point to protective factors or risk factors relating to the various levels of reintegration, with protective factors, such as stable employment, in the case of a community factor, making it more likely that a person could successfully reintegrate post-release. Clearly, then, there are potential difficulties for all former prisoners upon release. However, as we will argue, while some of those experienced by Deaf former prisoners relate to these issues, some are experienced differently because of the position of Deaf people with convictions—both within Deaf communities and within wider society.

Although there is a lack of literature about Deaf people's reintegration experiences, evidence from multiple nations shows that even in everyday life, Deaf people experience many of the issues discussed as exclusionary factors within the reintegration literature, such as struggling to access and engage with health care provision, mental health support, the job market or education and that community support and services are lacking for this group (Healthwatch 2022; O'Connell 2023). These issues are exacerbated for Deaf people who hold multiple marginalised positions, as they experience additional layers of structural oppression (Chapple 2019). This exists in a context of 'hearing privilege' (Kohli 2016), where Deaf people are discriminated against because societies are oriented around hearing norms, rules and sound and because hearing people are 'unaware of their entitlement' (Cue 2024: 9). Hearing communities tend not to be aware of the existence of the Deaf community, instead viewing deafness through the lens of the medical model of disability. The power disparity that exists between the hearing and Deaf worlds means that these views are enforced on Deaf people in areas of their lives involving hearing people and hearing institutions, even though they contrast with the identities of many Deaf people (Cue 2024).

This power disparity can have profound consequences in criminal justice settings. For example, within prisons in England, Deaf people experience severe pain, isolation and exclusion (Cobb 2016; Kelly 2017, 2018; McCulloch 2012) and are further disempowered by their 'prisoner' status (Kelly-Corless 2022). This is compounded by 'institutional thoughtlessness' (Crawley 2005: 350) from the Prison Service. The concept of institutional thoughtlessness, originally coined by Crawley (2005) refers to the ways in which prisons inadvertently cause harm and suffering to elderly prisoners, through a lack of recognition for their needs. However, the concept has been applied to understand the ways in which prisons inadvertently cause suffering to Deaf people in prison, through a lack of regard for their needs (Kelly-Corless and McCarthy 2025). This institutional thoughtlessness is reinforced through a lack of meaningful Deaf awareness for staff, a lack of inclination, accountability and severely limited resource allocation to support Deaf provision (Kelly-Corless 2022).

Furthermore, O'Rourke and Reed (2007) and Smith (2010) demonstrate that a lack of suitable treatment programmes in prison excludes d/Deaf people from developing pertinent knowledge and skills, increasing the likelihood of re-offending on release. Findings from Kelly (2017, 2018) and Kelly-Corless (2022) also highlight numerous instances in English prisons where Deaf prisoners were unable to meet the conditions of their sentence plans because appropriate programme provision was unavailable. Zidenberg *et al.* (2021) report similar issues in an United States context, highlighting a lack of adequate support for imprisoned d/Deaf people in accessing substance abuse programmes which put them at a disadvantage post-release. Other obstacles to reintegration have been reported by Alston (1998), who explored issues with the parole and probation systems in the United States, and highlighted problems relating to communication difficulties for Deaf prisoners, which led to therapeutic and emotional issues, including frustration, isolation and fear. Furthermore, in a United States context, a lack of communication support led to one Deaf person unintentionally breaching their probation conditions because they did not understand the purpose of their electronic monitoring device (Vernon and Miller 2005). This individual was re-imprisoned for the breach, an experience that the authors emphasise is commonplace for Deaf individuals.

Although community-based mental health services for Deaf people are lacking in England and Wales, secure inpatient mental health provision is much better. For example, there are multiple inpatient Deaf units located around England that are oriented around Deaf culture and BSL, where specialist interventions and therapy are delivered based upon the unique needs of Deaf people (Kaler 2022). While this is positive in terms of mental health support, it must also be understood in the context of a history of mental health institutionalisation being used to address a lack of appropriate support in other settings within and beyond the United Kingdom (Crowe and Drew 2021). This is also the case for some disabled populations, who have been over-institutionalised, instead of being supported within the community, something which Ben-Moshe (2011) argues should be considered when thinking about imprisonment rates in the United States. She states that what is understood as 'incarceration' in this context needs expanding to include 'jails, detention centres, institutions for the intellectually disabled, treatment centres, and psychiatric hospitals' (p. 387), given that this population is disproportionately likely to be incarcerated in various types of institutions. As such, while good secure mental health support for Deaf people could be viewed to be positive, it should be understood within its wider context, as an alternative to adequate support in both the community and prisons.

