

Thematic Synthesis Approach to Criminal Justice Professionals' Views of Offenders with Intellectual Disabilities

*Dr. Reekee Patel¹, Srinibas Nayak², Shilpa Rao Rastogi³, Debanjana Prasad⁴, Nyalam Ramu⁵ and Shubhi Goyal⁶

¹Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine, Parul Institute of Medical Sciences & Research, Parul University, Vadodara, Gujarat, India. E-mail: reekee.patel77502@paruluniversity.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2930-3373>

²Assistant Professor, Department of Law, SOA National Institute of Law, Siksha 'O' Anusandhan (Deemed to be University), Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. E-mail: srinibasnayak@soa.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8532-711X>

³Associate Professor, Department of Law, Vivekananda Global University, Jaipur, India. E-mail: shilpa.rastogi@vgu.ac.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6559-2202>

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Biotechnology, Noida international University, Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India. E-mail: debanjana.prasad@niu.edu.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-0548-6009>

⁵Centre for Multidisciplinary Research, Anurag University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India. E-mail: nyalamramu.nr@proton.me Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6546-0484>

⁶Quantum University Research Center, Quantum University, Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India. E-mail: shubhi.mathematics@quantumeducation.in, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1684-7324>

Abstract

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately represented in criminal justice systems and often face inequitable treatment shaped by professionals' knowledge, attitudes, and institutional constraints. This study aimed to systematically synthesize qualitative evidence on criminal justice professionals' views, experiences, and decision-making when working with offenders with intellectual disabilities. The process of qualitative synthesis of evidence based on a thematic synthesis method was performed in compliance with the recommendations of ENTREQ and on the basis of PRISMA 2020. Five electronic databases were searched to find qualitative and mixed-method studies that were published between 2021 and 2025. A total of 6 studies that included criminal justice professionals in custody, court-based, and community settings were included based on the criteria. The data were synthesized and extracted using line-by-line coding, descriptive themes development, and higher-order analytical themes development. There were four identified descriptive themes, which include knowledge and recognition of intellectual disability, perceptions of vulnerability and risk, organizational and systemic constraints, and emotional and ethical challenges. These were informed by three analytical themes, namely, inconsistent professional responses based on knowledge gaps, structural tensions between care, control, and justice, and systemic reliance on individual advocacy and adaptation. All six studies reported challenging issues with the identification of intellectual disability, which led to disjunctive decision-making and informal coping. The results have identified structural flaws in the training, policy, and structural provision that led to inconsistent and inequitable justice provisions. To enhance equitable and ethically sound reactions to offenders with intellectual disabilities, the standardized identification, professional training, and inter-agency cooperation have to be strengthened.

Keywords Criminal Justice Professionals, Intellectual Disability, Thematic Synthesis, Vulnerability and Risk, Qualitative Research.

Article History:

Received: 15.03.2025;

Revised: 26.04.2025;

Accepted: 28.05.2025;

Published: 27.06.2025

Introduction

People with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) are overrepresented in the criminal justice system on a global scale and tend to be affected by various vulnerabilities at each stage of the justice process. The criminal justice system, involving police officers, probation officers, lawyers, judges, and correction officers, has a vital role in determining how criminals with ID are detected, handled, and assisted [1]. Nevertheless, the available information indicates that the perception of intellectual disability among professionals is highly diverse, and it affects the decision-making process, the fairness of procedures, risk evaluation, sentencing, and access to relevant supports [2]. Attitudes, perceptions, and practices in the institutions might play their role in criminalizing, misunderstanding of the behavior, and treating offenders with ID unequally. It would thus be critical to synthesize the views of professionals in order to comprehend systemic constraints and reform opportunities [3].

The aims of the proposed study include synthesizing qualitative data on a systematic review of the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of criminal justice professionals in dealing with intellectually disabled offenders towards them using thematic synthesis [4]. The research will be used to determine common themes, mutual interests, and contextual influences on professional decision-making and working with offenders with ID at various phases of the criminal justice process [5].

