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SherlockAI and the Sentencing Review: AI-Assisted Radical Help

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Introduction

The Independent Sentencing Review highlights the potential of AI for supporting behavioural change in criminal justice involved people and identifies SherlockAI as deserving further exploration and evaluation to realise that potential (p.135). SherlockAI was co-founded by criminal justice involved people in partnership with the authors, and in this article, we explain how SherlockAI offers a distinctive and innovative resource. Both the authors are part of the SherlockAI team and this short article offers insights into why the innovative approach of this particular app resonates with the findings of the review at a time when there are ongoing emergent developments in mobile-based technologies to encourage and support desistance (Bartels, 2023; Knight et al., 2024; McGreevy, 2017; Morris and Graham, 2019) and ongoing interest in Hilary Cottam's work on radical help and radical care (Cottam, 2018; Cottam, 2021).

The sentencing review and the role of technology

Chapter eight of the report explores how technology can enhance offender management in the community, addressing immediate operational needs

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while enabling long-term transformation in the criminal justice system. It emphasises streamlining processes, improving outcomes and integrating innovations like AI, while stressing the need to 'get the basics right' by updating outdated IT systems and ensuring human oversight. The challenges of an IT system which the report describes as 'outdated and clunky' are familiar to anyone working in criminal justice or with criminal justice agencies, as are the problems of lack of appropriate and up-to-date facilities and hardware provision.

In the report, current technologies such as electronic monitoring (GPS for location tracking, radio frequency for curfews and transdermal tags for alcohol monitoring) are highlighted but noted as underutilised and operating in siloes. The review found that integration of technology in offender management is limited, relying heavily on basic ankle tags and paper-based processes. Greater use of technology creates issues such as potential biases embedded in AI and reflecting structural inequalities, privacy concerns in data-sharing and ethical issues. Electronic monitoring programmes face delivery problems, potential harm to families due to curfews and require safeguards. Increased community supervision involving multiple orders may strain resources, increasing demands for cross-agency coordination.

The recommendations made in the chapter are guided by three principles: prioritisation (freeing probation officers for high-value tasks), protecting the public (real-time risk monitoring) and personalisation (tailored supervision and rehabilitation). There are five proposed key recommendations, drawing on evidence gathered, international examples (for example Australia, South Korea and the USA) and stakeholder input:

1. Use existing technology more effectively to protect the public and improve rehabilitation.
2. Invest in the rapid expansion of successful pilots in technology.
3. Require all technology developed for offender management to be integrated with behavioural science.
4. Improve data-sharing across agencies working with the Probation Service.
5. Further collaboration with industry on research and development to explore new technologies for service transformation, including advanced AI.

The chapter concludes with considerations for the future. As technology integrates further, the government must monitor unintended consequences, such as reduced human interaction and sentencers' and justice system professionals' lack of confidence due to safety and efficacy

concerns. Evaluations should be shared widely to build confidence, combined with collaboration with the AI Safety Institute. At a macro level, technology could help track system-wide impacts on rehabilitation and reoffending, including 'success stories' where interventions have led to positive outcomes. It is important to note that the chapter promotes increased use of facial recognition technologies, which is controversial and merits separate discussion, as more extensive use of facial recognition in public spaces does not overlap with the explicit aims and operation of SherlockAI as a tool for help rather than monitoring or detection. Overall, the chapter advocates for technology as a tool to support, not replace, human elements in reducing crime and protecting victims.

SherlockAI

SherlockAI is named within the chapter's discussion of new technologies, describing it as a 'digital life coach for prison leavers, guiding them to services like housing and benefits based on their personal circumstances' (p.135). In the chapter there is a specific recommendation that all technology developed for offender management should include 'nudge-based' techniques, which are behavioural science tools that encourage people to make better choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). These can include basic 'nudges' such as court and appointment notifications and reminders. SherlockAI is an AI-powered chatbot (called Sherlock) that acts as a personalised guide through the criminal justice system. By understanding each user's unique mix of location, offences and personal details, including substance abuse challenges, Sherlock provides tailored recommendations, synthesising real-time information from legal databases, non-profit organisations and local agencies. It uses language suited to any literacy level and offers friendly conversations to guide its users towards positive choices.

