

People with Intellectual Disabilities and Crime: Changes in Terminology, Attitudes and Interventions in the Czech Context*

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[10.15408/jch.v13i3.46855](https://doi.org/10.15408/jch.v13i3.46855)

Abstract

Supporting people with intellectual disabilities in crime prevention and post-imprisonment resocialisation is a key challenge for modern society. This expert article by Lukáš Stárek highlights the understudied issue of individuals with intellectual disabilities who commit crimes and serve sentences in the Czech prison system. Based on a literature review and an analysis of current legal frameworks and interventions, this paper aims to outline the evolution of terminology, shifting social attitudes, and changing professional approaches when working with this target group. Historically, terminology has shifted from stigmatising terms like "mental retardation" toward more humanistic language, namely "people with intellectual disabilities" (as adopted in ICD-11 by the WHO), to respect individual dignity and uniqueness. The article emphasizes the fulfillment of individual rights, respect for autonomy, and the enhancement of personal responsibility and adaptive capabilities. Within the Czech prison system, this study analyzes various integrated interventions, such as educational programs, social and financial skills training, psychological support, and community reintegration preparation to prevent recidivism. Successful resocialisation depends not only on strengthening correctional programs, but also on creating an inclusive environment outside prison walls. Joint efforts among professionals, families, and the general public are crucial to prevent social exclusion and enable individuals with intellectual disabilities to become equal members of society. In conclusion, the article provides practical recommendations for future penal policy improvements and social work practice.

Keywords: Individual Rights; Intellectual Disability; Prevention; Prison System; Resocialisation; Support

* Received: June 17, 2025, revised: July 13, 2025, accepted: July 19, 2025, published: December 30, 2025.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Intellectual disability is one of the least accepted forms of disability in society. As stated by Vágnerová, Hadj-Moussová and Štech (2004), it is a complex problem involving not only intellectual abilities but also other dimensions of personality such as emotions, communication skills and social adaptation. This disability affects individuals' ability to learn, develop independently and participate in wider social life. According to the Czech Statistical Office, 1 152 000 people with intellectual disabilities were registered in the Czech Republic in 2018, representing approximately 13% of the population (CSO, 2019). This increase highlights the need for a systematic approach to the inclusion of people with these disabilities in all areas of life, including areas such as the justice and prison systems.

The definition of intellectual disability has evolved in line with changing social norms and attitudes. Slowik (2022) describes intellectual disability as a syndromic limitation in intellectual ability that affects other aspects of personality, including emotional stability, communication skills, and social interaction. Although terms such as "mental retardation" or "psychiatric deficiency" were previously used, modern approaches prefer the term "intellectual disability" (Bazalova, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Terminological changes reflect society's increased sensitivity to stigma. Valenta and Müller (2021) stress that current terminology in psychopediatry should reflect a humanistic approach that respects the dignity and uniqueness of each person. This principle has become the basis for modern intervention strategies aimed at promoting the autonomy and inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in society.

This article focuses on one of the key but neglected areas, namely people with intellectual disabilities who commit crimes and serve prison sentences. Based on an analysis of current approaches and legislative frameworks, the need for comprehensive support for these individuals, including relapse prevention and preparation for reentry into society, will be discussed.

B. METHODS

This study applies a non-experimental qualitative research approach. The author collected and analyzed descriptive data in depth through a literature review as well as an analysis of legal documents and regulations in the Czech Republic. This qualitative method was used to explore complex phenomena related to changes in terminology, social responses, and the effectiveness of forms

of intervention and resocialisation for people with intellectual disabilities who come into contact with the law. By analyzing legislative documents (such as Act No. 108/2006 and Act No. 169/1999) and findings from scientific literature, this research successfully outlines the qualitative conceptual shift from a stigmatising medical approach toward a humanistic, human rights-based, and socially inclusive approach. The use of this qualitative method enables the author to formulate practical and holistic recommendations for the Czech prison system.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. General Characteristics of Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability is a wide-ranging and diverse phenomenon that affects individuals at several levels of their lives. In the literature, this issue is defined by different authors whose approaches often reflect the specifics of the times, culture, and social attitudes. Slowik (2022) characterizes intellectual disability as a complex syndromic limitation of intellectual abilities, which, however, also affects other components of personality, such as emotions, communication skills, adaptation, and overall social competence. This broad view includes not only cognitive functions but also the ability to respond to environmental stimuli and to act independently.