Though there is an increasing amount of qualitative research to examine the experiences of criminal justice professionals working with intellectually disabled offenders, these studies have been disjointed across disciplines, jurisdictions, and professions [6]. The current literature remains confined to individual occupational categories or contexts of justice, making it hard to have a wider understanding of it. There exists a deficiency in integrative thematic synthesis that summarizes these results to bring out general trends, contradictions, and systemic problems. This has led to the policy development and training programs commonly being founded on single discoveries, as opposed to an in-depth comprehension of the professional viewpoint [7].

The hypothesis of the study is as follows: the perceptions of criminal justice professionals regarding the offenders with intellectual disabilities are influenced by their insufficient formal training, organizational factors, and system pressures that cannot ensure the consistent identification of ID, the use of informal coping, and the fluctuations in the level of empathy and accommodation. It is also theorized that all these leads to an imbalance in the justice delivery towards intellectually disabled offenders [8].

This research contributes to a number of aspects. To begin with, it offers a strict thematic synthesis of qualitative evidence, which proposes a comprehensive and theory-based comprehension of the views of criminal justice professionals. Second, it determines cross-cutting themes that cut across the professions and the justice settings, pointing to structural and attitudinal barriers of the system. Third, the results guide the provision of evidence-based policy reform and professional training and interagency collaboration to enhance fairness, access, and outcomes of the criminal justice system in relation to offenders with intellectual disabilities.

This paper is organized in the following way. The Introduction presents the reason, goals, and importance of investigating the views of criminal justice professionals regarding people with intellectual disabilities as offenders. The Literature Review has expressed the synthesis of the available qualitative and review evidence with major gaps that make the present study justifiable. The Materials and Methods section describe the design of the thematic synthesis, search strategy, inclusion criteria, quality review, and analysis. The results section displays the characteristics of the study, descriptive themes, and higher-order analytical themes with the assistance of tables and figures. Findings, implications, and limitations are interpreted in the Discussion. The Conclusion highlights the important lessons and future perspectives.

Literature Review

The literature always proves that criminals with intellectual disabilities face tremendous difficulties in criminal justice systems, as they are mostly influenced by the perceptions of professionals, their knowledge, and institutional practices. A recent systematic review conducted by [1] indicates that criminal justice practitioners tend to have ambivalent and at times conflicting perceptions of offenders with ID, as they tend to swing between the perception of Vulnerability and risk [10]. Although others show empathy and wish to make reasonable changes, other professionals have reported that they have been uncertain, frustrated, or, depending on stereotypes, especially when not adequately trained. The

findings highlight the direct effect of attitudes in decision-making at sentencing, risk assessment, and custodial management levels.

These problems, as further widened by systemic and policy-level gaps, are reported in broader reviews. According to [4], there are pronounced discrepancies in the criminal justice policy of the neurodevelopmental conditions, such as ID and autism, and this leads to disjointed service delivery and a lack of clear professional roles. In the same manner, [5] and [11] reveal that intervention programs targeting individuals with ID or ASD are available, but their application in the justice field is unequally distributed and usually relies on professional awareness and organizational capacities [18].

In the forensic and custodial setting, studies have shown an increased risk and Vulnerability in persons with ID. According to [3] [12], individuals with ID in the forensic inpatient context are more at risk of restraint practices, behaviorally interpretive mistakes, and extended detention. Similar themes of marginalization, having a limited voice, and professional discretion can be seen in qualitative syntheses of adjacent justice populations, including prison residents [8], transgender women prisoners [9], and people with lived experience of suicide in custody [6], which supports the key role of staff perceptions [13].

Health and social care evidence also creates a clear picture of how professional attitudes determine service delivery to vulnerable groups. The meta-syntheses of the experience of mental health professionals working with adults with ID adopt emotional burden, role ambiguity, and structural constraints [15], and reviews of intermediaries in the justice system accentuate their role in overcoming communication barriers developed due to professional misunderstanding [17]. Furthermore, the necessity to have a systemic sensitivity and professional reflexivity is highlighted in qualitative syntheses of reintegration [14], family caregivers in forensic care [19], and participatory inclusion of underrepresented populations [16][20].

