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Understanding Vulnerabilities and 'Pathways' in the Commission of Sexual Offences by Autistic Individuals: Perspectives from UK-based Practitioners

Abstract
Although autistic people are no more likely to perpetrate crime compared to the general population, evidence suggests that certain types of crime, such as sexual offences, are more common among autistic individuals who do engage in crime. In recent years, with the rapid increase in the commission of sexual offences in the United Kingdom (UK) and beyond, it has become increasingly critical to explore why some autistic individuals engage with sexual crime, in order to establish robust mechanisms for preventing initial offences as well as re-offending. Drawing on data collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 UK-based practitioners who work directly with autistic adults who have been charged and/or convicted of committing sexual offences in the UK, this article explores questions regarding why some autistic individuals engage in sexual offending, focusing on the various vulnerabilities of autistic individuals for committing sexual offences. The article explores potential 'pathways' to sexual offending, tracing the absence, from a young age, of provision of sex education to young autistic people, and the stifling of their abilities to practise healthy sexual relationships.

Key words
Autism; vulnerabilities; pathways; sexual offending; prevention

Introduction

Autism is a heterogenous developmental condition that affects the way autistic people interact with, experience and understand the world around them[1] (Autistica, 2022). The prevalence of autism in the United Kingdom (UK) general population is estimated to be 1-2% (O'Nions *et al.,* 2023; Roman-Urrestarazu *et al.,* 2021). Differences in the ways autistic people engage with and understand social interactions can contribute to misunderstandings and conflict with others, and can, in some cases, contribute toward circumstances where an autistic individual faces arrest and criminal charges (Payne et *al.,* 2020). While autistic individuals are overwhelmingly more likely to be the victims of crime than perpetrators (Griffiths *et al.,* 2019), some studies have suggested that some autistic individuals may be uniquely vulnerable to engaging in sexual offences (Haskins and Silva, 2006; Sutton *et al.,* 2012; Allely and Creaby-Attwood, 2016).

While researchers have attempted to explore the reasons why some autistic individuals may engage in offending (Collins *et al.,* 2023; King and Murphy, 2014; Payne *et al.,* 2020), the body of empirical literature on sexual offending perpetrated by autistic individuals remains rather limited (Allely, 2022). Some scholars suggest that most autistic individuals who offend do so as a result of a combination of factors, including personal circumstances (e.g., dealing with periods of transition or change); the difficulties associated with being autistic (e.g., social naivety, sensory sensitivities, pursuing a preoccupation, failing to appreciate the consequences of one's actions, theory of mind difficulties, emotional regulation difficulties); and co-occurrence with other psychiatric conditions (see Newman and Ghaziuddin, 2008; Melvin, 2019; Allely, 2022). Other scholars point to additional factors, such as a lack of sex education as a key factor contributing to child sexual abuse offending, and the role of the internet in the commission of these offences (Sugrue, 2017; Allely, 2022). Some authors further suggest that autistic individuals can engage in offending behaviours (including sexual offending), without fully recognising the harmful or illegal nature of their actions (Freckelton and List, 2009; Grant *et al.,* 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018; Allely, 2022), with some challenging the notion that such individuals should be held criminally liable (Douard and Schultz, 2017).

However, it is important to note that whilst there is a small, emerging body of research that has identified some factors that contextualise why some autistic individuals may be vulnerable to sexual offending, the breadth, depth and quality of existing empirical evidence relating to autism and offending nevertheless remains limited (Collins *et al.,* 2023). Existing empirical literature is largely comprised of small *n* case study evidence that lacks breadth (e.g., Chan and Saluja, 2011; Griffin-Shelley, 2010; Milton *et al.,* 2002; Murrie *et al.,* 2002), larger scale quantitative studies that lack depth of exploration into how and why autistic people engage in offending (e.g., Rutten *et al.,*

[1] For consistency, the neuro affirming terminology 'autistic individual' is used in this article, instead of person-first terminology 'individual with autism' to reflect the preferences of the autistic community identified in previous research (Bottema-Beutel *et al.,* 2021; Kenny *et al.,* 2016). Nonetheless, the authors recognise that this does not reflect every autistic individual's preference (Buijsman *et al.,* 2023; Bury *et al.,* 2023).

2022; Higham *et al.,* 2021), and other methodological limitations (e.g., sampling biases).

Overall, a more comprehensive insight into possible autism-specific 'pathways' to specific types of offending for this population, such as sexual offending, is fundamentally lacking (Payne *et al.,* 2020). In particular, there is a need to better understand what vulnerabilities to offending autistic individuals may present from childhood to adulthood, and how these vulnerabilities, when not addressed, may contribute to a pathway towards sexual offending. The current absence of robust evidence relating to how and why some autistic individuals engage in sexual crime may have problematic implications for devising evidence-based risk assessment, prevention and support strategies for this population. There is a need for empirical research to explore what leads a minority of autistic people to engage in sexual crime, and identify the pathways towards sexual offending, as well as intervention points for parents and guardians, and practitioners to prevent sexual offending.

