

What is stigma?

Stigma refers to negative attitudes, stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination directed towards a person or group. People who have been involved in the justice system often face stigma long after they have completed their sentence or order.

The stigma around involvement in the justice system can create barriers which can make it harder for individuals to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their communities.

Further resources

The Community Justice Ayrshire Partnership uses its [website](#) to increase awareness, knowledge and confidence in Community Justice.

On the Community Justice Scotland [website](#) you can find resources explaining rehabilitation, reintegration, community sentences, and public perceptions.

Or contact the CJAP support team at communityjusticeayrshire@north-ayrshire.gov.uk

Key message

Reducing stigma helps people rebuild their lives, strengthens communities, and supports positive outcomes for everyone. People should not be defined solely by their past but recognised for their potential to contribute and change.

Every interaction matters. By challenging stigma and treating people with dignity, we can help create safer, fairer, and more inclusive communities.

One of the thirteen priority actions in the [National Strategy for Community Justice](#) is

“Support integration and reduce stigma by ensuring the community and workforce have an improved understanding of and confidence in community justice”

The Community Justice Ayrshire Partnership must work towards this action.

Examples of different types of stigma

- **Public stigma:** Negative attitudes held within communities and society, e.g. *“All people with justice involvement are dangerous.”*
- **Self-stigma:** Internalised negative beliefs leading to shame and reduced self-worth, e.g. *“I have spent time in prison, so I do not deserve help.”*
- **Perceived stigma:** Fear of being judged because of personal circumstances, e.g. *staying inside or avoiding others after release from prison.*
- **Structural stigma:** Policies or systems that limit access to support, e.g. *people with active addiction facing barriers to mental health services.*
- **Associative stigma:** Stigma experienced through association with others, e.g. *family members being blamed, judged, or excluded.*

Common misconceptions

Myth: People who have committed an offence cannot change.

Fact: Many people involved in the justice system do not reoffend and go on to make positive contributions to society.

Myth: A criminal conviction defines a person forever.

Fact: A person's offence is only one part of their life story. People are capable of growth, learning, and rehabilitation.

The impact of stigma

Stigma can result in:

- Social exclusion and isolation
- Poor mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced confidence and self-esteem
- Fewer opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration
- Increased risk of returning to offending behaviour

Although there will always be a need for prison where a risk of serious harm is posed, the international evidence shows that imprisonment can have damaging effects, through weakening social ties, creating stigma, adversely impacting on employability and housing stability, and ultimately increasing the likelihood of reoffending.

What can we do?

As Staff

- Use respectful, trauma informed, person-centred language (e.g. “person with convictions” rather than labels such as “offender”).
- Challenge stereotypes and assumptions.
- Focus on strengths, progress, and potential.
- Treat people with dignity and respect.

As Community Members

- Be open-minded and avoid making assumptions.
- Understand that blame, shame, and judgement does not promote change.
- Support opportunities for employment, volunteering, and inclusion.
- Recognise that everyone deserves a chance to move forward.
- Understand that safer communities are supported by successful rehabilitation.