As this review shows, although it is possible to glean some insights about the experiences of Deaf people in related contexts and about reintegration more generally, little is known about the post-release experiences of Deaf former prisoners. We aim to address this gap by exploring the experiences of Deaf people post-prison.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The research was qualitative in nature, with data collected through 18 semi-structured interviews in an 18-month period between 2023 and 2025: five with Deaf people who had been in prison, one with a deaf person who had been in prison and who had knowledge of the Deaf community, and 12 with practitioners working with this population. The inclusion of practitioners supplemented the insights from Deaf former prisoners. Expertise varied across the practitioner group, with the roles of all practitioners listed in Table 1. The practitioner sample consisted of 5 d/Deaf people and 7 hearing people.

We utilised opportunity sampling, a sampling method appropriate for hard-to-recruit participants (Brady 2006). We attempted a combination of recruitment tools to recruit Deaf former prisoners, though many generated no responses. Initially, we contacted relevant organisations to ascertain whether they had contact or knowledge about Deaf people with convictions, and whether they had potential 'leads' for interviews. 120 organisations were contacted via email in November 2022, including 7 national and local Deaf organisations and charities, 63 Deaf clubs and groups, and other service providers that explicitly focus on Deafness or on supporting former prisoners (without a focus on Deafness). The organisations were asked whether they would be interested in talking to us as part of the research, whether the service was involved in supporting Deaf former prisoners and if they knew of other services providing support for Deaf former prisoners and ex-offenders. A total of 30 responses were received, which were checked for whether they had contact with Deaf people with convictions and whether there were any potential participants to interview. This generated two practitioner participants, and led to a Deaf former prisoner participant. Aside from those generated by our initial contact with services, all participants were recruited via service providers or existing research connections with potential participants.

Two interview schedules were used: one for former prisoners and one for practitioners. Interviews with former prisoners asked people about their relationship with the Deaf community (prior to and after prison), their experiences since leaving prison, whether being Deaf mattered within their post-prison experiences, their experiences of support services since leaving prison,

Table 1. Pseudonyms and roles of participants

Alan	Deaf former prisoner
Austin	Deaf former prisoner
Charles	Deaf former prisoner
Graham	Deaf former prisoner
Liam	Deaf former prisoner
Ceri	deaf former prisoner
Adam	Practitioner: Service provider in forensic support service
Adrian	Practitioner: Forensic Psychiatrist
Dean	Practitioner: Facilitator of group for Deaf people with convictions
Jack	Practitioner: Practitioner in secure mental health hospital
Leona	Practitioner: Facilitator of group for Deaf people with convictions
Lisa	Practitioner: Communication professional
Mark	Practitioner: Deaf advocate
Ruby	Practitioner: Practitioner in residential service for Deaf people
Sally	Practitioner: Clinical Psychologist
Sarah	Practitioner: Service provider working at a Deaf charity
Sharuthi	Practitioner: Practitioner in residential service for Deaf people
Tracey	Practitioner: Practitioner in residential service for Deaf people

and the support they would like to see given to Deaf former prisoners. Although it was not an explicit topic within the interview schedule, many of the interviews also included discussion about participants' experiences of prisons. Interviews with practitioners addressed their experiences of working with Deaf former prisoners; their knowledge about the barriers faced and available support; and their views on what factors are important for successful reintegration post-release. Interviews took place face-to-face or online via Microsoft Teams, depending on the preference of the participant, and interview times ranged from 20 minutes to two hours. Where relevant, participants were offered use of an appropriately qualified BSL interpreter or other relevant communication professional.

Seventeen interviews were recorded using either a Dictaphone or the recording tool on Microsoft Teams, and one interview was recorded with a visual recording device. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. In cases where an interpreter was used, this was transcribed verbatim from the interpretation. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. We followed the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; developing themes; review of the themes; naming themes; and producing the article. We used a broadly inductive approach. While some of the resultant themes corresponded with anecdotal accounts we have encountered previously, others were not anticipated and offered unexpected findings.

Confidentiality, anonymity and consent were all important ethical considerations, and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Central Lancashire.[4] Consent forms and information sheets were developed, with BSL copies also made available, to ensure they were accessible for Deaf participants. We also asked for the support of each participant's preferred interpreter in ensuring that information was clear to participants. We checked with participants before the interview whether they had any questions or concerns, or whether anything was unclear. To

[4] Now named University of Lancashire.

minimise the risk of participants being identified, we have provided pseudonyms for each participant, as well as removing other obvious identifiable characteristics. While we feel that providing demographic data on each participant risks compromising their anonymity, in the case of the six former prisoners, they were all White British, mostly male (one female), and their ages ranged between 20s and 70s. Four were located in the North-West of England, one located in the South of England, and one in Wales. We have provided the pseudonyms and roles of each participant in the table:

THE EXPERIENCES OF DEAF PEOPLE AFTER RELEASE FROM PRISON

The findings from the research show that Deaf people face exclusion and stigma following their release from prison, which in turn impacts their attempts to reintegrate into the Deaf community and wider society. these findings are split into the following themes: the legacy of prison, experiences of probation, experiences of other state and community-based support services, institutionalisation, exclusion from the Deaf community, and existing good practice.