Although this is an increasing body of research, there is still a fragmented nature of studies in the literature based on professions, settings, and jurisdictions. Not many have been made to incorporate the viewpoints of professionals into one analytical approach. This gap highlights the need for a thematic synthesis approach to consolidate evidence, identify cross-cutting patterns, and inform training, policy, and practice improvements for offenders with intellectual disabilities within criminal justice systems.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative evidence synthesis using a thematic synthesis approach to systematically examine criminal justice professionals' views and experiences of working with offenders with intellectual disabilities. Thematic synthesis was chosen because it allows combining the results of qualitative research and maintaining the richness of data, deepening, and the context of primary data. The review was based on the recommendations provided by the existing guidelines of the qualitative systematic review methods, namely the ENTREQ framework, and additionally, guided by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to achieve transparency and rigor during the study identification, screening, and selection processes.

Search Strategy

To ensure the inclusion of more recent evidence of the latest criminal justice practices and policy settings, a systematic literature search was performed in several electronic databases, such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, between January 2021 and December 2025. Searchers used relevant keywords and controlled vocabulary of intellectual disability, criminal justice professionals, offenders, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. Maximum retrieval was implemented with the help of the use of the Boolean operators and truncation. The included studies and related reviews were screened through their reference lists in order to identify more eligible studies. To achieve transparency and reproducibility, a detailed record of search terms, Boolean operators, and database-specific strategies was kept.

Eligibility Criteria

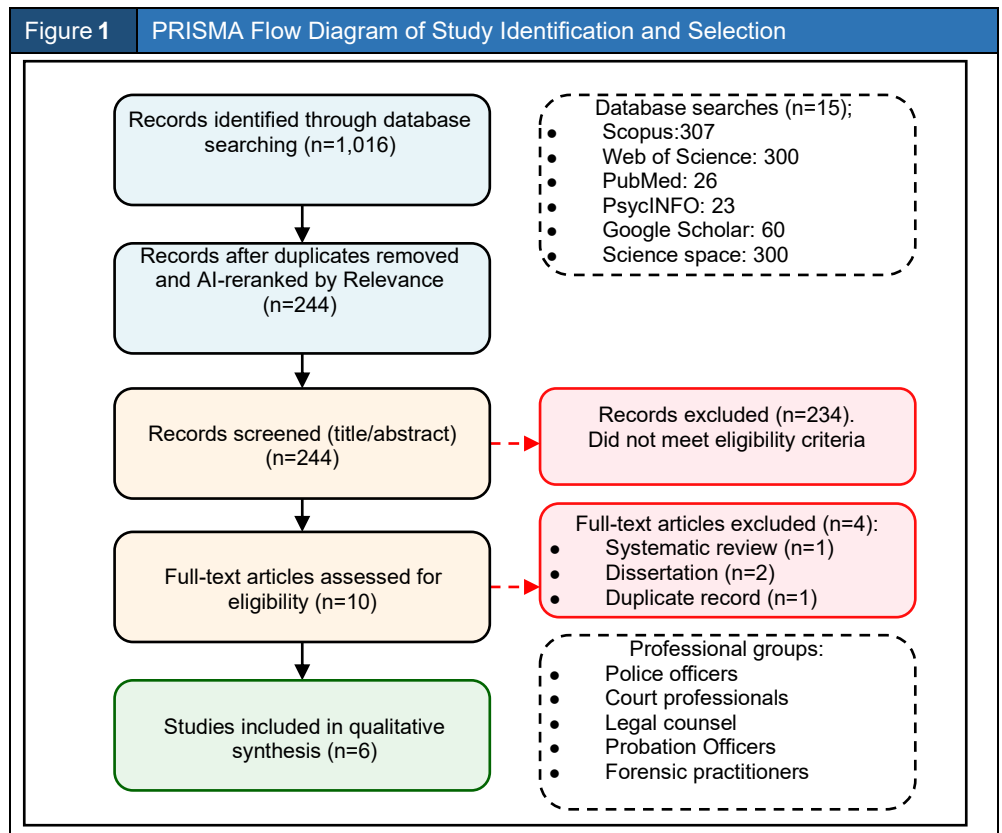
Studies were included if they:

- (i) employed qualitative or mixed-methods designs with extractable qualitative data;
- (ii) focused on criminal justice professionals (e.g., police officers, judges, lawyers, probation officers, prison staff, forensic clinicians);
- (iii) explored views, attitudes, perceptions, or experiences related to offenders with intellectual disabilities; and
- (iv) were published in peer-reviewed journals in English.

