

Language impairment needs more recognition in the juvenile justice system

By Dr Jessica Edwards

The prevalence of language and communication impairments in adolescents in custody is much higher than that seen in the general population, with estimates ranging from 60-90% compared to 7-12%, respectively¹. A study from Nathan Hughes and colleagues has now investigated co-morbidity of language difficulties in a cohort of 93 young male offenders (aged 15-18 years) held in a secure custodial facility in the UK. The participants completed a range of assessments to evaluate aspects of their communication, cognition and neurodevelopment: 47% demonstrated overall language skills markedly below the population average, of which 28% had overall language impairment. This latter group exhibited difficulties with communication and nonverbal cognition, and were at a higher risk of self-harm, depression and alcohol/substance misuse than those without impairment. Despite >40% of those with language impairments previously being involved in the care system or attending a specialist school, the majority had not accessed any form of speech and language therapy prior to custody.

These findings identify that access to speech and language services is severely limited in young offenders. The researchers conclude that there are likely to be many missed opportunities to identify language difficulties within the health, social care, and criminal justice and education systems. They propose that speech and language services should have a greater role in the youth justice system to facilitate early identification and support for those at risk of engaging in offending behaviour.

Referring to:

Hughes, N., Chitsabesan, P., Bryan, K., Borschmann, R., Swain, N., Lennox, C. & Shaw, J. (2017), Language impairment and comorbid vulnerabilities among young people in custody. *J Child Psychol Psychiatr.* 58: 1106-1113. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12791

Further reading:

¹Hughes, N. et al. (2012) Nobody made the connection; the prevalence of neurodisability in young people who offend. London: Office for the Children's Commissioner.