The legacy of prison

Multiple participants gave significant attention to discussing issues that they faced in prison, and the ways in which these shaped their post-prison experiences. For example, Liam, a former prisoner, reflected:

> I didn't know what was going on and I felt so frightened and sad … I was just literally left to rot. I felt completely isolated—I was all by myself. I had no support. I couldn't speak to anyone. I felt really upset. There was a room that I found in prison that I could go to. It was like a TV room. But they didn't have any captions on the TV, so I couldn't hear anything, I couldn't see anything, and then my hearing aid broke and they wouldn't pay for my hearing aid to be fixed. So, I was literally just sitting there knowing that people were talking about me and I had no distractions … It's really, really not safe for Deaf people in prison.

These issues were discussed at length by practitioners as well, with Adrian who works in a secure mental health setting for Deaf people, stating:

> We had one lad who spent about a year on remand in prison while psychotic because of delays in getting him a bed. And it took us at least a year just to get him through the sort of after-effects of that and how psychotic it had made him with the isolation and the lack of communication and everything else.

Lisa (practitioner) drew attention to issues relating to a lack of interpreters in prison, saying:

> Most stuff in prison isn't accessible to Deaf people, is it? I think they really struggle to get interpreters [and] even if they get interpreters … It's not designed from that [a Deaf] perspective—You can't just parachute an interpreter into a group for, I don't know, relapse prevention to deal with substance misuse and expect the Deaf person to understand because conceptually they don't. They're going to have been housed in prison but I think mostly they haven't been rehabilitated in prison … So, there's been a few court cases where Deaf people have had solicitors to do with accessibility in prison and as far as I know they've all settled out of court.

One purported purpose of prison is rehabilitation, but Deaf people often accumulate further trauma there due to the isolation they face—both in terms of accessing the formal parts of the

prison regime and in terms of social isolation. This then complicates their post-release reintegration, as they are both traumatised and ill-prepared for release into the community. These findings support existing literature which highlights the disproportionate levels of pain and deprivation experienced by Deaf people in prison (Cobb 2016; Kelly 2017, 2018; Kelly-Corless 2022; McCulloch 2012; Zidenberg 2021).

Experiences of probation

It was unanimously perceived that the Probation Service does not meet the needs of Deaf people on release from prison. The data showed several issues in Deaf people's experiences of accessing and engaging with probation. Sally (practitioner) highlighted the ways in which the purpose of probation itself was often not clear to Deaf people, and that the specific requirements of licence conditions were often not understood:

> I think for a lot of them fundamentally don't get what probation is… I often tell a story of years ago, there was a young Deaf guy in Manchester that I did an assessment for, and he was a bit of a one-man crime wave. He had an injunction taken out against him, against his girlfriend who had a baby… I gave him the bit of paper. I was like, well what's that then? And he went injury and that's because he saw the word injunction and that was the closest he could get. Had not a clue what it was for.

Numerous participants cited a lack of appropriate explanation of licence conditions to Deaf former prisoners, which led to an increased risk of their breach, sometimes unknowingly. It was also noted that licence conditions can create difficulties for Deaf people in circumstances where an individual's licence conditions include restrictions on their movement, given that Deaf clubs/centres are often geographically clustered and sometimes located a significant distance from their home. Sarah (practitioner) spoke about the experience of an individual she had contact with:

> The Deaf person's like… 'But there's no Deaf clubs in this area. The Deaf club's over there'. That means a Deaf person is becoming isolated in this area, no support. Whereas if it's a hearing person, they could go to the local pub, they could access the local community. Deaf people have to travel.

All participants reported that a lack of Deaf awareness across the Probation Service was a fundamental issue. The data showed that this lack of Deaf awareness leads to a sense amongst Deaf people that their needs are not understood or respected by their probation officer. This is complicated further by the fact that Deaf people often have long histories of being told by hearing people of their need to fit into a hearing world (Ladd 2003), leading to distrust and a reluctance to engage.