Current study

The present study aimed to enrich the existing evidence base by providing a more focused, in-depth exploration of autistic people's pathways toward sexual offending. More specifically, this study qualitatively explored the perspectives of practitioners that work directly with autistic individuals (adults – generally aged 18 to 30) who have offended to (i) identify the various vulnerabilities that may lead to the commission of sexual offences, and (ii) explore potential 'pathways' to sexual offending, commencing in childhood, to the point of perpetrating sexual crimes during young adulthood. In doing so, the study set out to address the following research questions:

- How do features of autism provide the context of vulnerability to engage in sexual offending?
- How do vulnerability factors contribute to 'pathways' in the commission of sexual offences by some autistic individuals?
- What can be done to prevent sexual offending by autistic individuals?

The paper builds on the existing body of knowledge on sexual offending committed by autistic people by exploring – from the perspective of practitioners that work directly with autistic people who have committed sexual offences - the pathways to sexual offending. The paper explores practitioners' perspectives of the various vulnerabilities that may lead an autistic person to commit sexual offences, and reflects on how some of these vulnerabilities, present through childhood through adolescence into adulthood, can represent pathways to the commission of sexual offences. In exploring the pathways that some autistic people may experience prior to being charged and/or prosecuted for sexual offences, it is hoped that practitioners and parents/guardians may be better positioned to understand the various points for possible intervention to prevent sexual offending by autistic people from occurring.

Method

Design

A qualitative approach was taken to explore practitioners' experiences and sense-making (Willig, 2013) in relation to each of the research questions. We adopted a constructivist approach, since we wished to draw on experienced practitioners' knowledge, ideas, explanations, and assumptions. Hence, although we hoped that our analysis provided a framework for understanding the potential links between autism and sexual offending, these were grounded in our interviewees' and our own understandings and perspectives and may not reflect the realities and experiences of autistic individuals.

The research received ethical approval from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences (AHESS) ethics committee within Anglia Ruskin University in June 2022 – ETH2122-0646.

All potential study participants were sent an information sheet and consent form prior to participating in an interview. The information sheet explained the purpose of the study, how participant data would be used, and how to withdraw from the study.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted over a six-month period (October 2022 to March 2023). The interview sample comprised 12 UK-based practitioners who are currently working directly with, or have worked in the recent past (the last two to three years), autistic adults who have committed sexual offences. This included practitioners who work in non-government organisations (NGOs) (n=8), law enforcement agencies (n=2), or other government agencies as social workers, clinical directors, or solicitors (n=2). These practitioners mostly support young autistic adults who have committed a first sexual offence. Interviewees were recruited through convenience and snowballing methods. As a first step, practitioners that were known to the research team were invited to participate in an interview. Individuals who completed interviews were then asked if they could recommend colleagues who might be interested in participating in the study.

A semi-structured interview (SSI) schedule was developed by the research team, using their varied expertise in relation to autism and sexual offending. An initial set of semi-structured interview questions was developed by one member of the team who has significant experience in conducting interviews with practitioners working with vulnerable persons. The questions were then reviewed by other members of the team who lent their specialist knowledge of autism to the framing of the questions. The final protocol consisted of eight open questions.

Interviews began by exploring interviewees' professional experiences of working with autistic people and asking them to reflect on how they had developed their knowledge of autism (e.g., through training and/or practice experience). Interviewees were then asked to discuss their experiences of working with autistic adults who have committed crime, particularly sexual offences. They were then asked how the characteristics of autistic individuals could contribute towards vulnerabilities and pathways into offending, and what could be done to prevent such pathways. Interviews concluded by exploring how autistic individuals, their families, and practitioners could be better supported. Interviews were recorded (with the consent of the interviewee), lasted

approximately one hour each, and were transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

As the pool of organisations and practitioners providing direct support to autistic individuals who have committed sexual offences in the UK is relatively small, in order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, only basic information on the interviewees' work sectors (government, or non-government) is provided in brackets next to quotes.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022), a flexible approach that can provide a detailed and complex account of interview data. Thematic analysis is a useful method for examining under-researched areas (Braun and Clarke, 2006), such as autism and sexual offending, and can be used to "identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices" (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p.297). The analytical procedure adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2022) six recursive phases of: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and writing up.

After reading through all the transcripts, one author initially line-by-line coded all the interviews separately for each research question in turn using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020). Coding was broadly semantic (Braun and Clarke, 2022), staying close to the interviewees' descriptions of their thoughts, understanding and experiences. An inductive approach was used; however, we were mindful that the interviews were shaped by the framing of the research questions and interview schedule. Initial codes were combined and grouped into a preliminary summary of initial themes, which was presented and discussed with the entire research team to reach consensus on final central organising concepts and names of themes.

Findings

PATHWAYS TO SEXUAL OFFENDING

Themes reported in this section explore the various vulnerabilities that manifest from childhood to adolescence, which may lead an autistic individual to commit sexual offences. Although not a chronological pathway per se, the themes presented here describe the key antecedents that interviewees identified as contributing toward instances of sexual offending by autistic people. Themes also capture examples where people and systems around autistic individuals could have intervened and/or supported the autistic individual away from engaging in sexual crime.

Missed opportunities for early support and intervention

Interviewees suggested that sexual offending perpetrated by autistic individuals may represent the latter end of a longer pathway, with troubling and inappropriate behaviours evidenced by those individuals earlier in life (typically during childhood and adolescence). Specifically, they described how certain problematic behaviours

considered criminal in adulthood (e.g., public masturbation) and associated intervention needs can be overlooked in childhood.

