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Autistic People and their Families: Calls to the Police

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Purpose

Autistic people and their families sometimes have difficulties that require help from the police, but little is known about their contacts with police. This study aims to examine first contacts from autistic people and their families with the police.

Design/methodology/approach

In this study, in one typical city in England, a database that records all calls to the police (over a period of approximately two months) was analysed to examine the extent to which the calls concerned autistic people.

Findings

It was found that 2% ($n = 78$) of the total of 3,654 calls concerned autistic people and their families. About half of the cases related to autistic children and half to autistic adults, with family members being the most frequent callers to the police. In over a quarter of the cases, the calls concerned missing persons, and in about one sixth, they involved the need for support and a similar number involved disputes (usually within the family). The calls were significantly different from non-autistic calls to the police.

Research limitations/implications

Despite some limitations, these data provide the first snapshot of autistic people's initial contacts with the police.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that autistic people have difficulties with communication, social cognition and social participation, so that they tend to have fewer friends and are more often rejected and deliberately excluded from relationships than their neurotypical peers (Chamberlain et al. 2007; Locke et al. 2010; Whitehouse et al, 2009). Perhaps partly as a result of this, they are well known to be particularly vulnerable to social coercion, bullying and abuse in a variety of settings, including in school and in their local community (Cappadocia et al, 2012; Sterzing et al, 2012). It seems likely that this is to some extent due to widespread discrimination against people who are seen by others as 'different', and it may be that the risk of victimisation is exacerbated by the difficulties autistic people have with communication and emotional regulation (Cappadocia et al 2012). At any rate, this increased vulnerability to victimisation is especially worrying for autistic people and for their families, given the very high rates of peer victimization reported (Cappadocia et al. 2012; Sterzing et al. 2012). In these situations, where autistic people are victims of discrimination, bullying or abuse, there may be a need for intervention from the police, but it seems that very little is known about the extent to which police are called in to assist autistic people who may be victims of crime.

Autistic people may also be suspected of crimes at times. The evidence from well-designed research studies suggests that they commit fewer crimes than their neurotypical peers (King & Murphy, 2014; Collins et al, 2023; Bowden et al, 2023). Nevertheless, autistic people do sometimes engage in a variety of illegal activities, including aggressive disputes with other people, acquisitive crimes, like theft, and occasionally serious crimes, like rape or arson (Bowden et al, 2023). In these kinds of circumstances, autistic people may of course come into contact with the police. While they should be accorded some reasonable adjustments in the police station in the UK, such as Appropriate Adults² (AAs), a number of studies have

² In [English law](#), an **Appropriate Adult** is a parent, guardian or social worker, or any responsible person over 18, as specified in the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#). An AA must be called by police whenever they detain

found that these are not always provided (Crane et al, 2016; Judge et al, submitted). Indeed, it seems that autistic people may not always understand what is going in the police station or in courts when they are suspected of crimes (Judge et al., submitted).

Very few studies examine how the police first become involved with autistic people (exceptions being Rava et al 2017; Tint et al 2017) but it seems that autistic people and their families often feel the police did not treat them well (Crane et al, 2016; Judge et al, submitted). However, it is known that police have little training in autism (Chown, 2010; Christensen et al, 2023; Crane et al, 2016; Gardner et al, 2019) and at times they may be unaware of autistic people's difficulties, since autistic people often do not tell police about their autism (Crane et al, 2016; Judge et al, submitted).

This study examined the ways that autistic people (and their families) first come into contact with the police, either as victims of crimes or suspects of crimes.

Method

The study was made possible through collaboration of Tizard Centre at the University of Kent, with the local police. It was a mixed-methods study, with two parts, which were designed in collaboration with Police. We aimed to:

- Understand how people were identified as autistic by police services and gain initial insight into the prevalence, characteristics, and journeys through police services of autistic individuals, based on the current police data recorded
- In a second part of the study, the views of police service professionals were gathered, in relation to the current regulations, processes, information recording, and support services in place for autistic people who come into contact with the police. This part of the study will be separately reported.

or interview a child (under 18) or [vulnerable adult](#). They must be present for a range of police processes, including interviews, intimate searches and identification procedures, as detailed in the [Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#) (PACE) Codes of Practice.