This lack of knowledge and understanding can also lead to risky and inappropriate situations arising, as Sally (practitioner) discussed:

> There are loads of Deaf kids who are not ever so well supervised knocking around at the Deaf club, with parents who are possibly a little bit naïve… So clinically when you're thinking about risk, you're thinking about not just the person but the environment that they're inhabiting. Now if you've got a probation officer who's never, who has no idea about the Deaf club and thinks it's all a lovely, nice place… All rosy and people are so welcoming then, you know, there are going to be vulnerable potential victims in the Deaf club, aren't there?

A lack of understanding of the needs of Deaf people also meant that in many cases, inappropriate communication support was provided, and in some cases, no communication support was provided at all. Liam (former prisoner) spoke of being released from prison and arriving at his

first meeting with his probation officer the day after, only for there to be no BSL interpreter present. He cited eight occasions where the probation service had not provided an interpreter during meetings and described the situation as 'a bit of a lost cause really'. Similarly, Dean, the facilitator of a support group for Deaf people with convictions, said:

> What really needs to change is that the agencies, especially public funded agencies like probation, health service, housing, need to be more Deaf aware, especially probation. When I found out that you had someone who had no English whose communication was wholly in BSL, not great BSL at that, and they were having meetings with probation worker with no interpreter. What's the point?

The implications of the issues considered throughout this section are discussed below by Austin, a former prisoner:

> The probation officer wanted me to go to a rehabilitation workshop for offenders. And you know, so it was a rehab that it was part of the conditions that you have to attend the group. So I went to the group, went to the meeting and there was a couple of probation officers who were involved in sorting it all out and everyone was brought in. And there was maybe 6–7 men in the room at this meeting. They were all hearing, everybody was hearing. But I still wasn't provided with an interpreter. So, I was expected to try and lip read everybody who was speaking. Didn't have a clue what they were saying, and I was desperately trying to sort of work out from people's facial expressions, whether they were nodding or disagreeing. And it was just impossible.

Negotiating the bureaucracy of the state is experienced as a pain of re-entry by many prisoners (Durnescu 2019). However, for Deaf people, it was clear that the standard of support they received from probation was far below that which would be considered acceptable for a hearing person, and that this reinforced a sense of hearing privilege (Kohli 2016). This poor support clearly led to frustration with probation, consistent with the findings of Alston (1998). Furthermore, there were issues in understanding the role and purpose of probation, as well as the requirements placed on the person themselves, risking unintentional breaches of licences, corroborating the findings of Vernon and Miller (2005).

Experiences of other state and community-based services

Like many other released prisoners, Deaf people are likely to need to engage with numerous other state services upon release, including mental health services, housing services and social services. However, participants highlighted that these services often relied on verbal and written English and did not adapt easily to BSL. Services often utilised phone calls or drop-in services, creating a barrier to Deaf people accessing services on an ad-hoc basis. Sharuthi (practitioner) said:

> It's one of my bugbears in appointments and with mental health teams and stuff like that. If you need anything give us a call. Well, no, they can't just give you a call. They have to set it up themselves to have access to video interpreters to make a phone call and then they're not speaking to you, they're speaking to an interpreter who's speaking to you. But to actually get in and see them and to be able to book an interpreter for an appointment there's then a delay. Someone could be in the middle of a mental health crisis and they say, I need to book in to see you but I need an interpreter, you've got to give at least a week's notice to be able to get an interpreter.

Even where services are adapted for Deaf people, this can take a long time to organise. These delays were neatly summarised by Ruby (practitioner), who stated that in this context and in society more broadly, 'Deaf people always have to wait' and Sharuthi (practitioner) who remarked,

'I'm privileged just by being hearing because I'm in a hearing world. It's so easy for me to access all these different things'.

Findings relating to the availability of community-based groups and local services (such as local charities) mirrored these experiences. Participants highlighted that relevant services and groups are often set up with hearing people in mind, and that communication barriers make them inaccessible for Deaf people. The following quote from Ruby (practitioner) provides an example of such a case:

> A person who goes and lives in the community, maybe they've got a problem with alcohol. They decide maybe they want to go to an AA group, you know, because they realise that they don't want to offend again… But unfortunately, they're all drop-in sessions, well a Deaf person can't just drop in because how are they going to communicate?

Adam (practitioner) noted that, 'All of the mechanisms we give to people to re-establish themselves back in the community are all of a disadvantage to Deaf people'. This can create a sense of futility and hopelessness (Nugent and Schinkel 2016), with Lisa (practitioner) stating:

> I think the fear of going back to prison isn't their biggest fear. Their biggest fear is repeating the behaviour again…. What is there to help me? … How can I change me? I want to grow as a person. I want to be an effective member of society. I want to be able to have a relationship and a life and maybe even a job.