'When you're a child it's maybe just a slap on the wrist [for inappropriate touching]. And by the time they're eighteen years old and not really engaged in any training education or anything, they end up reproducing very similar behaviours from childhood, however, they do so in the community… and then they end up getting arrested.' (NGO interview participant).

Moreover, interviewees described how failing to get an autism diagnosis can also be key in the pathway to sexual offending for some autistic individuals, contributing to how behaviours are interpreted and whether intervention and support needs are identified. Interviewees lamented the long and difficult process that parents often face in pursuing an autism diagnosis for their children. In the UK, diagnostic assessments for autism are infamous for taking a very long time through public health services, and parents that wish to have a diagnosis performed more quickly must go through the private health system. However, whilst private health routes may be quicker, they can be extremely expensive and therefore financially inaccessible to many.

'Having proper good diagnostic, robust assessments around autism and looking at other options as well for this particular young child is a is a must really, especially for those children that we are diagnosing late. And parents will say, 'I have been trying to get a diagnosis for like, since they were five.' So, we fail them there. The healthcare system fails them because diagnosing is taking too long. Assessments for diagnosis are taking too long.' (NGO interview participant).

As a consequence of these hurdles to autism diagnosis, interviewees observed that many autistic children enter adolescence and adulthood without ever receiving an autism diagnosis. This can mean that some inappropriate behaviours exhibited by autistic young people that may be interpreted by others as autism-related and indicating support needs when a person has a diagnosis may instead be misunderstood or construed as deviant behaviour.

'They get older and are displaying these behaviours that people think are naughty, deviant, when it's not that at all, they just haven't been corrected and have not received a diagnosis.' (NGO interview participant).

Furthermore, without a diagnosis, autistic young people and their parents may not be able to access suitable specialist support services, leading parents to struggle to know how to support their autistic child as they move through adolescence into adulthood. Interviewees suggested that parents can feel that they remain in the dark as to why their child exhibits certain behaviours, may not know how to manage those behaviours, and/or may fail to recognise the importance of enlisting specialist support.

'Parents will often be confused about why their child is different. They won't know what help is available or necessarily know that their child needs specialist support.' (NGO interview participant).

That said, an autism diagnosis alone does not guarantee appropriate support or intervention. Even with a diagnosis, interviewees highlighted how autistic children and adolescents may not receive appropriate guidance and intervention to address or prevent inappropriate sexual behaviours. This lack of support means that certain behaviours exhibited by autistic children can often be overlooked or excused by parents, educators, and community members as simply the behaviours of a neurodivergent child. For example, one interviewee gave the example of how an autistic child may engage in public masturbation at school numerous times, with little or even no intervention or support for the child from the parents or the school. Another example given was autistic children inappropriately touching others, and again how this behaviour may be frequently ignored or excused when the individual is younger.

'Their inappropriate behaviour, invading someone's personal space, touching in a sexual manner. Even with a diagnosis… it could just be that they don't understand social boundaries and don't understand the cues due to their own lack of social and cultural awareness. And their behaviour has caused somebody else to believe that the behaviour is actually criminal.' (Government interview participant).

Participants emphasised how, at this early stage, such problematic behaviours hardly ever come to the attention of the authorities, as the school and parents may consider these behaviours as not harmful and therefore not criminal. At most, the child may receive a superficial reprimand for these behaviours and a verbal lecture on how they must cease the behaviours. Unfortunately, if left mostly unchecked and permitted to perpetuate in childhood without appropriately tailored support or intervention, then upon reaching adulthood these same individuals can remain unaware that behaviours could be tantamount to sexual offences. As such, these same behaviours can eventually be regarded as criminal in adulthood, putting those individuals in contact with the criminal justice system, even in circumstances where they do not fully recognise the harmful nature of their behaviours.

> *'Well all of a sudden you're 18 and we can't get away with behaving like that [public masturbation] anymore.' (NGO interview participant).*

This theme thus highlights the importance of both early autism identification and the need for appropriate post-diagnosis support and intervention. Without proper support for the child and the family certain behaviours may not be understood by those around the individual, these behaviours will likely not be adequately addressed, which may lead to contact with the criminal justice system in later life.

Limited opportunities to learn about healthy sexual relationships

There was consensus among interviewees that, in their experiences, one of the most consistent reasons that autistic individuals engage in sexual offences (and fail to understand that their behaviour is criminal) is that they have had little or no opportunity to understand and practise healthy sexual relationships. Elaborating on this, many participants reported that autistic children and adolescents are frequently viewed by their parents, teachers, and others as non-sexual beings, who are not aware of, nor interested in sex. However, by contrast, interviewees emphasised that, in their professional experiences, autistic young people are often no different to neurotypical people in terms of their desire to learn about sex and engage in sexual relationships. However, due to others' reluctance to allow autistic adolescents to learn about sexual

relationships, this group can have their sexual development significantly stifled by those around them:

> *'People just don't like to think of people with disabilities having sex lives and having relationships, and they sort of assume that people on the spectrum are little robots and they don't want sex, and they don't want people and they don't want love and they're all cold. They're all cold fish, and that's not true… There's a big social stigma, and we try to stop people with disabilities having sex.' (NGO interview participant).*

Interviewees highlighted that autistic adolescents tend to be very protected by their parents and educators, and are often very closely monitored. This protection usually is a product of parents' and educators' fears that autistic adolescents are vulnerable, will not know how to act appropriately in a sexual context, and will not know how to navigate an intimate relationship with a peer. This was particularly relevant in instances where an autistic individual has additional co-occurring support needs (e.g., intellectual disability):

> *'Obviously for people with special needs also on the autistic spectrum, quite often those opportunities [to explore sex] are kind of taken away because you tend to be in environments where you're much more monitored, where there's much more support available. But support also means that you have much less privacy and therefore much less opportunities to explore things safely. And again, quite often there's a concern, which sometimes comes from a good place, that you're going to be too vulnerable, you wouldn't really know how to navigate intimate relations or just how to appropriately approach a potential partner.' (NGO interview participant).*

Participants also felt that autistic young people often experience more limited formal education regarding sex and healthy sexual relationships, because this education is not adequately provided or made sufficiently accessible by the child's parents or their school.

