

Communication Disability and Crime

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The team at the Talking Mats Research and Development Centre at the University of Stirling carries out research with people with a range of communication and/or cognitive difficulties including learning disabilities, stroke and dementia. We focus on producing practical outcomes from our research. One outcome is the Talking Mats framework which supports people with communication difficulties to express their views www.talkingmats.com.

Research shows that people with communication difficulties suffer from a much higher rate of physical and sexual crimes than those with general population. They experience a wide variety of crimes which are often chronic in nature and they report those crimes at much lower rates than the general population. Victims of crime who cannot communicate effectively are less likely to report crimes, nor are they likely to access the justice system when they become victims of crime. (Bryen, Carey, & Frantz 2003; Collier et al. 2006; Mansell et al. 2009)

In addition to being victims, people with communication difficulties may also be perpetrators or witnesses to crime but the criminal justice system has not yet developed robust methods to support them. There is a lack of suitable and accessible tools to allow them to understand, consider and express their views.

One tool that has research evidence of its effectiveness is The Talking Mats framework. It helps people with communication difficulties to think about the issues discussed with them and express their opinions. It provides a structure where information is presented in small chunks supported by symbols. It gives people time and space to think about information and say what they feel in a way that is easily recorded. It is an interactive and flexible resource that can be adapted to address different issues.

The following photo shows a young man with aphasia as a result of a brain haemorrhage using Talking Mats to express his views.



Research has been carried out to measure the effectiveness of the Talking Mats framework with people with aphasia, learning disabilities and dementia. The findings from these studies have shown that when using the Talking Mats framework compared to ordinary conversation:

- the quality information gained is significantly improved
- and amount of information gained is significantly improved
- people's concentration improves
- it helps people to organise their thoughts and stay on-track
- the person with communication difficulties has more control
- the burden on the interviewer is reduced

(Murphy J 2010;Murphy 2005;Murphy & Cameron L 2008;Murphy, Gray C M, & Cox S 2007)

In their clinical work, several of the Talking Mats team have been involved with the police in supporting victims who have significant communication difficulties and one case study has been published (Bell & Cameron 2003).

The Talking Mats team is hoping to develop further work with this vulnerable client group within the criminal justice system and would welcome further discussion.

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