The effectiveness of treatment for male sex offenders with learning disabilities: a review of the literature
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CRD summary
This review assessed the effectiveness of interventions for male sex offenders with learning disabilities. The review methods were not described, therefore the potential for error and bias could not be assessed. However, given the paucity of methodologically sound studies, the authors' conclusions, which made suggestions for further research rather than attempting to inform practice, are appropriate.

Authors' objectives
To assess the effectiveness of interventions for male sex offenders with learning disabilities.

Searching
PsycINFO (via SilverPlatter), EMBASE, MEDLINE and the Cochrane Library were searched from 1990 using the reported search terms. The reference lists of identified studies were checked.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Inclusion criteria were not defined in terms of the study design.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies of any type of intervention for the relevant participants were included. The included studies used a variety of interventions including medication, psychotherapy, group and individual therapy, prison regimens, cognitive-behavioural therapy and multi-modal treatments (details were reported).

Participants included in the review
Studies of male sex offenders (excluding adolescents and children) with learning disabilities were eligible for inclusion. The included studies selected their own definition of offending behaviours.

Outcomes assessed in the review
Studies reporting any outcome were eligible for inclusion. The included studies measured a variety of outcomes, ranging from subjective and informal measures to reported rates of recidivism after treatment.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors did not state how studies were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
It was unclear if validity was formally assessed, but some aspects of validity were discussed in the text: study design, sample size and the methods used to assess the outcomes.

Data extraction
The authors did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction. The incidence of recidivism was extracted from each study.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were grouped by design and intervention type and combined in a narrative.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between the studies were discussed in the text and additional information was tabulated.

Results of the review
Thirty-one studies (more than 470 participants) were included. The studies were classified as case studies/series (11 studies, n=17), larger outcomes studies (8 studies, n=199), interventions of groupwork (8 studies, n=83) and retrospective studies (4 studies, n>171).

The included studies had methodological flaws: e.g. small sample size, lack of control group, use of multi-modal interventions making it impossible to identify any successful component, and lack of a formal assessment of the outcomes. In addition, the retrospective studies were subject to interpretation bias. These methodological flaws severely limit the reliability of the results presented.

Case studies.
Nine of the 11 studies reported no recidivism; these evaluated cyproterone acetate therapy, residential programmes for transferred prisoners, psychotherapy, cognitive group therapy, risperodone and multi-modal therapies. One case study reported an episode of ‘irresponsible behaviour’ but no offending after assisted covert sensitisation and individual counselling; a second reported an incidence of stalking after individual cognitive therapy; a third reported an increased interest in children with a reduction in the dose of medroxyprogesterone; and a fourth reported no offences, but a continuation of sexual behaviour after therapy with selective serotonin receptor inhibitors.

Larger outcomes studies.
Where reported, the rate of recidivism with treatment ranged from 0 to 30.8% (5 studies). One study reported a rate of 66% when treatment with anti-androgen was stopped, and another 84% within 12 months of a prison regime. Studies that did not report recidivism reported improvements in relationships with other prisoners or staff or in behaviour (3 studies).

Interventions of groupwork.
Where reported, the rate of recidivism with treatment ranged from 0 to 57.14% (6 studies). Studies that did not report recidivism reported improvements in cohesion and attendance and participation (2 studies).

Retrospective studies.
Where reported, the rate of recidivism with treatment ranged from 23 to 84.2% (3 studies). The fourth study reported a reduction in incidents in 8 of the 19 cases followed up.

Authors’ conclusions
Given the methodological flaws in the included studies, the authors concluded with suggestions for future research.

CRD commentary
The inclusion criteria were explicit for the participants. Given the nature of the research question, broad inclusion criteria for the interventions, study designs and outcomes appeared appropriate. Several relevant sources were searched but no attempts were made to locate unpublished studies, thus raising the possibility of publication bias. It was not clear whether any language limitations had been applied. The methods used to select studies and extract the data were not described, so it is not known whether any efforts were made to reduce reviewer error and bias. Some aspects of validity were discussed in the review and characteristics of the individual studies were reported.
Combining the studies in a narrative was appropriate given the heterogeneity between studies in relation to populations, interventions and outcomes. Given the paucity of methodologically sound studies, the authors' conclusions, which made suggestions for further research rather than attempting to inform practice, are appropriate.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**

Practice: The authors did not state any implications for practice.

Research: The authors stated that there is a need for further research to validate the Questionnaire on Attitudes Consistent with Sex Offences. They also stated that cooperation between research groups and agreement on standards would increase the quality of research. In addition, they suggested that research into the treatment of sex offenders on the autistic spectrum may be useful.

**Bibliographic details**


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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.