

Category: Nursing issues

Study type: Quantitative study - other

Author's declarative title: Barriers to Mental Health Care for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Norway: Implications for Mental Health Nursing

Commentary on: Fossum, H. K., Karlsen, K., Munkhaugen, E. K., Bakken, T. L., & Kildahl, A. N. (2025). Barriers to Mental Health Assessment and Treatment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Findings from a National Service Development Project in Norway. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19315864.2025.2592566>

Commentary

Implications for practice and research

- All mental health nurses should have a standardised baseline awareness of the needs and reasonable adjustments available to support people with learning disabilities to access and engage with mental health services.
- Future barriers to gaining access to mental health assessment and treatment research in Norway should aim to include individuals with learning disabilities.

Context

Although individuals with learning disabilities are at higher risk of developing mental health problems (Hughes et al., 2017), they can often face substantial barriers in gaining access to mental health services (Whittle et al., 2019). In mental health settings, individuals with learning disabilities report wanting more time for assessment/treatment, a more holistic assessment and carer/family involvement when appropriate (Karlsen et al., 2025). However, barriers appear to vary according to how services are organised, and it remains unclear how these barriers manifest within the Norwegian healthcare system (Fossum et al., 2025).

Methods

This qualitative study aimed to assess the perceived barriers that individuals with intellectual disabilities face in accessing mental health services in the Norwegian healthcare system. Participants were recruited across specialist mental health services in 19 public hospitals and two additional relevant organisations in Norway. Using purposeful sampling, clinicians and family members were recruited who had specific experience of intellectual disability and mental health services. In group sessions participants were asked to fill out 'Post-it' notes and place them on five named boards

based on previous research in this area (access, resources, competencies, collaboration, availability and other). Data was coded by two authors using an inductive approach.

Findings

In total 382 Post-it notes were collated and coded. After coding, a core theme was identified that individuals with a learning disability and mental health needs were perceived to be less important than those without intellectual disabilities. Alongside this consistent theme, a range of high level barriers were identified, which were System related barriers (e.g. fragmented organization of health services and lack of structures that support cross-service collaboration), A lack of knowledge and expertise (e.g., lack of knowledge of intellectual disabilities in mainstream mental health services), Insufficient resources (e.g., insufficient capacity in, and poor accessibility to, existing specialist units) and Unhelpful attitudes (e.g., rejection and disavowal by mainstream mental health services).

Commentary

When interpreting the findings from this study, it is important to be aware that the study was on barriers specifically experienced within the Norwegian healthcare service. Furthermore, unfortunately individuals with learning disabilities were not included in this study and the perceptions and barriers identified are from family members and clinicians. Despite this reduced external validity and sampling preference these findings may be more generalisable, as previous studies from other countries have identified similar themes increasing the applicability of these findings (Whittle et al., 2018). The study identifies that these barriers are context dependent and interrelated and are caused by all parts of the healthcare system from environmental level issues to specific service delivery problems, suggesting that from a solution perspective interventions would have to be approached at all levels to tackle all these barriers. One intervention which is highlighted as being a possible way to combat the crosscutting themes and the specific barrier of lack of knowledge is an educational programme. The study's authors highlight that it may not be functional or desirable to educate all clinicians to a high level but having a general awareness of possible adaptations would help with many of the issues faced by individuals with intellectual disability in accessing mental health services. A recent systematic review by Poku et al. (2026) identifies a wide range of differing adaptations which can be made for individuals with learning disabilities to gain access to psychological therapies (Poku et al., 2026).

References

Hughes-McCormack LA, Rydzewska E, Henderson A, MacIntyre C, Rintoul J, Cooper SA. Prevalence of mental health conditions and relationship with general health in a whole-country population of people with intellectual disabilities compared with the general population. *BJPsych Open*. 2017 Sep 29;3(5):243-248. doi: 10.1192/bjpo.bp.117.005462. PMID:29034100; PMCID: PMC5620469.

Karlsen K, Munkhaugen EK, Fossum HK, Bakken TL, Kildahl AN. Mental Health Services for Adults With Intellectual Disabilities: A Qualitative Study of Patient Characteristics, Associated Factors and Consequent Needs for Adaptation in Assessment and Treatment. *J Appl Res Intellect Disabil*. 2025 Jan;38(1):e13315. doi: 10.1111/jar.13315. PMID:39448449.

Whittle EL, Fisher KR, Reppermund S, Trollor J. Access to mental health services: The experiences of people with intellectual disabilities. *J Appl Res Intellect Disabil*. 2019 Mar;32(2):368-379. doi: 10.1111/jar.12533. Epub 2018 Oct 10. PMID: 30306674.

Poku AC, Gray KM, Hewitt O, Langdon PE. Adapting Psychological Therapies for Individuals With Intellectual Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *Clin Psychol Psychother*. 2026 Jan-Feb;33(1):e70202. doi: 10.1002/cpp.70202. PMID: 41496656; PMCID: PMC12775901.

HK, H. K., Karlsen, K., Munkhaugen, E. K., Bakken, T. L., & Kildahl, A. N. (2025). Barriers to Mental Health Assessment and Treatment for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: Findings from a National Service Development Project in Norway. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19315864.2025.2592566>

Whittle, E. L., Fisher, K. R., Reppermund, S., Lenroot, R., & Trollor, J. (2018). Barriers and enablers to accessing mental health services for people with intellectual disability: A scoping review. *Journal of Mental Health Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 11(1), 69–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19315864.2017.1408724>

Commentator details

Name: Emma Hill

Affiliation: Christchurch primary school

Correspondence address: Bent Ln, Colne BB8 7AA

Email: ejwoods_84@hotmail.com

Name: James Hill

Affiliation: University of Lancashire

Correspondence address: Fylde Rd, Preston PR1 2HE

Email: JeHill1@Lancashire.ac.uk

Competing interests

None