> *'People just don't like to think of autistic youth having sex lives and having relationships, and they sort of assume that young people on the spectrum are little robots and they don't want sex, or need to know about sex, and they don't want people and they don't want love and they're all cold.' (NGO interview participant).*

Participants identified that, in their experience, this is particularly relevant for autistic children who have attended special needs schools.

> *'Perhaps you went to a school for kids with special needs quite often you don't really get acknowledged fully as a sexual being. So the idea is that you may be provided with just some basic education because now it's part of the curriculum but all other opportunities are taken away because you're on the spectrum.' (NGO interview participant).*

The lack of adequate sex education and opportunities to practise sexual relationships mean that some young autistic individuals have not necessarily had a chance to experiment with intimate touching or sexual intercourse by the time they reach

adulthood. Consequently, whilst not the case across all autistic individuals, some may fail to understand the important concepts and social rules relevant to sex and relationships (e.g., understanding consent, appropriate courting behaviours, and what is legal and illegal in terms of sexual contact):

> *'You have the added pressures around understanding consent. The nuances of somebody might say 'yes' and then change their mind doesn't really come into it. Once somebody has said yes, that is, it's a yes, they've ticked that box, there is no turning back.' (NGO interview participant).*

There are potential serious consequences to this lack of sex education and limited opportunity to acquire experience of sexual relationships. For example, participants in this study identified that a major problem is that, due to a lack of sex education, young autistic adults may be unaware of the illegality of the intimate touching of minors. To complicate this, interviewees highlighted that some autistic adults that they have worked with have sought out friendships with children under the age of 18 years. Most often, participants suggested this was because some autistic adults identify as younger than their chronological age, and can find children easier to talk to than their adult peers:

> *'Many of them do see themselves as being younger than their age. And they quite struggle to fit in with their own peers. So perhaps at 21, 22, 23 years, you feel more comfortable, and feel that you have potentially more chances to connect and be paid attention to, and be also perhaps you know, appreciated by somebody who's 14, 15.' (NGO interview participant).*

Participants also highlighted that social media has provided a means for some of these autistic adults to meet children via various social media chat fora, such as Facebook, and online games. It is important to note that the initial connection with children through social media platforms can be innocent, motivated by a need for friendship and social connection. However, after a period of time interacting via social media and forming friendships, this can escalate to some autistic adults wanting to meet the child in person. In such cases, paired with a lack of sexual experience and lack of knowledge regarding the illegal nature of inappropriate touching of children, participants suggested that this can create a pathway to some autistic individuals to attempt to sexually touch the child upon meeting them face to face.

> *'We had quite a few clients have been referred to us and there were issues of sexually harmful behaviour, but they were also times when they just wanted to make friends. They're very obsessive in terms of, you know, somebody speaks to them, and they just really want to become friends and it quickly escalates into some bombarding them with text messages and phone calls and etcetera. So again, obviously, they do need to be provided, in my opinion, with enough opportunities to try and test things and perhaps also go through mistakes.' (NGO interview participant).*

One interviewee provided a case example (below) that clearly illustrates the implications of a young autistic adult's problematic behaviours not being dealt with during adolescence, combined with a limited cognisance of the dangers of making friends with children via social media:

'They call it mischievous behaviour or something like that, but you know, it was inappropriate behaviour within the school setting… then as soon as he became 18, 19, again, there were some instances in which he probably engaged in inappropriate behaviour with young kids. It was investigated by the police, but no consequences. And then he ended up in prison because he made contact with some underage individuals on the internet. He exchanged with them intimate pictures. And then he was planning to meet with them. He panicked about it. I don't think he was going to be comfortable really meeting with them. He went and told the support worker about it. And, of course, the support worker flagged it up with the police. And then after an investigation, he went to court and then he ended up in prison for 30 months.' (NGO interview participant).

Overall, this theme highlights the risks associated with autistic youth receiving inadequate opportunities for sex education and to practise healthy sexual relationships. When deprived of these opportunities, it is understandable that autistic individuals will not understand fundamental concepts of healthy relationships, such as consent. This theme is closely tied to the issue of naivety in the online world, which is further discussed in the following theme.