An important milestone in terminology was the transition from the term "mental retardation" to "intellectual disability". This shift, introduced by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), reflects efforts to remove stigma and emphasizes the individual's adaptive abilities as a key diagnostic element (Bazalova, 2023). The ICD-11 definition of intellectual disability encompasses significant limitations in intellectual function and adaptability, and the aetiology can be diverse and is often associated with the period of early development (Marková, Prázdna, & Jičínská, 2019).

Historically, there has been considerable terminological inconsistency in Czechoslovak and Czech literature. Bajo and Vašek (1994) identified more than 20 terms used in the period 1952-1989, including terms such as "mentally retarded," "mentally retarded," and "mentally defective." Valenta and Müller (2021) point out that the need to unify terminology led to the widespread use of the term "mental retardation", which has become a standard in educational, medical and social fields. Although the term was functional, current approaches emphasize the need for terminology that respects human dignity.

Current understanding of intellectual disability takes into account not only cognitive and intellectual aspects, but also the broader context of an individual's life. This approach is reflected in the humanistic framework described by Cimmann et al. (2020). The authors stress that disability is only one dimension of human identity and that the language used to describe it has significant ethical implications. In the Czech language, this approach is evident in the formulation "a person with intellectual disabilities", where the preposition "with" emphasises the individual's personality and their value as a whole being.

The social acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities has evolved over time in line with social progress. According to Hájková and Strnadová (2010), more frequent public contact with people with intellectual disabilities contributes to changing attitudes towards a more inclusive perception of these individuals. However, there are still significant challenges in the justice and prison sectors related to adapting and supporting this group.

2. Mental Disability and Crime

Individuals with intellectual disabilities represent a specific group that can be both perpetrators and victims of crime. However, this issue is often overlooked, highlighting the need for systematic research and targeted intervention. Limited cognitive abilities and low levels of critical thinking mean that people with intellectual disabilities can be easily influenced and manipulated. This vulnerability contributes to their involvement in criminal activities, often as accomplices or scapegoats (Bajcura, 2005).

In the European context, we can point to a Dutch study by Kea and van Oppenraaij (2021), which shows that 30% of prisoners have cognitive limitations. These individuals often commit minor crimes such as theft or fraud, many of them acting under the influence of those with higher intellectual abilities. At the same time, research suggests that adolescents with lower IQs tend to engage in more impulsive behavior and have higher exposure to risk factors such as low school performance, socioeconomic problems, or inappropriate family backgrounds (Koolhof et al., 2007).

In the Czech environment, according to Bajcura (2005), the most common crimes committed by persons with mental disabilities are property offences, often related to obtaining the basic necessities of life. When committing crimes in groups, these individuals are usually influenced by other offenders and are not fully aware of the consequences of their actions. However, this does not mean

that they should be exempted from responsibility, but it does point to the need for a special approach during the trial and execution of the sentence.

Persons with profound intellectual disabilities or severe intellectual disabilities do not usually commit crimes. Pavlovsky and colleagues (2009) report that these individuals are more often victims than perpetrators. Their vulnerability is due not only to cognitive limitations but also to their inability to adequately assess danger in social situations. This type of crime, referred to as "mate crime," includes cases where the perpetrator poses as a friend of the victim to take advantage of them (Doherty, 2015).

Although international research, such as the study by van Wijk, Hardeman and Scholten (2015), suggests a relationship between low IQ, criminal behaviour and increased recidivism, there is a lack of comprehensive data on prisoners with intellectual disabilities in the Czech environment. At the same time, family and social environments, including peer influence, appear to play a key role in the development of criminal behaviour. Prevention should focus on strengthening the social and communication skills of these individuals, enabling them to better cope with manipulative pressures and develop the ability to make responsible decisions.

3. Support and Assistance for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in The Prison System

Supporting people with intellectual disabilities requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account all aspects of their lives, including education, social skills, adaptation to the environment and preparation for independent living. In a prison environment, these needs are often even more pressing, as prison is a very challenging environment for these individuals. It is therefore necessary to provide targeted interventions and special programs to contribute to their adaptation and resocialization (Bajcura, 2005).