Participants & measures

The first part of the study used data that were routinely collected by the police. The police employ a number of different databases for different purposes, and these are summarised in Table 1. Some of the IT systems for these databases are modern and flexible and able to adapt to provide analysis, whilst others are 'legacy' systems and quite inflexible in the way that they can categorize and analyze data. The Police Force Control Room (FCR) database, STORM, upon which this part of the research was based, is a legacy system and relatively inflexible in terms of changing the categories of data that it collects. The benefit of STORM is that it is the only system which contains all the crime and non-crime police contact records, as it is a record of every call to the police. For many incidents it is not clear at the time of the initial report whether they involve crimes or not. Following further investigation, some will be classed as crimes, registered and further detailed on ATHENA (see Table 1), with an initial report on STORM, whilst others, which may initially have appeared to be crimes may not be recorded as such, and so leave no trace elsewhere. For example, family and neighbour disputes short of a crime may only be recorded on STORM.

By far the majority of incidents recorded in STORM arise from telephone calls directed to the Police Force Control Room, mostly by members of the public (according to Thomas et al, 2021, police calls regarding individuals in the community needing mental health support are a very small number, roughly 1% of such calls). In the Police Force Control Room the details of the caller and incident are typed into the system and an initial classification or 'call type' is attached to the incident. This initial classification is selected from a fixed menu of 25 incident types. At the conclusion of the police involvement in the incident, a final 'call type' is coded. This is likely to be a more accurate assessment of the nature of the incident as it is based on a clearer and lengthier analysis, but it is selected from the same fixed menu. Finally, a closing numerical code is added which slightly extends the range of types of incidents and offers a possibility for a qualification of the earlier types (a list of final or 'closing' codes and their meanings can be obtained from the first author).

Examples of these classifications are set out below in Table 2.

(Table 2 about here)

The police assessment of incidents on STORM is concerned with describing the type of incident, not the type of person involved. The police guidance states: *Thereafter incidents should be closed with the code that most obviously reflects what the incident is principally about.* Hence it is not *intended* to assist with research about people. The limitations are that only one code can be used at a time so a second or third qualifying code cannot be added (this would be possible in some police force systems and would for example enable a first code of 'disturbance' to be qualified by 'mental health' issue or other qualifiers in other databases; however this is not possible in STORM).

Another limitation is that new codes cannot be added, so for example there was no code for 'mental health' amongst these preset STORM codes at the time of this research.

Consequently, this research employed an alternative tactic: Police operators also record on STORM a brief narrative of incidents in 'free text' within such records. This is searchable to a restricted degree. The method refined for this research was to search this free text for strings of text such as "autis" (which would capture autistic and autism) and "asperg" (which captures Aspergers). There is a limit to the number of incidents that can be included in such a search. The system 'times out' and closes the search after a fixed period of time. The larger the number of incidents included in a single search, the longer it takes and so if more than perhaps 100 incidents are free text searched at once, the search shuts down without producing a result. It is a limitation of the method that batches of incidents have to be recorded and then the output data, exported to excel, has to be merged with the data from previous searches to complete a full record.

Ethical issues

A specific difficulty in this part of the research concerned access to personal data subject to the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR is European legislation effective from May 2018, that

enhances individuals' control over their personal data and establishes strict guidelines for organisations handling such data). The police records were subject to the GDPR and could not be fully shared with University researchers, without the informed consent of all parties. Consequently, the STORM data were anonymised by a police volunteer (AT), as in the example above. As a trained and vetted police volunteer he could directly access the IT systems, anonymise the data and share it with the researchers. A second police volunteer

assisted in coding some of the incidents to ensure reliability (see below under Procedure). Thus the University researchers were analysing secondary data. The study was approved by the ethics committee at University of Kent.

Procedure

Almost two complete months of data (4th March to 26th April) for the chosen year were extracted by the police volunteer from the STORM database for a specified urban area of a particular county in the south of the UK. The urban area was a city of approximately 67,000 inhabitants and had typical crime rates (98.8 crimes per 1000 people per year) for areas with medium size cities (the crime rate was somewhat lower than in major cities like London but higher than in rural areas). These data on STORM contained all incidents entered on STORM for that city, for that period. The free text of those incidents was then searched for the words 'autis', 'Asperg' and 'ASD', as described above. Examples of the basic police data from STORM are shown in Table 2 (these examples involved people with autism). It can be seen that for the incidents identified through the free text searches, the anonymous identifying and classifying details are also extracted (see Table 2). The incident reference includes the date, set out so that it is ordered in chronological sequence (the year has been removed to protect anonymity but it was a typical year and preceded the Covid outbreak). The first incident in Table 2 is 497th incident in the county on the 4th of March; the last is the 1511th in the county on 6th March. Only incidents occurring in the chosen city of the county were downloaded (the numbering is allocated county-wide, so that each incident in the county has a unique number).

Each incident log containing the search terms was then read to ensure that the search term was present. In addition, in this study, whenever an incident was found which concerned a person with autism, the next incident in STORM was also selected, and these 'next incidents' acted as an unbiased comparison group, relating to non-autistic people. Where the 'next incident' referred also to an autistic person, the next but one incident was chosen for the unbiased comparison group.

