

# *Deaf after prison*



**Guidance for  
practitioners in  
supporting Deaf people  
post-release**

## About this resource

The information provided in this booklet originates from research carried out by Dr Laura Kelly-Corless and Dr Daniel McCulloch. Lily Graham and Trudi Emmens aided with aspects of the project. The research was funded by a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant entitled Life after prison: The journey back to the Deaf Community (Reference: SRG22/220416). The research was also supported by the University of Central Lancashire and The Open University.

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# Introduction

Transitioning back into society after being in prison is a difficult and isolating experience for many people. For d/Deaf communities this can be even more difficult and there are specific barriers related to rehabilitation, transition and regaining independence. Although the Equality Act (2010) and British Sign Language (BSL) Act (2022) place statutory duties on some organisations, there is little understanding of how best to support Deaf people after prison.

This resource provides an overview of the experiences of Deaf people after time spent in prison and makes recommendations for criminal justice professionals supporting Deaf people being released from prison.

This resource focuses on the experiences of culturally and linguistically Deaf people. Cultural and linguistic Deafness is often differentiated from audiological deafness by using a capital D, rather than a lowercase d. A brief outline of some of the characteristics of each form of d/Deafness is provided on page 5. However, it should be recognised that these are simplified types, and in practice there is huge variation and complexity of experience within each group.



# Definitions

## **Cultural & Linguistic Deafness**

- Refers to individuals who identify as being part of a small culturally distinct minority group, who commonly use British Sign Language (BSL), a visual language, to communicate.
- These individuals are usually part of the Deaf Community, which is made up of people who often share Deaf-specific life experiences and cultural norms and values.
- They have visual and tactile ways of behaving, including using touch to express warmth and friendliness, and for getting people's attention.
- Because their language is visual, they often do not speak, read, or write in ways that a hearing person might expect. Relying on lip reading/writing things down may not make sense to a Deaf person.
- Deaf people can distrust hearing people because of their experiences in the hearing world.
- To combat historic experiences of communication deprivation, the sharing of information and knowledge is prioritised, alongside a directness in communication style.

## **Audiological deafness**

- An audiological condition, measured on a spectrum according to the quietest sound and types of sounds that an individual can hear.

# Deaf people's experiences before and within prison

To understand Deaf people's experiences of life after prison, it is important to understand their experiences of prison, and of life before prison.

Prior to prison, Deaf people are likely to have experienced exclusion, isolation and confusion throughout their lives<sup>1</sup>, both in terms of being able to access services and opportunities available to hearing people; and in terms of being isolated from the hearing world. This exclusion usually begins during their early years, for example by being the only Deaf individual within a family or attending schools which do not support their needs. A lack of common language can mean that Deaf children do not understand expected behavioural and social norms in a hearing-dominated world, which can cause confusion and frustration. Deaf communities are more likely to experience abuse and neglect. Deaf women are between two and three times as likely to experience domestic and sexual abuse than hearing women<sup>2</sup>.



## Key fact


Is it estimated that 30% - 60% of Deaf people have experienced mental health difficulties<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup>RNID (2024) It Does Matter: Public attitudes towards deaf people and people with hearing loss. Available at: <https://rnid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/RNID-It-Does-Matter-Report-V2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Crowe (2017) 'Breaking the Silence: Empowering Deaf and Hard of Hearing Survivors of Domestic Violence', in A. J. Johnson, J. R. Nelson, and E. M. Lund (eds) *Religion, Disability and Interpersonal Violence*, New York: Springer

<sup>3</sup>Joint Commissioning Panel for Mental Health and SignHealth (2017) Guidance for commissioners of primary care mental health services for deaf people. Available at: <https://signhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/jcpmh-deaf-guide.pdf>



The difficulties and barriers faced by Deaf people throughout their lives can often result in exposure to trauma. Research suggests that trauma and adverse childhood experiences can have long-lasting impacts on cognitive, psychological, emotional and social development<sup>4</sup>. This may be compounded for Deaf people as there are relatively few BSL signs to discuss trauma, meaning that it can be difficult for Deaf people to communicate about traumatic experiences, and for there to be a shared language of trauma within the Deaf community. There is also a lack of tailored guidance for supporting Deaf people who have experienced trauma<sup>5</sup>.