One of the key tools in the Czech prison system is specialised units for people with intellectual disabilities. These units were established on the basis of Act No. 169/1999 Coll., which obliges prison establishments to provide prisoners with mental disabilities with appropriate programmes and individual care. The specialised sections aim to minimise conflicts between prisoners, protect vulnerable individuals and prepare them for their return to society. The basis of their regime is systematic work with routine activities, therapeutic methods and education (Bajcura, Zange, 2019).

According to current data from the Prison Service of the Czech Republic, 36 specialized wards have been established in 25 prisons in 2022, five of which are exclusively for persons with mental disabilities. These units are run by professional teams consisting of psychologists, special educators, social workers, and other specialists who provide individual and group therapy, social skills training, and preparation for independent life after release (Jiříčka, Kejřová, 2015).

A key component of support in the prison environment is education aimed at developing social and communication skills. One example is the methodology for the development of social competences developed in the Czech Republic, which includes practical exercises focused on everyday situations such as interpersonal communication, managing stressful situations or navigating legal issues (SPMP CR, 2023). These courses aim to develop skills in prisoners that will enable them to better integrate into society upon release.

Pörtner (2009) stresses the importance of an individual approach to prisoners with intellectual disabilities. This approach allows for a focus on the unique needs of each individual, supporting their strengths and motivating them to develop themselves. Interventions should also include working with the prisoners' family environment, as the family often plays a key role in their resocialisation.

Despite the existence of specialised programmes, the Czech prison system faces several problems. Among the most important are the lack of qualified staff dedicated to working with people with intellectual disabilities and limited financial resources. Another problem is the lack of connection between the prison system and social services, which can complicate the reintegration of prisoners into society (Hanzelová, 2018).

Another challenge is the limited supply of alternative sentences for people with intellectual disabilities, which could reduce their exposure to the negative impact of the prison environment. These alternative forms of punishment, such as home confinement or community services, may be more appropriate and beneficial for their further development (Lukáš et al., 2018).

4. Prevention and Recommendations for Working with People with Intellectual Disabilities

Prevention plays a key role in minimising the risk of criminal behaviour by people with intellectual disabilities. A focus on education, social skills

development and family support is essential. These areas can contribute to greater resilience to manipulation, empowerment and better integration into society.

One of the main preventive tools is systematic education aimed at strengthening the competences of individuals with intellectual disabilities. As stated by Collot d'Escury (2005), educational programmes should include not only basic skills such as communication or conflict management, but also the development of more complex skills such as empathy and critical thinking. These programs can help people with intellectual disabilities to better recognize risky situations and protect themselves from possible manipulation.

The family environment plays a key role in prevention. The support of parents and loved ones is often crucial for the development of responsibility and self-esteem in individuals with intellectual disabilities. Organisations dedicated to supporting these families can provide educational courses, psychological counselling and other forms of assistance that contribute to improving the quality of life of the whole family (SPMP CR, 2023).

To work effectively with people with intellectual disabilities in the context of prevention and resocialization, it is essential to follow several key principles:

1. Individual approach: Pörtner (2009) stresses the importance of adapting the approach to the specific needs of each individual. This approach includes an analysis of the individual's abilities, interests, and motivations, which enables the development of targeted interventions.

2. Use of practical methods. For example, methodologies for developing social competences include training in reacting to dangerous situations, managing stress, and navigating everyday situations such as travelling or shopping (SPMP CR, 2023).

3. Interdisciplinary cooperation: Successful work with this target group requires the cooperation of professionals from different disciplines, including educators, psychologists, social workers and lawyers. This collaboration allows for a comprehensive view of the individual's needs and effective problem-solving (Hanzelová, 2018).

4. Promoting autonomy: The aim of all interventions should be to strengthen the autonomy of the individual and his/her ability to make decisions about his/her own life. This includes not only education, but also practical experiences that enable the individual to apply the acquired skills in a real-life setting (Collective of Authors, 2005).

Alternative sentences, such as house arrest or community service, can be a more effective way of working with people with intellectual disabilities. These forms of punishment reduce exposure to the negative influences of the prison environment while promoting the social inclusion of prisoners. However, sufficient support and supervision must be provided to achieve the desired outcomes (Lukáš et al., 2018).