Importantly, in all instances where a Deaf person did report positive engagement with community services, there was a clear feeling that they had had to make this happen, as shown by Liam (former prisoner), who said 'If I hadn't have done anything myself, nobody does anything for me, not even probation'.

Thus, as with probation, within many state and community-based services, there is a lack of Deaf awareness—reflecting the wider sense of Deaf people having to navigate a hearing-dominant world, in which Deaf people are at a disadvantage. This in turn reflects notions of ableism (Cue 2024; Kohli 2016; Thorneycroft and Asquith 2021), as well as the notion that many services are institutionally thoughtless (Crawley 2005; Kelly-Corless 2022; Kelly-Corless and McCarthy 2025).

Institutionalisation of Deaf people

Data showed that provision of secure mental health provision far surpasses that provided in prisons or in the community, with Sally (practitioner) stating, 'What's happened in mental health needs to happen in prisons'. Six practitioners discussed the implications of this discrepancy on decisions made about the treatment of Deaf people in prisons and in the community. Participants discussed the temptation to refer people to inpatient psychiatric settings because they know a Deaf person will be better supported there. Adam (practitioner) reflected:

> Specialist departments of the NHS don't have enough therapists … which is in part, why diversion often is quite attractive because you usually get a better level of treatment [and] therapy in hospital than you can in the community… We've had circumstances before where we've advocated for people going into hospital rather than staying out in the community, simply because they'll get what they need in hospital.

While this may be a preferred option in terms of the quality of the treatment received, it leads to people being hospitalised unnecessarily and indefinitely because there is nowhere appropriate

for them to be released to. Adrian (practitioner) noted, 'It's just really hard to discharge people to the community because of a lack of community options' and Sharuthi (practitioner) lamented that people get stuck because 'they don't need to be on a section anymore and there's nowhere for them to go'.

A common route back to the community for Deaf people post-prison is to be diverted into secure psychiatric settings and then released from there. Two participants in this research were Deaf mental health specialists with the power to make diversion decisions (Adrian and Sally), and both discussed the decision-making process in these contexts. Sally reflected:

> If I'm brutally honest I think those of us doing the assessments would have a much lower threshold for getting them over into mental health than you would for a hearing person. I mean prisons are full of hearing people aren't they who would meet the criteria for personality disorder or PTSD or learning disability or whatever, and they stay in prison. I think if you go and see a Deaf person, if you possibly can, you shoehorn them out into mental health … It's pragmatic.

Adrian further contextualised these decisions:

> You're balancing what the outcome for them of being in prison is going to be versus the outcome of being in hospital. I think the reason why the bar for going into hospital ends up being so much lower is because prison is so psycho-toxic for Deaf people, so you're not comparing the same thing. For a hearing person in prison they've got a peer group, they've got structured things to do. They've got access to a mental health team who know what's going on. They've got medication at times. They've got officers keeping an eye on them. They've got an offender manager who's talking to them and doing some therapeutic work. When you've got a Deaf prisoner you've got almost none of that. They're incredibly isolated… They're usually barred from the vast majority of the structured activities, the meaningful timetable, anything like that… I don't think it's poor little Deaf people, let's take them into hospital where they'll have a nicer life. Certainly, when I'm doing it, it's [that] you can absolutely see that the end outcome is going to be that this person is going to come out of prison deeply traumatised and at best no less risky than they were when they went in, and at worst a lot more risky.

Like hearing people, Deaf people are often released from secure psychiatric settings to some form of semi-institutional residential setting. This research included three staff members (Tracey, Ruby and Sharuthi) and one service user (Alan) from a supported living residential setting for Deaf people. Tracey discussed the historical institutionalisation of Deaf people, stating that this continues to shape provision and state intervention now:

> Because that was how at the time society dealt with people … who were deaf and had mental health problems, they did become institutionalised, and then throughout that we've had lots of changes in legislation and approaches, but people have been so institutionalised right from the very early stages when they were young adults… So now they are beyond that point where you could be rehabilitated and then you get them into community.

The experience of over-institutionalisation is not a new one for Deaf people, with a long history of institutionalisation being used to mitigate a lack of appropriate support in other settings (Crowe and Drew 2021). Indeed, it is precisely a lack of equivalent support for Deaf people in both prisons and the community that leads Deaf people to be placed into (and remain) in institutions—a further demonstration of the ways in which hearing people are privileged (and Deaf people disadvantaged) (Cue 2024).