Deaf people often have very negative experiences of prison. Deaf prisoners tend to experience extreme levels of isolation, loneliness and exclusion. Education and rehabilitative programmes tend to use written and spoken English, and informal communication relies on spoken word. Prison staff usually have little Deaf awareness, so do not understand Deaf prisoners' needs. Deaf people are commonly unable to fulfil the requirements of their sentence plans, meaning that they can either leave prison after receiving little rehabilitation, or spend longer in prison than others would<sup>6</sup>. There is little meaningful pre-release planning for Deaf prisoners, meaning that they often leave ill-prepared for post-prison life.

*"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, 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"*

<sup>4</sup>Franke H.A (2014) Toxic stress: effects, prevention and treatment. *Children*, 1(3): 390–402.

<sup>5</sup>Morris D., Hamilton, A., Webb., E. L., & Baker (2024) International consensus guidance for meeting the trauma needs of deaf people, [oral presentation]. 1st International Meeting trauma needs in secure settings Conference, Centre for Developmental and Complex Trauma & Crisis, Disaster & Trauma Section of the British Psychological Society, March, United Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup>Kelly, L. (2017) 'Suffering in Silence: The unmet needs of d/Deaf prisoners', *Prison Service Journal*, issue 234, p. 3-15.

## Life after prison

For anyone, rejoining society after imprisonment can be difficult. There are significant barriers to employment, rebuilding trust with loved ones and adjusting to a lack of structure and routine. For Deaf people this can be even more difficult, as they have to navigate these barriers in a world which does not recognise their communication needs or cultural history.

This section outlines some common barriers faced by Deaf people after release from prison.

### Experiences of probation

Upon release from prison, all individuals are required to engage with probation services. They are assigned a probation officer and are required to meet with this person on a regular basis.

Communication support in probation appointments is often inconsistent, and in many cases, there is no support at all. This results in these appointments holding little value for Deaf people. For example, probation appointments often rely on shared understandings of complex ideas and concepts, often explained in English. As a result, it is sometimes unclear to Deaf people what probation means and why it matters.

The requirements of a post-release licence are often explained in inaccessible ways. This may increase the risk that a Deaf person breaches the terms of their probation, often unknowingly.

Probation officers are often not equipped with enough awareness of the cultural histories and norms of the Deaf community. As a result, support plans are usually not tailored to their cultural needs. This can lead to a feeling amongst Deaf people that they are not understood or valued. As Deaf people have long histories of being told by hearing people of their need to conform, this can lead to distrust and a reluctance to engage.

In some cases, a lack of awareness can have serious consequences. In one example in our study, a probation officer recommended that a Deaf person attend their local Deaf club. However, Deaf clubs often involve children, and this individual's post-release licence prevented them from having contact with children.





## Experiences of other community-based services

People released from prison are likely to need to engage with numerous other community-based services, including those provided by the state or provided by charities. However, within many of these services, there is a reliance on English and a lack of Deaf awareness. Whilst local funding for community-based services can be varied, they are often a key source of support for people leaving prison. Our findings suggest that Deaf people find it very difficult to access community-based services, unless they are designed explicitly for them.

Community-based services often utilise phone calls or drop-in services, however, this is inaccessible for some Deaf people. This presents a barrier to ad-hoc engagement and means support may take longer to reach Deaf people. This is especially concerning during points of acute crisis.

*“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”*

## Exclusion from the Deaf Community

Within the Deaf community, there can be a huge amount of stigma attached to the 'offender' label. Deaf communities are close-knit and there can be fear that everyone in the Deaf community knows about someone's conviction. This is made worse by the fact gossip is often seen as a key part of Deaf culture, so there is a fear of being talked about.