That is, it uses 'nudges' based on its Reintegration Guidance Framework (RGF), which is a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to supporting people with backgrounds of criminal justice involvement in their journey towards successful community reintegration. Grounded in psychological research, criminology and trauma-informed practice, the RGF emphasises the importance of choice and agency while encouraging pro-social decision-making. The framework ensures that all guidance provided is actionable and pro-social, offering concrete resources and support networks while maintaining compliance with legal and offender management requirements. Perhaps most significantly, the RGF frames practical actions as constructive steps in personal transformation, using empowering language that helps individuals see themselves as active agents in creating new, positive identities. This approach recognises that

successful reintegration is not merely about avoiding future criminal behaviour, but about supporting individuals to build lives characterised by dignity and purpose.

In their 2016 article reflecting on the past history of the uses of technology in offender monitoring, including the well-known link between ankle tags and Spider-Man and the less well-known earlier relationship between location monitoring and West Side Story, Gable and Gable explore potential futures for developing technological interventions that do not simply provide monitoring but offer what they call a 'persuasive technology' (Gable and Gable, 2016). This would reward users for prosocial activities. In addition, and more imaginatively, the authors explore how these rewards could become part of a framework where users are, along their pathway, given opportunities to become positively engaged with other people and to behave in a pro-social way. SherlockAI can be understood as a form of persuasive technology.

SherlockAI is founded on lived experiences and focuses on the needs of the criminal justice involved individual rather than offender management, although information on risk and risk-based restrictions and requirements can be incorporated into each user's profile. The 'nudges' could be argued to 'advise, assist and befriend' in the mould of the traditional characterisation of the role of the probation officer, resonating with recent work on hope and probation (Ali et al., 2025).

SherlockAI is not values-neutral; the foundational decision-making framework on which it bases its suggestions is designed to ensure that all responses not only comply with the criminal law but also reflect pro-desistance and pro-social behaviour. It is not only a persuasive technology but a dynamic one, learning from individual feedback and user insights.

Radical help and radical care

The SherlockAI approach is built on firm theoretical foundations related to human connection, such as radical help and radical care (Cottam, 2018). As Jake Phillips points out in his comments on the review report, 'we know that people are more likely to be successful in moving away from harmful lifestyles if they are connected to and invested in the communities and societies of which they are a part' (Phillips, 2025:233). SherlockAI encourages connections and, being technology-based, can be welcomed by people for whom in-person contact is challenging, including some neurodivergent people, disabled people and people experiencing mental health difficulties.

In a previous article in the BJCJ we outlined Hilary Cottam's concept of 'radical help' (Cottam, 2018) and then reflected on the RECOOP prison Buddy programme for people in prison aged 50+ as an example of this 'radical help' within a prison context (Nicholson and Codd, 2025). We argue that human relationships and the radical help of mutual aid are key to bringing about behavioural change (Nicholson and Codd, 2025) and that SherlockAI's distinctively democratic and cooperative AI solution enhances these human relationships. Radical help has human relationships at its heart and brings about behavioural change by creating new ways of living and growing through mutual aid. When people feel supported by strong human relationships behavioural change happens, and when new systems make that change feel easier, people want to change (Cottam, 2018). This reflects the links between social capital, mutual aid and desistance. We argue that SherlockAI provides this kind of new system by creating an innovative form of human relationship supported by AI within a framework of AI-supported mutual aid, and that it enhances rather than replaces the traditional role of human relationships in making behavioural change happen (Weaver, 2015).

Going beyond this, Hilary Cottam has spoken more recently about 'radical care' (Cottam, 2021, 2023). While not involving 'care' in the traditional sense, SherlockAI includes elements around health and well-being and thus can prompt people to take actions to promote their own health and wellbeing and encourage professional help-seeking where appropriate. This may not be identical to Cottam's 'radical care', but is 'radical caring'. Indeed, for some people leaving prison, caring families and support networks may not exist, and thus SherlockAI can provide elements of care but also encourage people into settings, groups and connections where care becomes more visible and readily available.

Conclusions

The Independent Sentencing Review recognises the potential for technological interventions, including AI, to support not only criminal justice agencies, professionals and staff but also to support and encourage people involved with the criminal justice system to avoid offending again and to build new and positive identities. SherlockAI has been developed by a multi-disciplinary team including people with lived experience of the criminal justice system that, with appropriate resourcing and investment, provides an innovative, dynamic and evidence-based tool which has great potential to make a significant positive impact.

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