Following this data extraction from STORM, the police volunteer derived an 'incident type' from the free text. The age and gender of the autistic person (where known) was listed, along with a unique identifier so that they remained anonymous but repeat contacts with

individuals could be considered. Unlike police incident codes, this analysis of incident types was concerned with the role or behaviours of the autistic individuals, deduced from the free text regarding the incident. The 'incident type' was assessed for reliability by comparing two independent raters (first and second police volunteers), who independently checked that the search terms produced the same list of incidents, for the months chosen, and that they coded the first 20 incidents from the free text in the same way, as regards behaviour, or 'incident type'.

The 'incident types' used were:

- Aggressive behaviour – unmanageable behaviour, often violent or uncontrollable, including hitting others, throwing objects, threatening others where restraint was needed. (In the police codes this appears as a range of crimes or disorder).
- Inappropriate sexualized behaviour. This may include sexual assault but most commonly concerns sexualized images either as offender or victim or indeed both ('victim' is also separately coded, see below).
- Crime – either as victim or offender ('victim' is also separately coded, see below). This is separated from unmanageable behavior and from aggressive behavior, and usually concerns behaviours such as theft of property, as opposed to unmanageable behaviour.
- Missing person (misper) – these are people who have gone missing and are reported to the police because there was concern that they would come to harm. This could be viewed as a kind of behaviour and is the category which is most consistent in its assessment by the police.
- Bullying – physical or verbal abuse of others, either as victim or perpetrator. Again it is a type of offensive behaviour but in most cases the autistic person is the subject or victim (this 'victim' status is also separately coded, see below).
- Harassment – where an individual harasses another, by behaviour that demeans, humiliates or embarrasses a person
- Need for support – where someone contacts the police as a way of getting, or trying to get, support.
- Dispute – this is a family argument, often over the care of the autistic individual, not always directly involving the autistic individual. Sometimes these 'disputes' were

between two families, and sometimes they were reported by members of the public, who were concerned at the sounds of a major dispute and worried for individuals involved.

- Neglect – where someone, through age or incapacity, is unable to care for themselves and is thought to suffer neglect.
- Accidental – accidental call of 999 (the police contact number in the UK), not intended by the caller

Separately, the person with autism was also coded as the victim, if appropriate, when a crime or potential crime was involved.

Some people came into contact with the police repeatedly, and these were indicated in the 'frequent' column. Some incidents occurred several times at the same address, and this was indicated by 'repeat address' (often these were care homes for several people).

The setting where the issue arose was also coded from the free text. These were in the family 'home'; in connection with the 'family' but not at home; in a 'care' setting; in 'school' or in a 'public' place.

Table 3 gives examples from 3 cases of autism-related incidents.

(Table 3 about here)

Results

Between 4th of March and 26th of April in the chosen year, in this city, a total of 3654 incidents were recorded on STORM, of which 78 (2%) related to autism or Asperger syndrome (no incidents of 'ASD' were found, but some of the people identified had additional reported diagnoses, such as ADHD, also noted in the free text). An unbiased comparison group of 'next' incidents for non-autistic people was also selected, as described above.

Incidents involving autistic people

Of these 78, the majority involved males with autism or Asperger syndrome (70.5% of incidents), with only 29.5% involving females. Many involved adults (46%, i.e. 36 incidents),

while 54% (i.e. 42 incidents) concerned children (<18 years). Table 4 shows where the incidents took place.

(Table 4 about here)

The person calling the police was by no means always the person with autism, as can be seen in Table 5. Close family members were most common (mainly mothers, less often fathers, and once a grandmother).

(Table 5 about here)

As regards the types of incident, Table 6 below shows that the most frequent types were 'missing person' incidents, followed by incidents in which the person was seeking support. Typically the 'missing person' incidents involved calls from worried family carers (n=9), paid carers (n=7), school staff (n=2) or members of the public (n=2). On the other hand, the 'need for support' incidents came mainly from autistic individuals themselves (n=11), with one family member and one friend also calling for support for the autistic individual. It can be seen that aggressive behaviour and crimes, harassment and bullying appeared quite often, and the autistic individuals were often the victims, rather than the suspected perpetrators. Calls about sexual behavior were rare but in all three cases involving this code, it was the alleged perpetrator who had autism (i.e. not the victim). Only one case of suspected neglect appeared in the sample, and this resulted from the only call from a healthcare worker, who was concerned that an autistic person was being neglected.