Studies focusing solely on offenders' perspectives, quantitative outcomes without qualitative components, or non-criminal justice settings were excluded.

Study Selection

All identified records were imported into a reference management system, and duplicates were removed. Two reviewers independently checked titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria, and the inter-reviewer agreement was high, which implies that the eligibility criteria were used in a similar way. Potentially relevant studies were then screened against the full text. Any differences detected during the screening or entire-text review processes were discussed, or reasons why agreement did not occur were determined through consultation with a third reviewer, and thus a consensus-based decision of inclusion.



The PRISMA flow diagram shown in Figure 1 is used to describe the process of selecting the studies to undertake the thematic synthesis. A total of 1,016 records were initially identified through database searching. After removal of duplicates and relevance-based screening, 244 records were screened at the title and abstract level, resulting in the exclusion of 234 records that did not meet the eligibility criteria. Ten full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which four were excluded due to being systematic reviews, dissertations, or duplicate records. Ultimately, six studies were included in the qualitative thematic synthesis.

Quality Appraisal

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative checklist. Quality assessment was not used as an exclusion criterion but instead informed the interpretation of findings and the assessment of

confidence in the synthesized themes. Altogether, the quality of methodology used in the included studies was moderate to high. The strengths that have been identified are common to all and include a clear intention of the study, suitable qualitative research designs, and comprehensive data collection techniques. The limitations reported were mostly connected with the lack of reflexivity and the description of analytical procedures that were not complete, and these aspects were considered when interpreting the synthesized results.

Data Extraction

The two reviewers extracted data via a standardized extraction form. Data extracted were also checked to be consistent, and disagreements were addressed through Discussion to make the qualitative data accurate and complete. The form included major study features, such as country, professional population, setting, and study design, and appropriate qualitative results. Only data derived from participants' accounts and authors' interpretations relating to criminal justice professionals' views of offenders with intellectual disabilities were included in the synthesis.

Thematic Synthesis

Data synthesis followed the three-stage thematic synthesis process described by Thomas and Harden. To begin with, the coding of extracted findings was done inductively in a line-by-line approach. Second, descriptive themes representing the common meanings across the studies were created to organize codes. Third, analytical themes were formulated with the use of interpretive comparison, which allowed exploring higher-order insights into the systemic, organizational, and attitudinal factors that formed the views of the professionals.

Reflexivity and Rigor

The members of the research team included criminal justice and mental health research professionals. To promote rigor, reflexive dialogues were to be maintained in the process of synthesis to evaluate actively the assumptions of the researchers and the way in which disciplinary perspectives could affect the process of coding and interpretation to reduce the impact of subjective bias. To record the coding decisions and theme development, an audit trail was kept. The emphasis was put on transparency and consistency in order to increase the credibility and reliability of the synthesized findings.

Results

Characteristics of Included Studies

This thematic synthesis has included six research articles that fit the inclusion criteria. These were carried out between 2021 and 2025 in different jurisdictions such as the UK, Australia, and Europe, and with criminal justice professionals of different roles, such as police officers, judges, probation officers, forensic clinicians, and prison staff. The designs used in all the studies were semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or qualitative aspects of mixed-methods research, which allowed delving into the perspectives of the professionals regarding the offenders with intellectual disabilities.