Exclusion from the Deaf community

Findings from all interviews showed that there can be a huge amount of stigma attached to the 'offender' label within the Deaf community—potentially even more so than for hearing former prisoners within hearing cultures. This is consistent with existing international literature about the disapproval from the Deaf community to crime (Lundeberg and Breivik 2017), as well as the wider literature on reintegration (Mourão *et al.* 2025) and the pains of re-entry and desistance (Durnescu 2019; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). However, the findings presented here offer further insights into this stigma and its consequences for this population. For Deaf people, the stigma and shame of this label were often keenly felt both immediately after release from prison and in the longer term. Graham (former prisoner) said, 'They still think I'm bad and it's like they don't realise I'm a good man, you know. They've got long memories'. One of the reasons cited for this prolonged stigma was the small and tight-knit nature of the Deaf community, with the perception that everyone knows everyone else's business. Adrian (practitioner) reflected:

> The Deaf community is so small and a lot of people know each other. Certainly, if you were in the same town it's very, very likely that if an offence has been committed by a Deaf person, particularly against another Deaf person, that every Deaf person in that town is going to be a friend or acquaintance of one or both of the victim and the offender and that's hard to get past.

Additionally, Tracey (practitioner) highlighted that the visual nature of BSL could work against any attempts to talk confidentially, saying:

> I think it's such a small community and of course signing's very visual. So, things like privacy and confidentiality are quite compromised. You know if people have confidential conversations in public areas, anybody can watch that conversation. So, I think. It's very unlikely that the Deaf community aren't fully aware of people's criminal record.

Gossip was highlighted by many to be an integral part of Deaf culture, which meant that news about scandalous topics, such as crime, travelled quickly. This sense of everyone knowing about a person's offending history presented a huge barrier to reintegration, as is shown in the quote below from Adam (practitioner):

> Everybody seems to know what everybody's done and that's really, really difficult as well. You cannot reintegrate into a community when all of the people around you in your community know your history… and know the mistakes that you made.

Sarah (practitioner) highlighted that the fact that Deaf people often seek employment opportunities within the Deaf community meant that job prospects are also negatively impacted by the stigma of the 'offender' label. Our findings showed that opportunities are minimal for formerly imprisoned Deaf people, in part because Deaf employers are reluctant to take on people with convictions. As employment is cited as a key factor in reintegration literature (Mourão *et al.* 2025), this is clearly a barrier to reintegration for Deaf former prisoners.

The effects of stigma were also felt in relation to access to local Deaf services or clubs. For example, while contact with services early in our research was methodological in focus, it also provided some indicative information about access to Deaf clubs for people with convictions. Within the 11 Deaf clubs who responded about access for Deaf people with convictions, access was uneven, with two replying that they would allow former prisoners to access services, and others saying either that they would not allow access (three), that they had not encountered any Deaf former prisoners (three) or that they did not ask clients about their offending history (three).

Thus, the approach to Deaf people with convictions is clearly mixed across Deaf clubs/spaces. Furthermore, some participants mentioned that uneven criteria for access intersected with geographical unevenness to reinforce a sense of an unpredictable 'lottery' of local provision. Austin highlighted the messiness of these arrangements, saying '[Deaf organisation A], they can't support Wales. [Deaf organisation B] doesn't support sexual offenders. It's all messy'.

The data also showed that people respond to reintegration difficulties in different ways. Individuals discussed alternatives such as moving to a new town (but felt that the stigma would still follow them), or, in some cases, moving away from the Deaf community and socialising more with hearing people. For some, this seemed to offer a fresh start (despite the negative feelings Deaf people often have towards the hearing world), as Liam (former prisoner) discussed:

> I've also got some good friends that are hearing because I think the Deaf world is so small they just talk about you all the time. Whereas other hearing people that are now my friends, I feel better with them.

For Deaf former prisoners, exclusion and isolation from the Deaf community can be extreme. This often results in a total withdrawal from the Deaf community, as Sarah (practitioner) highlighted:

> Most of them just disappear, I think they know if they set foot in the Deaf clubs and pubs… people essentially gossip. Also, they've got increased paranoia about talking about me. Will they talk about me? Are they going to plan to hurt me? If they do plan to hurt me, how do I protect myself? … Lots of paranoid behaviours… It's not safe. It's better to stay at home, but then they become isolated and that's got its own issues. The mental health goes downhill, and it really is a vicious cycle.

Such a sense of stigma meant that even where Deaf-specialist services were available, people could be reluctant to engage because of the fear that they would know the person. This could result in them not accessing vital services, as Sally's (practitioner) quote below, shows:

> A woman in a family proceeding actually said to me the other day, so she's someone with quite a trauma history and I was talking to her about [name of organisation]. And she said, I don't want a Deaf therapist because I'll know them as part of the Deaf community.