Awareness and education of the general public is also an important part of prevention. Hájková and Strnadová (2010) point out that more frequent public contact with people with intellectual disabilities contributes to their acceptance and improved social attitudes. An informed society is better able to respond to the needs of this group and support their full inclusion.

Bačová (2024) conducted research in school settings ... Open and non-violent communication is another key element that contributes to a safe classroom climate. Teachers in innovative schools actively encourage students to express their opinions and feelings without fear of negative consequences. This approach includes regular discussions and reflections that allow students to share their experiences and work together to find solutions to potential problems. Open communication not only fosters an atmosphere of trust but also strengthens students' ability to reflect on their thoughts and emotions, which is important for their personal development. This type of communication also allows teachers to better understand and respond to students' individual needs, thus contributing to the overall quality of teaching. However, here too, we are concerned with stimulus and ideas - open and non-violent communication; understanding individual needs.

Social exclusion is discussed by Daněk and Klugerová (2023). Who note that this is a major issue that modern society is attempting to address. It has negative impacts not only on a local level but also on a national, European, and even global scale. In today's interconnected society, it is important to recognize that social exclusion issues in other countries or on other continents will have an impact on us. Therefore, it is crucial to strive for the elimination, prevention, and combat of social exclusion through all possible means.

D. CONCLUSION

People with intellectual disabilities are a vulnerable group who require specific support across different areas of life, including education, social skills, crime prevention and post-prison integration. The analysis identifies a number

of key challenges and opportunities that should be taken into account when developing policies and interventions targeting this group.

Summary of key findings

1. Impact of environment and family: family background and the quality of the social environment have a major impact on the development of an individual with intellectual disabilities. Lack of support in these areas can lead to social isolation, low self-esteem, and increased vulnerability to negative influences.

2. Lack of alternative punishments: the traditional prison environment is unsuitable for people with intellectual disabilities and can worsen their psychological and social condition. Alternative punishments, such as community service or house arrest, provide more effective solutions that promote their resocialisation.

3. The need for awareness and education: public awareness of the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities is key to their acceptance and inclusion. This awareness should be complemented by systematic training of professionals working with this group.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations can be made:

1. Strengthening the interdisciplinary approach. The involvement of experts from various fields (psychologists, educators, social workers, lawyers) in the development and implementation of interventions ensures a comprehensive solution to the problems of people with mental disabilities. Regular consultations and sharing of experience between these professionals can significantly improve the quality of services provided.

2. Development of alternative sentences. Legislation should include broader options for alternative sentences for people with intellectual disabilities. These punishments should be accompanied by targeted support, such as educational programmes that develop social skills and prepare the individual for a return to society.

3. Education and training of professionals. Professional training for justice, social services and education workers should include courses focused on the specifics of working with people with intellectual disabilities. Topics such as effective communication, ethical approach and prevention of stigma should be an integral part of these programmes.

4. Support for families. Families play a key role in supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities and should therefore be actively involved in prevention and re-socialisation programmes. Family support organisations should offer not only psychological support but also practical training, for example in financial planning or stress management.

5. Community intervention and awareness raising. Community-based programmes aimed at raising public awareness of intellectual disabilities can help improve the acceptance of these people in society. These programmes should include anti-stigma campaigns and the promotion of inclusive activities, for example through social or cultural events.

Further research is needed to effectively address the issue and should focus on the following areas:

- The impact of socio-economic factors on crime: analysing the relationship between poverty, education and crime among people with intellectual disabilities can reveal key risk factors and contribute to their elimination.

- Effectiveness of alternative sentences: A comprehensive evaluation of programmes such as house arrest or community-based services could provide data for their wider implementation.

- Specifics of work with adolescents: Adolescents with intellectual disabilities are a particularly vulnerable group that requires specific approaches. Further research should identify effective methods of prevention and support for this group.

Supporting people with intellectual disabilities in the field of crime prevention and re-socialisation after imprisonment is a key challenge for contemporary society. It is essential not only to strengthen existing programmes but also to create an inclusive environment that enables these people to participate fully in society. The joint efforts of professionals, families and the general public can contribute to enabling people with intellectual disabilities to become equal members of our society.

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