Naivety in the online world

Participants frequently described how autistic children can be drawn to the internet for a number of reasons: allaying loneliness and isolation; the desire to talk to peers online; and the ease of establishing friendships and social connection online compared to the offline world. However, interviewees highlighted how autistic individuals can exhibit naivety in relation to the internet, failing to fully appreciate the complexities and risks associated with content on the internet. Whilst this can be the case for many young people online, interviewees observed that for autistic individuals specifically, this can extend (and has extended) to a propensity to unwittingly engaging in criminalised online activities and behaviours. For example, perhaps representing a black-and-white interpretation of the world, they may assume that a sexual image of a child available on the open web is 'legal', simply because it is freely available on the Internet. Consequently, as highlighted in the extract below, such individuals may believe it is acceptable to view and save that image:

'I think this naivety is very common. They will say 'but the images just came from Google'. They've assumed that if they were illegal images, they'd be in the dark web. 'And I didn't go in the dark web, I just downloaded images from Google.' (NGO interview participant).

Interviewees further explained that professionals and others around the autistic individual can experience challenges intervening and preventing further harm in such cases. For example, some participants described professional interactions with young autistic individuals, where they had tried to convey guidance to help them to understand that certain images on the internet are illegal and harmful (such as child sexual abuse material (CSAM), but those individuals have still not fully comprehended that open web accessibility does not equate to 'legal' or not harmful:

“I have offenders who say, ‘if I can get this at home on Google, how can it be illegal?’ That is very common. Quite a few people. I've probably explained calmly and reasonably a number of times and they don't get it. You know, 'hang on, but I can look at it there' (on the open web). ‘Why is that? What is the issue with that?” (Government interview participant).

Whilst it is tempting to assume that this is due to the autistic individual’s lack of understanding, it may also represent issues in how well that information and guidance is being communicated to the autistic individual. This perhaps suggests a potential need for more effectively adapted intervention approaches.

‘I think maybe the mainstream version [of sex education] should be adapted so that it is more autism friendly. I think even without autism, there will be young people that need it a little bit clearer and so therefore being very defined I think would be useful. I think it is the greys… that would be harder for an autistic person to comprehend. So, if you were in a mainstream classroom, the autistic children in that space may need a bit longer to understand things.’ (NGO interview participant).

To complicate these issues further, other interviewees identified that once autistic young individuals have started looking at pornography on the internet, they have found that a subset can fall into a downward spiral. In these cases, such individuals can fall into a pattern of looking at increasingly more graphic and violent images, before eventually accessing CSAM; perhaps reflecting a deviant manifestation of an intense or preoccupied interest:

‘If you talk about people on the autistic spectrum, they do quite often end up accessing inappropriate content on the internet. It becomes quite apparent that probably they didn't really have a specific interest in those inappropriate contents online and they just ended up there because, you know, there's a suggestion of a slightly more extreme content and extreme and more extreme. And then next thing you know, they found themselves accessing illegal content. And therefore, you know, everything gets flagged up with the police.’ (NGO interview participant).

In this way, some autistic individuals’ pathways to offending may not begin with deliberate intentions and actions to view CSAM. Instead, their search commences with legal adult content, perhaps seeking to explore sexual content to develop and improve their understanding. However, in doing so, various websites direct and expose them to increasingly graphic content, and with limited inhibitory and consequential thinking capacities, this leads to CSAM, as they do not always grasp the illegal nature or recognise the inherent harms of CSAM.

‘Of course, once you're trying to just explore things, and inappropriate content just gets offered to you without you specifically searching for it. It is quite staggering… if you talk about people on the autistic spectrum, they do quite often end up accessing inappropriate content on the internet.’ (NGO interview participant).

Reflecting on autistic individuals they had worked with, interviewees noted that even when some autistic individuals *do* comprehend that CSAM is illegal, they can nevertheless find it difficult to distinguish whether sexual images that they find on the

internet are images of adults or children, and/or may not intuitively recognise fear and other emotions on the faces of children in CSAM. In making sense of these issues, interviewees felt that this was perhaps underpinned by a combination of naivety, rigidity in thinking, limited exposure to healthy sex, and other traits such as difficulties reading others and in perspective-taking.

Finally, interviewees highlighted that autistic differences in online social communication and interaction can contribute towards criminal convictions for some autistic young people. Namely, interviewees identified that some autistic adolescents and adults can struggle to communicate in a way that is understood by non-autistic people online, which can be interpreted as threatening, despite a lack of threatening intent. For example, some autistic individuals may send quite factual (albeit non-malicious) messages without additional context, which can be misconstrued by others as menacing.

One interviewee provided an example in which a young autistic man had been writing messages on Facebook to people, including neighbours, one of whom was a female who lived alone. The messages she received were very "factual" from his perspective, but experienced as very frightening from her perspective, and contributed towards his later contact with the criminal justice system:

> *'I said when I read it as a person, as a female that lives by herself, it was terrifying. When I read it through an autism brain, it was just standard matter of fact. 'I know where you live' and it was like, 'but I did, I saw her out the window.' So, everything he wrote was factual, in his view. But because he'd written it, and I always say this to young people about when they write messages, we cannot get the context. And, so, for the young person that was stalking, he was convicted and charged and received a sentence. So, he received a youth rehabilitation order. I think it was about 12 – 18 months or so, so a long, long order.' (NGO interview participant).*

In summary, this theme highlights how the internet can create a context that leaves some autistic individuals susceptible to engaging (albeit sometimes inadvertently) in sexual offending behaviours or be interpreted as engaging in related offending behaviours. The theme further highlights specific responsivity challenges for those intervening. Namely, that verbally conveying messages to a young autistic individual regarding 'correct' and 'incorrect' online behaviour is likely to be insufficient to instil understanding. This may therefore represent a crucial consideration in understanding offending amongst autistic individuals, and the formulation of preventative sexual offending intervention strategies when working with autistic individuals.