Ultimately, for some individuals, the barriers to reintegration proved to be too great. Many service providers highlighted the high chance of reconviction, because of the isolation and lack of support they faced. Lisa (practitioner), called this a 'fait accompli', with it only a matter of time before people were reconvicted:

> I think for some that I've worked with, they'll just end up back in prison because they've got no way out. They have no network; they have no sense of belonging. They're not in the hearing world. They're not in the Deaf world. The family may not want them back, or they know if they go back into the family home, history's gonna repeat itself. And it does. So, there's, like, a fait accompli. They know they're gonna end up back inside. It's just a question of when.

The experiences discussed throughout this section highlight the effects of stigma for Deaf former prisoners' reintegration, including uneven and unpredictable access criteria for Deaf clubs and services, barriers to employment, and social isolation. These effects of stigma corroborate existing literature about both the pains of desistance and re-entry, as well as some of the barriers

to reintegration (Durnescu 2019; Mourão *et al.*, 2025; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). However, given that for Deaf people, there are few other communities that they can readily access, the isolation can feel extreme. Just as Durnescu states, these issues are inter-related and can lead to 'exclusion traps or vicious cycles' (2019: 1493), with Lisa reflecting the sense of being trapped by exclusion in her comments on the situation being a 'fait accompli'.

Existing good practice

Findings from the research highlighted small pockets of good practice, although these were relatively few and sporadic. Further, they relied on individuals going above and beyond the norm, which meant that aside from the good practice delivered in secure mental health settings, all instances of proactive support for this population had been developed in small, localised silos by concerned individuals, or services which had spotted a particular gap in provision. For example, we located and interviewed one Deaf advocate who had considerable experience of supporting Deaf people across the criminal justice system and did this free-of-charge because he knew how little support they had elsewhere. Another example was a service provider who was funded to provide 'in reach' style support to Deaf people in prisons, but who was also providing 'through the gate' support for Deaf people despite not being funded to do this. Discussing this, Jack (practitioner) stated:

> We are funded to treat them while they're in prison, however it doesn't sit right with me saying, right, we're finished now, off you go. So, I will look into where they're going, and what services are around there… I'll meet with the probation hostel… and make sure that they're aware of services around there. I'll provide Deaf awareness training for them as well [and] do a lot of preparatory work with the prisoner saying about the transition… It's a problem. But we try… They are a lost community. If we can do our bit, then we've done a little bit. We've made every effort.

At the time of data collection there was one community support group running across England and Wales for d/Deaf people with convictions. This group offered those who attended an opportunity to meet up without fear of judgement from other people within the Deaf community. We interviewed two of the group's facilitators (Dean and Leona), and one attendee (Charles). When discussing people who engaged with the group, Leona stated:

> A really, really long time ago he [an attendee] was involved in the Deaf community and then he said he… said he didn't want to be involved with them anymore… But then obviously he came along to our groups and then from that he, was happy to meet up with the Deaf Centre people and get support from them. So that was quite good because he kind of got integrated back in.

Despite the positive outcomes associated with the group, facilitators discussed struggling to recruit attendees. They cited fear of being found out to be an 'offender' by the Deaf community, and difficulties in locating people who had withdrawn from the Deaf community altogether, as reasons for this. Due to funding cuts to the organisation running the group, this group has since ceased to exist, which is indicative of a broader pattern where supportive schemes are created, but then cannot continue due to a lack of resources or lack of take-up, despite there being a clear 'need' for Deaf former prisoners.

While the examples of good practice have an invaluable impact on the quality of life of this population, our findings showed that they often 'plug the gaps' left by inadequate support across other services. This was illuminated by Dean, who stated that even though the support group was intended as a social space for d/Deaf people to meet and engage with each other, it often ended

up being used by attendees as an opportunity to ask for support with housing, welfare benefits or probation issues. Fundamentally, these examples of good practice were exceptions rather than the norm, where motivated individuals voluntarily went above and beyond the call of duty, because the alternative was to have either very poor or non-existent support for this population.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In exploring the experiences of Deaf people after prison in England and Wales, the findings presented in this research address a significant gap in existing knowledge about this population. Although we do not set out the findings in ways that directly correspond with the layers or dimensions of reintegration set out by Mourão *et al.* (2025), the findings presented in this study demonstrate that Deaf people face challenges in almost every aspect of their reintegration after release from prison. The themes highlighted within the findings demonstrate the ways in which interpersonal factors (lack of social support and community involvement, through exclusion from the Deaf community), institutional factors (lack of suitable provision from service providers, the legacy of poor provision in prison), and community factors (lack of employment and issues with finding suitable accommodation) are interrelated in multiple and complex ways. These create difficulties for Deaf former prisoners that in ways reflect the pains of re-entry and desistance discussed in the literature (Durnescu 2019; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). However, they also show that because Deaf former prisoners are often excluded by hearing communities and services, and are stigmatised within the Deaf community, they often face additional difficulties in successfully negotiating reintegration post-prison.

