

Train police to adapt to autism, urge researchers

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Our latest psychology study highlights how more must be done to equip police officers with the skills to adapt when they come into contact with autistic people.

Seven out of ten autistic adults were dissatisfied with their experiences with the police, reporting discrimination, a lack of clarity and feeling that their needs were not met, according to a new study published by psychologists from our University with colleagues at City University London.

These responses, which are published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, were echoed by the experiences of [police officers](#) in England and Wales, with one in five police officers being

dissatisfied with how they had worked with autistic individuals and only a minority of police officers having received training on autism.

The results emphasise the need for training that is tailored to specific policing roles, such as uniformed officers and specialist interviewers.

Tailoring responses to adapt to autism

Involvement with the police can be a difficult experience for anyone, but especially for someone with autism. There are no figures for autistic involvement in the [criminal justice](#) system, but evidence suggests that individuals with autism can and do come into contact with the legal system, as victims, witnesses and suspects.

There are over 700,000 people with the condition in the UK, but detecting autism isn't easy as there is no characteristic appearance associated with the condition – autistic people look just like anyone else, and not all behaviours associated with autism are very obvious.

Speaking about the study, Dr Katie Maras from the Department of Psychology, who co-authored the report, explained: "It is essential that police feel better equipped with role-specific training about autism, and that they have the institutional support that allows them flexibly adapt their procedures in order to better support people with autism."

Co-author Dr Laura Crane from City University London said: "Contact with police can be a stressful event. As a result, police officers, especially those in frontline roles, need to be aware of possible signs of autism."

Understanding the challenges from both perspectives

Such signs can include problems with social interaction (such as avoiding eye contact), problems with language and communication (literal understanding), and also poor behavioural flexibility (for example, obsessional interests).

To find out more about police officers' experiences of people with autism, the team used an online survey to gather the experiences and views of 394 police officers from England and Wales. They found that 42 per cent of officers were satisfied with how they had worked with individuals with autism, with 21 per cent reporting dissatisfaction (37 per cent gave a neutral response).

Reasons for this varied, but a variety of barriers were cited, such as time and organisational constraints, as well as a lack of role-specific training, with just 37 per cent of officers having received training on autism.

Using a different questionnaire, 31 autistic adults and 49 parents were asked about their experiences. They were also largely dissatisfied with their experience of the police and echoed the need for police training on autism. The majority of parents (74 per cent) and [autistic adults](#) (69 per cent) were dissatisfied with their experiences, reporting perceived or fear of discrimination, a lack of clarity and explanation, and feeling that their needs were not met.

In particular, many autism community respondents felt that an inappropriate physical environment (for instance interview rooms, custody suites) coupled with a lack of appropriate support and explanation led to emotional stress, along with breakdowns in communication.

Dr Crane added: "Autistic people are a vulnerable group within the criminal justice system. High quality training and support for police who may encounter autistic people within their role will ensure that the

experience for all involved improves to the necessary level."

Expanding this work

Dr Maras has recently been awarded ESRC Future Research Leader funding to develop her work supporting adults with autism. The new funding will enable her to expand her research into developing support for the challenges people with [autism spectrum disorder](#) face in other important real life contexts, in particular for job interviews and medical consultations. Worth nearly £300,000, her project will run up until 2018.

Commenting on the funding, she said: "I'm thrilled to receive this award. People with autism are often disadvantaged in employment, healthcare and police interviews because their impairments in social and cognitive processes - such as memory and communication - can affect their ability to relay relevant and important information. This research aims to elucidate the difficulties that people with [autism](#) have in reporting information in these contexts, and to develop a method of interviewing to support them."

More information: Laura Crane et al. Experiences of Autism Spectrum Disorder and Policing in England and Wales: Surveying Police and the Autism Community, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s10803-016-2729-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2729-1)

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