*“The Deaf community is so small and a lot of people know each other... 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”*

Within a single town, it is highly likely that most Deaf people only have one or two degrees of separation. This means that even where Deaf-specialist services are available, people can be reluctant to engage with these for fear of being recognised.

This stigma impacts other aspects of rehabilitation too. Deaf people often seek employment within the Deaf community. However, there is a lack of Deaf employment support and a reluctance from Deaf employers to employ people with convictions.

Consequently, individuals tend to become isolated from the Deaf Community, which is commonly the only place where they have previously felt a sense of 'belonging'. This isolation can be detrimental to someone's reintegration into society and can contribute to a cycle of reoffending. During our research there was one support group for Deaf people with convictions running in Manchester, which was useful for helping to combat this stigma. However, at the time of publication, this group had ceased to run because of funding issues.

## Recommendations for good practice

For people to successfully reintegrate into the community after release from prison, and to minimise the chance of them being sent back to prison, they need consistent access to effective education, relevant rehabilitative programmes, appropriate support, a sense of hope and positive relationships. Should barriers remain in place for Deaf people upon release from prison, this increases the risk that they cannot reintegrate into the community.

Therefore, more support is needed for Deaf people within and outside life in prison. This resource builds on existing good practice, to detail some of the steps that can be taken by commissioners and probation services to ensure life beyond the prison is supportive for Deaf people.

### Careful pre-release planning

Careful pre-release planning within prison means developing plans that consider the needs of Deaf individuals, taking into consideration that local community services for Deaf people vary. Licence conditions should take account of what Deaf-specialist support is locally available.

There needs to be consideration of what life looks like for Deaf individuals after prison. This involves taking a strengths-based approach<sup>7</sup>, ensuring there are services available and ready to support them with employment and retraining. This often also means providing practical support, such as help to complete paperwork, search for employment, pay bills or manage medication. This can make a significant difference in instilling independent living skills.



<sup>7</sup>Weaver, B. and McNeill, F. (2010), Changing Lives? Desistance Research and Offender Management. Report number 03/2010. Glasgow: The Scottish Centre for Crime and Research

### **Adopting a strengths-based approach:**

A strengths-based approach involves focusing on a person's individual positive traits, capacities and skills and identifying available support networks to help develop these skills. Taking a strengths-based approach in probation practice can help support people with lived experience of prison to meet their personal goals, engage meaningfully with wider society and reduce re-offending.

Pre-release planning must ensure that appropriate communication support is available at all stages and Deaf individuals are involved in and able to understand their own support plans. Information about licence conditions and re-offending must be explained in an accessible way.

*"I think what needs to be done is pre-release planning. ... having a social worker that they can communicate with, you know with a Deaf social worker or somebody who is aware of the needs of Deaf people so having interpreters available, have GPs available and the interpreters available at the GP. All this I think needs to be planned prior to release so as soon as they're released they can say we've got an appointment for you. It's next week, there's an interpreter there. People to talk through your banking. They'll give you a banking card, you know, job centres, phones, things like that. There needs to be more structure so that the deaf person isn't 'oh, how do I access this' and then that frustration of not being able to ask people how to do it. Or not being able to access stuff."*

## Minimising judgement and being trauma-informed

It is important to minimise judgement and avoid seeing Deaf people with lived experience of prison only as offenders. Given the isolation, shame and stigma faced from within their own community and often in wider society after release from prison, it is crucial that they are allowed a space to be more than this label. It is also important to be aware of the unique barriers faced by the Deaf community as well as the historical stigma associated with this community more generally, within a hearing-dominant world.

It is therefore crucial to take a trauma-informed approach<sup>8</sup> which understands rather than blames people for their behaviour. Specifically, it is important to recognise the unique experiences that members of this community may have. Thus, adopting a culturally informed lens is vital for working with Deaf people in prison.

### **Being trauma informed:**

Adopting a trauma-informed practice means being aware that traumatic experiences can impact a person's neurological, biological, social and psychological development as well as their ability to feel safe and form trusting relationships. Rather than asking 'What's wrong with this person?', being trauma-informed may involve asking 'What does this person need?'