Our findings show that to understand the lives of Deaf people post-release, it is vital to consider their experiences in prison, given that the extra layers of trauma accumulated there make successful reintegration into the community more difficult. Furthermore, Deaf people's poor experiences of prison create problems for the Probation Service, in that without access to support, programmes and services in prison, they are likely to be released without having had equivalent access to rehabilitative measures. The pressure placed on the Probation Service by this is particularly problematic, given this research shows that it too is 'institutionally thoughtless' (Crawley 2005: 350) with regards to the needs of Deaf people. Indeed, a lack of Deaf awareness and provision of interpreters means that probation is largely inaccessible to them. This inaccessibility is compounded by similar accessibility issues in most mainstream state and community services. Even when engagement with these services is not compulsory, they offer vital resettlement support for people released from prison. Clearly then, Deaf people who have been in prison are oppressed because of their Deafness in a hearing world, in addition to having to navigate the post-prison environment, just as other former prisoners must.

Importantly, findings from this research show that this population commonly experiences a double exclusion: they are excluded from hearing culture, services and opportunities because of their Deafness; and they are excluded from Deaf culture, services and opportunities, because of the stigma surrounding their conviction. In this way, this study adds an English and Welsh lens to existing international literature, which discusses the views of the Deaf community about 'crime' (Lundeberg and Breivik 2017). While a criminal conviction is almost universally stigmatising (Denver *et al.* 2017), it can lead to particular disapproval within the Deaf community. Our findings suggest that as with other taboo topics within Deaf communities (Fisher *et al.* 2018), people can be guarded about talking about their own convictions. However, like Beese and Tasker (2022), we found that the close-knit nature of the Deaf community, where 'everybody knows everybody', combined with the propensity for gossip, culminates in a culture where stigma is sharpened and exclusion is enhanced. This has huge consequences for formerly imprisoned Deaf people, who can become extremely isolated from the Deaf community. Responses to this isolation include

attempting to integrate into the hearing world, which they feel would be more accepting of them; or 'disappearing' from the Deaf (and hearing) community altogether. In this sense, it is true that Deaf identities affect reintegration experiences, but also that barriers to reintegration can affect a person's sense of their Deaf identity.

Deaf former prisoners are in effect being failed by a lack of appropriate statutory and community support. Findings from this study illuminate another sphere of life where Deaf people are oppressed, ill-supported and misunderstood. This reinforces the broader notion of 'hearing privilege' (Kohli 2016), whereby Deaf people are left behind in a world designed by and for hearing people, which does not understand or make space for their cultural and linguistic difference (Cue 2024). While many of the findings corroborate evidence from broader desistance and resettlement literature, the obstacles faced by Deaf people are particularly complex and difficult to navigate, as there are multiple layers of exclusion that hinder their attempts at reintegration into the community post-prison.

Relatedly, for us, Ben-Moshe's (2011: 399) argument that we must broaden 'the scope of research on incarceration to include a variety of confinements' for disabled people also rings true for the Deaf community, who are disproportionately likely to end up in a variety of institutions because of a lack of appropriate community provisions, and ongoing over-institutionalisation. Additionally, for this population, release from prison is not straightforward, and often involves routes through other institutions. Thus, we must see beyond the prison in isolation, looking instead to a broader 'incarceration continuum' (Ben-Moshe 2011: 387), to understand the experiences and impacts of the various forms of incarceration.

In considering the experiences of Deaf people after prison, this article makes a major contribution at both a domestic and international level in a number of ways, for example (1) by providing an entirely new knowledge base about the post-prison experiences of Deaf people; (2) by exploring the relationship between community provision, prisons and mental health institutions; and (3) by contributing to the very limited literature about Deafness in criminology. In doing so, just as with approaches such as crip criminology, it aims to disrupt the dominance of ableism within criminology, by highlighting the experiences and challenges faced by Deaf people, as a cultural and linguistic minority. As such, the article is likely to be of use to scholars not only interested in the lives of Deaf people in criminal justice settings, but also to researchers who are interested in the experiences of minoritised and 'othered' groups within and beyond criminal justice more widely.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, it cannot be shared publicly. A metadata-only record has been created in Lancashire Online Research Data, and access is restricted.

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