Collecting behaviours

Another behaviour that interviewees highlighted as contributing towards an autistic individual's pathway toward the commission of sexual offences was a propensity to develop "fixated", sometimes "obsessive", interests. In particular, whilst this fixation could be directed towards a person, interviewees more often described how some young autistic people that they support have been charged and/or convicted for possession of a collection of illegal image and video materials (e.g., CSAM and animal sexual abuse materials). According to interviewees, in their experience, these individuals often begin with no sexual interest in these materials in the first instance.

But, as highlighted in the previous section, they have initially inadvertently discovered the material through various searches on the internet, and developed an interest from there. These individuals can then develop intense collecting behaviours, searching for and saving a number of images and videos, with many driven by a non-sexual need to collect those materials and become a subject matter expert rather than a sexual motivation:

> *'I found that there was a number of people who are on the spectrum or certainly had been diagnosed anyway, they were showing signs of massive sort of collection behaviours, and the need for collecting. And not just the need for it. But actually, it's almost like they were almost switched off… 'There's another picture. I haven't got that one. I'm going to collect that.' So, 'great I'm going to have that (image)... So it's kind of prolific offending, but the motivation isn't necessarily sexual." (Government interview participant).*

When considering the autistic individuals they had worked with, one participant likened the nature and intensity of this interest to "an addiction", encapsulating a sense of drive and dependency.

Participants also reflected on the challenges faced by professionals in understanding these collecting behaviours and what they may mean for assessing risk. For example, to what extent a larger collection of CSAM could mean for the nature of that individual's motivations, their interest in the material and their risk of reoffending:

> *"You see, the police can't get their, don't get their heads around that. The police say if you've got it, you must have liked it. Some of them have so many images in their collections they couldn't possibly view them in their lifetime." (NGO interview participant).*

In sum, this theme highlights examples of how the internet can provide a dangerous space for some autistic individuals to become vulnerable to the commission of sexual offences. The theme further highlights some of the complexities faced by professionals in this field, in understanding how online image-based offending motivations and behaviours may differ for autistic individual, what this may mean for understanding and responding to risk, and how to distinguish this from forms of deviancy that are unrelated to an individual's autism.

Discussion

This research utilised government and non-government professionals' perspectives to identify potential vulnerabilities that may lead to sexual offending perpetrated by autistic individuals, and to explore potential pathways to sexual offending that may emerge during young adulthood. Whilst there have been some studies which have looked at how certain features of autism may provide the context of vulnerability to engaging sexual crimes (e.g., Mahoney, 2009; Dubin *et al.,* 2014; Dubin and Horowitz, 2017; Allely and Dubin, 2018; Allely, *et al.,* 2019; Allely, 2020; 2022), this is the first empirical study that has explored the pathways to this offence beyond clinical anecdotal and single case studies, from practitioners' perspectives.

The analysis identified a series of common specific vulnerabilities and pathways to sexual offending perpetrated by autistic individuals, which professionals have encountered in their respective areas of practice. Namely, our research identified the following common vulnerabilities among autistic individuals– lack of autism diagnosis; lack of early support; absence of sex education; stifling of healthy sexual experimentation with peers; naivety; communication difficulties; and obsessive collecting behaviours. Moreover, themes capture how potential 'pathways' to the commission of sexual offences can emerge when these vulnerabilities are not appropriately addressed early on in an individual's life. Key findings are further discussed below, incorporating implications and recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

Sexual education

The first key finding of our research is related to the gaps and inadequacies in sexual education for autistic individuals, and how this can create a vulnerability for sexual offending in some autistic individuals. This echoes previous research, which has highlighted how, despite having desires comparable to non-autistic peers, autistic people may have more limited experiences of formal and informal sexual education in early life (Holmes and Himle, 2014; Hartmann *et al.,* 2019), and may resort to alternative, sometimes less appropriate, sources (e.g., television, internet, pornography) to obtain such knowledge (Stokes *et al.,* 2007; Mehzabin and Stokes, 2011; Brown-Lavoie *et al.,* 2014; Barnett and Maticka-Tyndale, 2015; Pecora *et al.,* 2016). Given the potential implications for later sexual offending, this is a fundamental gap that must be addressed by parents and guardians, educators, and other relevant service providers. An autistic child or adolescent who has received inadequate sex education via formal avenues (e.g., school) and informal avenues (e.g., parents, peers) may have little to no understanding whatsoever of safe and healthy sex and intimacy (including the important principle of consent in sexual relationships) as they progress into adulthood.

Previous research on this topic provides some further context for this issue. For example, interviews with caregivers of autistic young adults have found that their sex education can be quite limited, often only covering issues of personal space and hygiene (e.g., Ballan, 2012; Holmes and Himle, 2014). In unpacking the reasons for this, Ballan (2012) found that some parents wrongly believed that their autistic children would be unable to achieve romantic or sexual relationships, and therefore felt that topics such as dating, sexual intercourse, and birth control were not necessary to discuss with their children. Given these findings, there is a need for alternative routes to providing sexual knowledge to autistic individuals (Sullivan and Caterino, 2008). In particular, it is important that a balance is struck between the provision of adequate content (i.e., covering themes and topics generally covered in sexual education for neurotypical young people) and responsive modes of delivery (i.e., suitably adapted to the communication and learning needs of autistic young people to enable engagement and understanding).