Some incidents were complex and could have been coded in several ways: for example, one call from school staff involved a boy with autism who appeared to have gone missing from school (coded as 'missing person'). He was later found to have locked himself in the toilet all day because he was being bullied (not coded as 'bullying', as the reason for the call to police was that he was a missing person).

Some calls were repeated, in relation to the same person, on a second (or more) occasion. In all there were 24 calls that were coded as repeatedly coming from the same caller, mostly these concerned 'missing persons' (8 repeats) or 'need for support' (11 repeats). In these

cases, it seemed likely that the person with autism or their family was in some considerable distress.

An examination of police codes (made by the officer receiving the call), showed similar results to the police volunteer's 'incident types'. The police codes break down in 25 or more possible codes but some can be summed together so that it could be seen that for the police closing codes the largest 3 categories were assaults, concerns for welfare, and missing persons.

(Table 6 about here)

Incidents involving the non-autistic comparison group

In comparison, for the incidents **not** involving someone with autism, i.e. the general population sample of incidents on STORM, the codes were rather different.

To begin with, 85% of the incidents concerned adults and only 13% concerned children: this was significantly different from the autism incidents where proportionately fewer were about adults (46%) and more were about children (54%). This was a statistically significant difference: chi square 27.45, $p < 0.001$.

The settings of incidents were also significantly different, with the non-autistic sample occurring more often in public (56% of incidents, compared to 21% of the autistic sample), in private (34% of incidents, compared to 0% of the autistic sample) or much more rarely in home/family/care/school settings (11% of incidents, compared to 79% of the autistic sample). This was also a statistically significant difference (chi square 79.1, $p < 0.001$).

It was unfortunately not possible to compare gender as this was not often coded in the non-autistic sample, whereas it almost always was in the 'autism' incidents.

The police final codes were also somewhat different for the general population sample, compared to the autistic sample ($p < 0.01$):

- traffic offences occurred 8 times in the non-autistic group, but not at all in the group with autism
- missing person was coded only once for the non-autistic sample, but 16 times for the autistic sample

- concern for welfare constituted just 7 incidents in the non-autistic group, compared to 13 in the autistic group
- aggressive assaults and fights were less common in the non-autistic group (1, vs 9 in the autistic group)
- sexual assaults occurred twice in both groups
- suicide risks occurred twice in both groups
- burglary was twice in both groups
- domestic violence was at similar levels (4 vs 5)
- abandoned 999 calls were at similar levels (5 vs 4).

An alternative way of examining non-autistic incidents was to consider those in the wider STORM database of 3654 incidents, on the dates in question (rather than selecting the 'next incident' following the 'autism' one). Using this wider database, excluding autistic incidents, and examining police final codes only:

- Assaults represented 12% (9 of 78) autistic incidents, as compared to 6% (226 of all 3576) incidents
- Concerns for welfare represented 17% (13 of 78) autistic incidents, as compared to 20% (730 of all 3576) incidents
- Missing persons were 21% (16 of 78) autistic incidents, as compared to 7% (257 of all 3576) incidents.

For these three categories, using the police coding, autistic people were twice as likely to be involved in assault incidents, slightly less likely to generate concerns for welfare calls and three times more likely to go missing.

Discussion

These data reflected some of the ways in which autistic people became involved with the criminal justice system in one city in part of England. It seemed that the calls to the police about incidents involving those with autism more often involved children and home/school/residential settings than the calls about incidents involving non-autistic individuals. The groups also differed in numbers of aggressive assaults and missing person

incidents (for both of which there were more in the autistic group), but it seems that concerns for welfare were common in both groups, judging by the police codes.

Amongst the autistic group, many incidents related to being a missing person (25.6% of all autism incidents) or being in need of support (16.7% of all autism incidents) or a victim of a crime (20.5% of all autism incidents). Arguably, all of these indicated the need for help and support, and they amounted to almost two thirds of the autism-related incidents that police were involved in (62.8% to be precise).

Recently there has been considerable debate within the police, in the UK, about how much time and manpower they spend on what they would consider to be 'non-crime' incidents, and where the incidents involve autistic people, this seems to be a reasonable complaint (and may well also be an issue with the non-autistic incidents, given the proportion of 'concerns for welfare' codes). Of course, in some cases, it would be difficult for health and social care staff to replace the police, for example, in the case of missing people, it would be very difficult for health and social care staff to locate people, given the fragmented nature of their services, and it may be that only a national organization like the police would be suited to such a task. Indeed the police force involved in this study had a well-developed system for dealing with 'missing person' cases: they were considered 'high risk' cases and after being logged on STORM, they were entered on a second database called COMPACT, along with a rating of risk. There were requirements for supervision of police actions on these cases (by senior officers) and there was a specific permanent Missing Person team located in the police headquarters. All of the individuals involved in missing person incidents in this study were later found. Nevertheless, at the very least, it seems that closer working between the police, health and social care is called for, in these 'need for care and support' type of incidents.