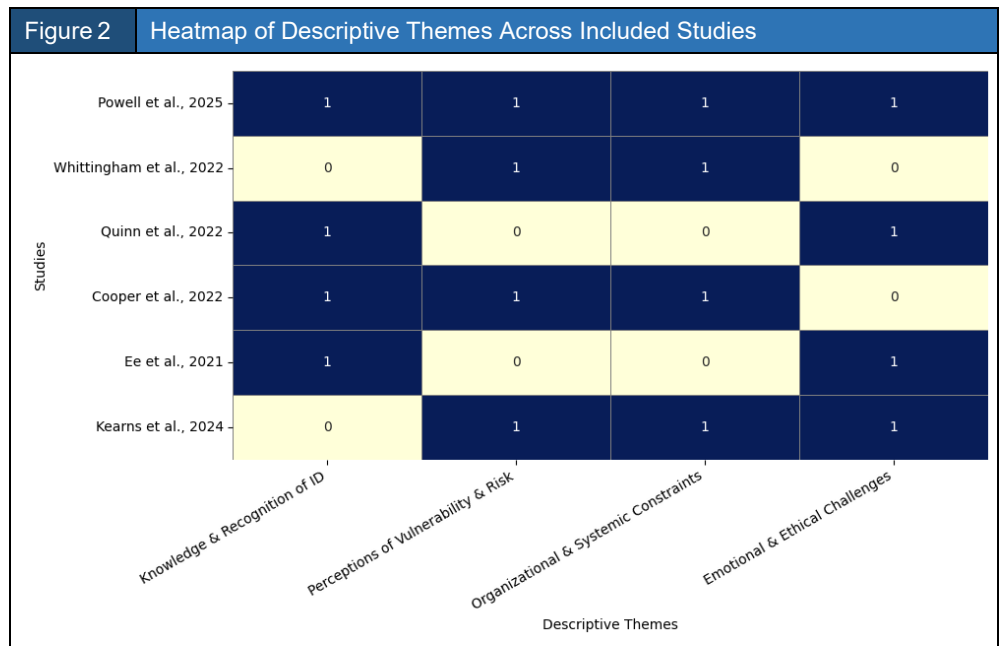
Table 1		Characteristics of Included Studies				
Powell et al.	2025	UK	Multiple (police, prison staff, judiciary)	56	Courts, custodial	Semi-structured interviews
Whittingham et al.	2022	Australia	Probation, community services	34	Community supervision	Qualitative component of scoping review
Quinn et al.	2022	UK	Forensic clinicians	22	Inpatient forensic units	Interviews
Cooper et al.	2022	UK	Police, probation, clinicians	40	Multi-agency	Systematic review with qualitative synthesis
Ee et al.	2021	UK	Mental health professionals	48	Mental health services	Meta-synthesis of qualitative studies
Kearns et al.	2024	Ireland	Intermediaries, legal professionals	30	Courts	Systematic review and synthesis

In the reviewed studies, most of which were performed in the UK and were based on semi-structured interviews, the results indicated a high level of focus on in-depth professional narratives. The subjects were also of diverse criminal justice environments, such as custodial, court-based, and community-based supervision. As shown in Table 1, the included studies provide a comprehensive overview of criminal justice professionals'

perspectives on offenders with intellectual disabilities, highlighting diverse professional roles, settings, and methodological approaches that enabled rich qualitative insights.

Descriptive Themes

Table 2		Descriptive Themes Across Included Studies	
Theme	Supporting Studies	Key Findings	
Knowledge and recognition of ID	Powell et al., Quinn et al., Ee et al.	Inconsistent identification; reliance on informal cues; limited training	
Perceptions of Vulnerability and Risk	Powell et al., Cooper et al., Whittingham et al.	Professionals perceive both Vulnerability and potential risk; decisions vary accordingly.	
Organizational and systemic constraints	Whittingham et al., Cooper et al., Kearns et al.	Resource limitations, policy gaps, and a lack of specialist services constrain interventions.	
Emotional and ethical challenges	Ee et al., Fernandes et al., Powell et al.	Professionals experience moral tension, frustration, and emotional strain.	



The coding of the 6 studies included, line-by-line, produced four descriptive themes that were repeatedly reported in multiple professional groups and criminal justice settings, implying that the reported challenges are widespread across the criminal justice practice as opposed to being context-specific. The former theme, knowledge and awareness of intellectual disability, indicated a great degree of variability in the knowledge and confidence of professionals in the identification of intellectual disability, with the majority of them depending on the behavioral indicators or on previous records, and indicating a lack of formal knowledge. The second theme, perceptions of Vulnerability and risk, also captured the continued struggles between the acknowledgement of the Vulnerability of individuals and their perception as a potential risk, which impacted the decision-making regarding supervision, safeguarding, and custodial actions. The third theme, organizational and systemic constraints, focused on the impact of resource constraints, ambiguous policies, and inadequate access to specialist services on professional judgment and practice. The fourth theme, emotional and ethical challenges, indicated that professionals frequently experienced moral tension, frustration, and emotional burden when attempting to balance care-oriented approaches with control and enforcement responsibilities.