Linked very closely to the issue of sex education for autistic individuals, our findings also captured how autistic adolescents can often have more restricted opportunities to practise healthy sexual relationships. In this study, this was frequently attributed to close monitoring by well-intentioned families and teachers around an autistic young person, often operating on myths and misconceptions about sex in relation to autistic

people. This resonates with existing research, that has found autistic adolescents and adults report far fewer sexual experiences when compared to their non-autistic peers, despite possessing a similar level of desire (Hellemans *et al.,* 2010).

This can be further compounded as some autistic individuals can find it difficult to formulate or articulate questions about sexual development and sexual activity to advance their understanding (Dubin *et al.,* 2014). The themes identified in this research suggested that this means that important principles and nuances of healthy sexual relationships can become lost on the autistic adolescent or adult, contributing to pathways towards behaviours (such as public masturbation or inappropriate touching) that would constitute a sexual offence in later life.

Existing research supports this pathway, suggesting that autistic youths can exhibit poorer self-regulation, coping skills and impulse control in relation to effectively managing sexual urges (Haskins and Silva, 2006; Sevlever *et al.,* 2013). As such, some autistic individuals who experience sexual urges, but have had limited opportunity to develop a good understanding of healthy sexual relationships through experience, may become prone to sexual offending later in life. Overall, this suggests that changes in attitudes and perceptions of adults supporting autistic young people are needed. Specifically, those around autistic children and adolescents need to appreciate that autistic people experience sexual desire in a similar way to non-autistic individuals, and should therefore not be overly restricted in learning about what constitutes healthy sexual relationships and the pursuit of these relationships.

Internet-based sexual offending

Findings made it clear that the online world can be appealing to autistic young people, as a predictable place of comfort and safety. Existing research similarly describes how autistic children and adolescents are often attracted to the online world, as it presents less complex social interactions compared to the offline social world, is easier to predict, logical, and does not involve as much nuanced communication (Mahoney, 2009). For instance, during computer-mediated interactions, they can take their time processing and responding to questions or what the other person is saying, and there are fewer overwhelming stimuli that are present during face-to-face interactions (e.g., facial expressions, different tones of voice, non-verbal body language, background noise).

However, whilst appealing to autistic people in this way, our findings also identified how the online world can present a risky environment for some autistic young people - forming a critical dimension of some autistic individuals' pathways towards sexual offending. For instance, this study identified examples of how the internet can provide a context for some autistic individuals to view and collect CSAM without understanding that the material is illegal, and/or engage in online conversations with children, which in some cases leads to face-to-face meetings and contact child sexual offences. A common theme underpinning these examples was a limited initial sexual or harmful intent when engaging in online offending. Similar themes have been captured in existing research. For example, Dubin *et al.,* (2014) suggest that autistic young people may use the Internet to obtain information about sex/sexual relationships or to satisfy sexual needs, as a result of limited or no sexual outlets with peers/friends.

However, as identified by participants in the current study, in pursuing such materials online, they may develop into intensely circumscribed fields of interest and this can very quickly lead them to view and download more and more illegal material (Mahoney, 2021). Once a circumscribed interest of this type is established, the young autistic individual's searches online are likely to not remain limited to a superficial internet search. Echoing participants' views in our study, previous research suggests that these internet searches can become obsessive and extensive, increasing the chances of them coming across or being exposed to CSAM (Tantam, 2000; Aral *et al.,* 2018).

Once exposed to CSAM, our findings highlighted how some autistic individuals may be uniquely prone to continue to view and search for such material. For example, they may experience difficulties estimating the age of victims, may struggle to recognise negative facial expressions (e.g., fear, distress, pain) depicted in CSAM, or may not intuit the illegality or consequences of accessing such materials when they are openly accessible online, which have similarly been identified in existing literature (Woodbury-Smith *et al.,* 2005; Dziobek *et al.,* 2008; de la Cuesta, 2010; Attwood *et al.,* 2014; Mogavero, 2016; Mesibov and Sreckovic, 2017; Sugrue, 2017; Allely, 2022).

Moreover, as with other types of preoccupation, the desire for CSAM in autistic perpetrators that have developed an intense interest in collecting CSAM can become significantly excessive and compulsive. In cases involving autistic individuals who have been charged with CSAM related offending it is common for there to be substantially large collections of hundreds upon hundreds of files that have been downloaded, saved and catalogued on their computer, many of which have not been accessed (Mesibov and Sreckovic, 2017).

Overall, these various factors may serve to perpetuate offending beyond the initial discovery of CSAM, and may represent some key target areas of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions to prevent sexual offending in autistic individuals. However, given the apparent benefits of the online world for autistic people (e.g., providing a space of comfort, safety and social connectedness), it is crucial that intervention and risk-management strategies avoid over-pathologizing internet access for autistic people. Instead, there should be a focus on the appropriate and safe use of the internet, including themes relating to accessing sexual content, without completely removing internet access or stigmatising autistic people as inherently risky individuals online.