<sup>8</sup>HM Government (2022), Working definition of trauma-informed practice. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice>

## Increased understanding and informed/specialist staff

Training for probation and prison staff needs to take place to ensure Deaf communities are supported both prior to and after release. Investing in training and awareness sessions would help to ensure that staff can carefully plan release and ensure ongoing support. Increased understanding has benefits for everyone – as it increases the chances of resettlement and reduces the risk of reconviction.

The most successful services for supporting Deaf people are those that adapt to meet the needs of Deaf people, rather than expecting Deaf people to adapt to their services. To be accessible and effective, a service must consult with Deaf people about their needs (especially communication needs).

*“It’s about having staff that can communicate and understand, not just about how to wave their arms around but about the person’s underlying experience.”*

The communication needs of Deaf people must be identified and recorded early. Where possible, information about communication needs should follow an individual throughout their contact with the criminal justice system. It is important to recognise that Deaf communities are made up of individuals with different communication needs, in that not all Deaf people will communicate in BSL. Communication support should be based on the needs and preferences of the individual.

There needs to be investment in specialist staff who also have a holistic understanding of Deaf culture. This is vital in ensuring that Deaf individuals are provided with culturally appropriate support.

### **Key fact**

Many Deaf (and deaf) individuals require communication support for interactions with hearing people. This can include BSL interpreters, Lipspeakers or Deaf relay interpreters<sup>9</sup>. The specific communication support required varies for each individual. It is best to clarify an individual's preferred communication method with them, rather than to presume this.



## **Sensitive and supportive transitions back into the community**

Liaising with the local Deaf community (for example, local Deaf services) can help to support an individual's transition from prison to the community. For many individuals, the Deaf community will have previously been a place of safety and support, but they will now be at risk of isolation and exclusion from the Deaf community.

Sensitive and culturally supportive work needs to happen to challenge stigma. This requires support from specialist workers, who understand the barriers faced and can help to minimise feelings of judgement. Within our research, individuals identified some Deaf-focused organisations that offered an open, welcoming and non-judgemental space. This was seen as crucial in supporting individuals to make new connections and to reintegrate back into society. These organisations can support in deepening understandings of providing judgement-free community outreach and bespoke services to offer extensive, personalised support. Therefore, referrals to appropriate third-sector and specialist advocacy organisations, such as Sign Health, should be considered.

<sup>9</sup>Definitions of each of these roles, as well as a directory of registered professionals in these roles can be found at: <https://nrcpd.org.uk/>

## Useful contact details and information

### The Deaf prison in reach service

The Deaf prison in reach service addresses the inequalities in the provision of mental health & psychological services to Deaf prisoners. The service offers specialist consultation, assessment, treatment in the Deaf prisoners first language of British Sign Language (BSL) and can if requested offer advice in the discharge process by linking up with outside agencies such as Mental Health Services and Probation Services, enabling the Deaf prisoner to access appropriate support.

For further information, contact: Jason Lowe, Clinical Nurse Practitioner, Deaf Prison In Reach Service.

Tel: 01777 248321

Email: [Jason.lowe@nottshc.nhs.uk](mailto:Jason.lowe@nottshc.nhs.uk)

### Think Deaf resources

Contact Dr Laura Kelly-Corless at: [LKelly-corless@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:LKelly-corless@uclan.ac.uk) for a copy of these resources which focus on supporting d/Deaf people in prison settings.

### Deaf advocacy support

#### Sign Access

Michael Stead

Tel: 01772 590237

Email: [michael@signaccess.co.uk](mailto:michael@signaccess.co.uk)

Website: <https://signaccess.co.uk>

### Psychological support for Deaf people

#### Sign Health Psychological Therapies team

Tel: 01494 687606

Email: [therapies@signhealth.org.uk](mailto:therapies@signhealth.org.uk)

### Deaf awareness training

#### Signature

Tel: 0191 383 1155

Website: <https://www.signature.org.uk>

### Sensory teams

Many councils have a sensory social services team, who will provide support for d/Deaf prisoners. Details of these can be found online.





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