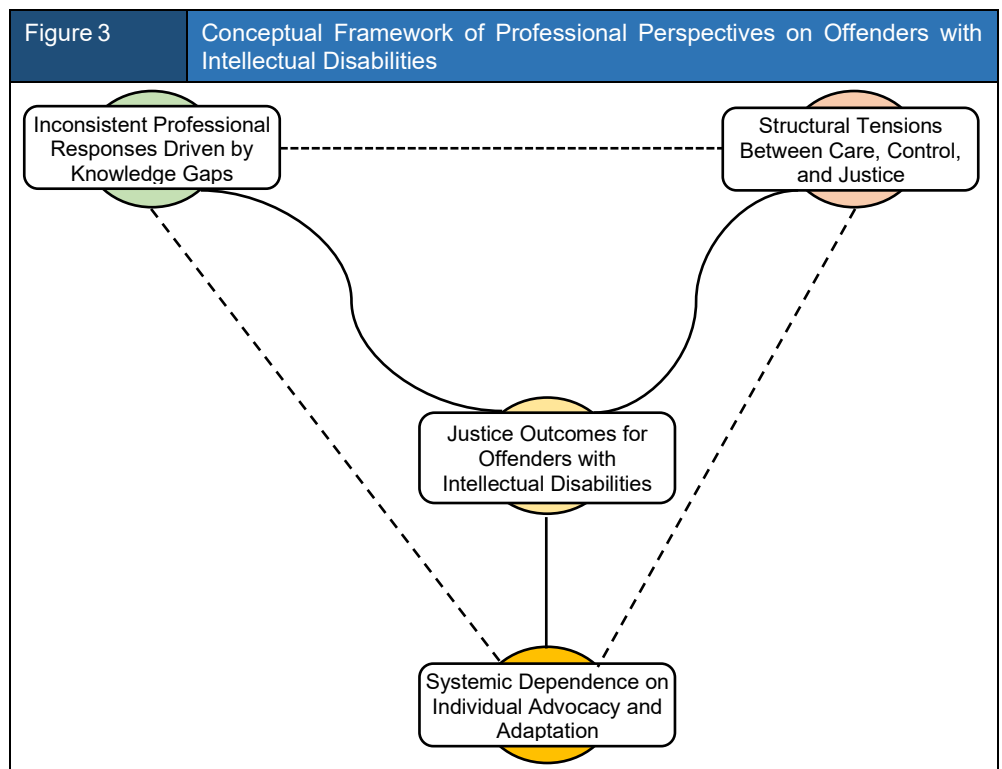
The thematic analysis revealed that there were four major areas in which the experiences of professionals were reflected: variability of knowledge and awareness of intellectual disability, balancing risk and vulnerability perception, effects of organizational and systemic constraints, and emotional and ethical issues faced by professionals when making decisions

(see Table 2). These themes sum up the practical and moral quandaries of handling offenders with intellectual disabilities by criminal justice professionals.

Figure 2 shows that the thematic synthesis of the six studies obtained revealed the existence of descriptive themes. A theme with a value of 1 denotes that the theme was mentioned in the study, whereas a theme with a value of 0 denotes that the theme has not been mentioned. The number graphically shows what themes are reported most frequently across the research and allows specifying whether specific professional groups or settings are covered or not.

Analytical Themes

Interpretive comparison of the descriptive themes formed the analytical themes, which allowed exploring the effects of individual knowledge, organizational structures, and professional discretion in more depth in criminal justice responses to offenders with intellectual disabilities. This interpretive synthesis yielded three additional higher-order themes of analysis. The initial theme, incoherence in professional reaction based on lack of knowledge, encompassed the results of inadequate training and disjointed instructions that brought about inconsistency in decision-making in various criminal justice environments. Structural tension between care, control, and justice is the second theme that underscored systematic pressures that tended to force professionals to focus on the risk management and procedures compliance aspects of their practice instead of the individualized support. Systemic reliance on individual advocacy and adaptation was the third theme, with much focus on the central place of professional discretion, informal workarounds, and expert intermediaries in facilitating access to reasonable adjustments and ensuring that offenders with intellectual disabilities receive fair treatment.