In the other autism incidents, 16 (20.5%) concerned what appear to have been crimes, such as aggressive behavior, theft, harassment (excluding victim incidents). Arguably there were also 12 (15.4%) disputes that could have constituted or led to crimes, making altogether 36% of incidents that were legitimately of a possible crime type. The data only provide a snapshot of these incidents and do not reveal whether the autistic individuals were later interviewed at the police station, and/or charged with crimes. They also do not give any

information on the views of the autistic people and their families of their contact with the police.

Other research studies have examined the involvement of autistic people and their families with the criminal justice system, and their views of the police and other parts of the CJS (see for example, Crane et al, 2016; Judge et al, submitted). However, few studies, apart from Rava et al (2017) and Tint et al (2017) have examined the first contacts autistic people and their families have with the police. Both Rava et al and Tint et al approached the issue from the viewpoint of the person with autism (and their families), whereas this study took its data directly from police records, and has shown how often people with autism and their families turn to the police for help.

Limitations.

This study has some limitations. The calls to police that were analysed for this study came from only one city in two particular months. It is thought that this area was typical of other small cities (for example, in terms of its crime rates) and there is no reason to suppose the two months chosen were not representative of other months. However, it is not known how the incidents collected here ended in the longer term and we were unable to further examine incidents of interest, such as what happened to those people marked as 'frequent' on the STORM data base.

From the police viewpoint, much of this kind of data has the status of 'hearsay' evidence legally, that is, it relates to what people say to the police about others, or else what people say to police about themselves, all of which is unsubstantiated from the legal point of view. For example, police records contain many references to a range of conditions, such as autism, Aspergers syndrome, ADHD and many other conditions. We had no evidence that these conditions were supported by a clinical diagnosis but none the less they gained credibility through repetition in the police records. In some police forces, there are efforts to employ a partnership approach with Health agencies to validate such diagnoses and to inform police actions on the basis of such a shared understanding, but that is not common, and does not occur at present in the county studied.

Recommendations

This study calls for further examination of how typical these data are for other areas. The data also argue for a much closer collaboration between the police and health and social care, and more support for autistic people and their families in order to improve their lives in the community.

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Table 1 Police databases

Database	Details
STORM	Force Control Room Incident Reports
ATHENA	Crime, custody and prosecution reports
PNC	Police National Computer (PNC) conviction records
THEMUS	Community Safety Unit
COMPACT	Missing Persons database

Table 2: Extract giving the first 3 examples of the ‘autism’ sample of police data from STORM (anonymised)

Incident Ref	Time	Final Call Type	Closing Code	Closing code meaning
0304-0497	10:46:15	SEXOFFENCE	127	Sex assault
0305-1745	21:26:05	ASSNOTREC	109	Assault
0306-1511	18:41:48	MISPER	730	Missing person

Table 3: Examples of coding of free text associated with each incident (all autism-related incidents)

Police Closing code (meaning)	Age	Unique ID	Incident type	Role	Frequent	Setting	Repeat address
Sex assault	18	m002	Sexual			Family	11
Assault	43	m003	Crime	Victim	Frequent	Home	
Misper	13	m005	Misper			Home	

Table 4: Where the incident involving the autistic person took place

Setting	No. of incidents	Percentage of total
Home (in the home)	23	30%
Family (in connection with family but not in the home)	10	13%
In care	19	25%
School	8	11%
Public place	16	21%
Total	76 (data on setting was missing for two cases)	

Table 5: Who called the police?

Relationship of caller to the person with autism	No. of incidents	Percentage of total
Mother, father or grandmother	28	35.9%
Autistic person him/herself	21	26.9%
Friend of autistic person	2	2.6%
Paid carer	10	12.8%
School staff	5	6.4%
Member of the public	11	14.1%
Healthcare worker	1	1.3%
Total	78	

Table 6: Type of incident, coded from free text

Incident type	Number of incidents	Percentage
Missing person	20	25.6%
Need for support	13	16.7%
Dispute (in family)	12	15.4%
Aggressive behaviour	9 (1 as victim)	11.5%
Crime	9 (6 as victims)	11.5%
Harassment	6 (4 as victims)	7.7%
Bullying	4 (4 as victims)	5.1%
Sexual behaviour	3 (none as victims)	3.8%
Neglect	1 (one as victim)	1.3%
Accidental call	1	1.3%
Total	78 (16 as victims)	