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focus on the central place of professional discretion, informal workarounds, and expert intermediaries in facilitating access to reasonable adjustments and ensuring that offenders with intellectual disabilities receive fair treatment.

Discussion

This thematic synthesis examined criminal justice professionals' views and experiences of working with offenders with intellectual disabilities, drawing on six qualitative studies conducted across multiple jurisdictions. The results indicate that there are uniform and integrated issues that influence professional decision-making, even though the roles, environments, and countries differ. In the studies included, it was possible to identify four descriptive themes and three higher-order analysis themes, and it is possible to emphasize the pervasive nature of these issues in criminal justice practice. One of the main discoveries of the synthesis was the high level of variability of knowledge of professionals and their awareness of intellectual disability. In the literature, researchers often based identification on unofficial behavioral indications or available records as opposed to formal screening, which demonstrates training and guidance deficiencies. Such a lack of knowledge directly led to the inconsistent professional reactions, as described in the first analytical theme, and had an impact on the decisions involving diversion, supervision, and access to reasonable adjustments. It was also found that there are ongoing tensions between the perception of persons as vulnerable and the controlled perceived risk. This ambivalent framing frequently led to precautionary or constraining reactions even in custodial or high-stakes settings when professionals realized that they needed to utilize support-based methods.

Organizational and systemic constraints became a damaging factor in practice. Gathering limited resources, a lack of inter-agency communication, and insufficient policy frameworks limited the ability of the professionals to act uniformly and fairly. These limitations supported the second theme of analysis, which points to structural tensions in the relationships between care, control, and justice that often placed risk management above individualized reactions. Therefore, synthesis found systemic reliance on individual advocacy and professional judgment, in which equitable results frequently depended on motivated practitioners or professional mediators and not on built-in systemic protections. These findings can have important implications for policy and practice. Greater awareness in the identification of intellectual disability, procedural advice, and better availability of specialist services should be implemented to decrease the variation in the response and dependence on individual advocacy. Embedding standardized screening and reasonable adjustments across justice pathways may improve equity and procedural fairness for offenders with intellectual disabilities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The evidence base has been mostly based on the UK-based research studies, which does not imply that the evidence is transferable to non-Western justice systems. Also, the differences in the quality of the methodology and reporting hampered comparative analysis between professional groups. Future studies ought to incorporate a broader geographical coverage and look at the views of professions that are not adequately represented.

Conclusion

It was a thematic synthesis that combined the results of six qualitative studies (2021 to 2025) that explored the opinions of criminal justice professionals on offenders with intellectual disabilities in various roles and contexts. The themes were four descriptive themes and three higher-order analytical ones, which indicated that issues pertaining to gaps in the knowledge, risk-vulnerability tensions, systemic constraints, and emotional burden are systematically reported in criminal justice settings. Notably, all six studies highlighted difficulties in the accurate recognition of intellectual disability, with professionals frequently relying on informal cues rather than standardized assessment procedures. In a similar manner, the conflict between care and risk-oriented responses was observed in various settings, which helped in the variability of professional decision-making. The findings indicate that current criminal justice responses remain heavily influenced by organizational limitations and fragmented guidance, resulting in a systemic reliance on individual advocacy and professional discretion to secure reasonable adjustments and fair treatment. While such discretionary practices can mitigate inequities, they also produce inconsistency and place disproportionate responsibility on individual practitioners. The development of standard screening mechanisms, specific training of criminal justice professionals, and better inter-agency protocols should be considered in future efforts in order to decrease the variability of practice. More studies are necessary, including more evidence-based researchers

beyond UK-dominated studies, analyzing the results in other legal systems, and the views of overrepresented groups of professionals. Criminal justice systems should be strengthened with structural provisions that will guarantee equal, uniform, and ethical reactions to intellectually disabled offenders.

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