Criminal responsibility

Our findings also indicated that some autistic individuals engage in sexual crimes somewhat inadvertently, with limited harmful intentions and/or awareness of the harmful and illegal nature of their behaviours. This echoes existing literature, which has also identified how autistic people can engage in offending without fully appreciating the harmful and illegal nature of their actions (Freckelton and List, 2009; Grant *et al.,* 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018; Allely, 2022), with some authors questioning the ethics of holding such individuals criminally liable (Douard and Schultz, 2017). Whilst it is not being suggested here that all autistic individuals that have committed sexual offences do so from a position of naivety and should be absolved of all liability, interviewees nevertheless attributed varying degrees of criminal responsibility among the autistic clients that they had supported, ranging from very little understanding that

their behaviours are sexual offences, all the way to full understanding that they are committing sexual offences.

This continues to raise questions beyond the scope of this paper about how autistic people should be treated when in contact with the criminal justice system, and how much autism should be considered as a factor when establishing guilt and sentencing decisions. Irrespective of these questions, however, interviewees' accounts of the vulnerabilities of autistic individuals that they have supported has helped to identify potential 'pathways' to the commission of sexual offences. Better understanding these vulnerabilities and potential pathways is helpful for pinpointing areas of early intervention, in order to prevent autistic children and adolescents from coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Pathways to sexual offending

In summary, the findings in this study identified examples of pathways from childhood to adulthood that can contribute toward sexual offending in autistic individuals. Key features of these pathways include: failure to diagnose autism in childhood; lack of early support; inadequate formal sex education during school years; lack of healthy sexual experimentation in adolescence; and failure to appropriately educate autistic adolescents regarding safe and appropriate uses of the internet. Our findings suggest that these vulnerabilities, when not addressed, can create a pathway to the commission of sexual offences. Our research has identified similar vulnerabilities to those already discussed in the small body of literature on the sexual offending behaviours of autistic individuals. However, the value of our study is that it more holistically identified potential pathways in terms of how these vulnerabilities may play out, from childhood to adulthood. When these vulnerabilities are not addressed, sexual offences may be committed by autistic individuals. This research will help inform the development of effective interventions and support for autistic adolescent sex offenders as knowledge and evidence-based literature in this area is sparse (Schnitzer *et al.,* 2020).

Implications for policy and practice

This paper will be of particular interest to professionals and other persons who have an important role to play in the support and education of young autistic people (e.g., parents, educators, and social workers). It is anticipated that practitioners, other professionals, and family members of autistic young people will use the study findings to understand the various points at which families and practitioners can intervene to prevent future sexual offending by young autistic people.

Recommendations for policy and practice

There remains much more work to be done to prevent the commission of sexual offences by autistic individuals. However, study participants highlighted that improved prevention of sexual offending by autistic individuals can be achieved through multiple prongs:

1. It is important that parents, educators, social workers, and other service providers strengthen their knowledge and capacity to support young autistic people early on, in order to prevent them perpetrating, and being charged with, criminal offences later in life. This can be achieved through improved resources for caregivers and teachers to strengthen their understanding and skills in

teaching autistic children what constitutes a healthy sexual relationship, and what is appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour. These resources should be developed using the important principle of user-centred design – that is, autistic individuals should play an important design in the development and piloting of the resources. Neuroinclusive resources should also be developed for all children to educate them about the risks of the online world and harmful online activities. These resources should take care to quash myths and misconceptions about sexual and online behaviours in autistic people, to avoid wrongly stigmatising autistic individuals as intrinsically risky individuals.

2. It is critical that parents, educators, and social workers are aware of the various points at which they can intervene in order to prevent future sexual offences from occurring. These include, but are not limited to: Ensuring that young autistic people have access to sex education; talking to autistic youth about appropriate sexual behaviours, particularly the principle of consent; speaking to parents and practitioners and supporting the child when an autistic child displays certain behaviours such as public masturbation; and monitoring online activities to ensure that autistic people are not collecting CSAM or other illegal material, and not engaging in conversations of a sexual nature with adult sex offenders or children.
3. There is a need to improve cross-sector collaboration on the prevention of sexual offending among autistic individuals across the life course. Improved coordination among educators, social workers, service providers, and relevant government entities can be achieved through autism working groups and other platforms that enable information sharing and discussion on best practices in supporting autistic individuals.
4. Improvements in the early diagnoses of autism are needed. There is a tendency for many autistic individuals who are charged with sexual offences to only receive a formal diagnosis in adulthood, often after contact with the criminal justice. Early diagnosis and corresponding allocation of tailored support to autistic young people and the adults around them could mean that these individuals are supported to understand what it means to be autistic, to more effectively adapt tuition around appropriate sexual behaviour, and to responsively intervene where early behaviours are exhibited that could lead to criminal charges in adulthood.

Limitations

Interviews were conducted only with practitioners that work or have recently worked (in the last two to three years) directly with autistic individuals who had committed sexual offences. No interviews were conducted with autistic individuals to understand, from their perspective, their vulnerabilities and pathways to sexual offending. Whilst some existing research has captured this to some extent (see Payne et al., 2020), it is anticipated that the findings of this exploratory study will be used to inform the design of a larger future research study, which will explore and synthesise the experiences and perspectives of autistic individuals who have committed sexual offences.

Furthermore, it is important to note that whilst participants in this study had experience of working with autistic individuals who had engaged in sexual offending behaviours, the research team could not confirm how many of those had formal autism diagnoses and how many were simply suspected as autistic. Finally, whilst the paper identified some key factors and potential pathways that can contribute towards sexual offending

perpetrated by autistic individuals, without more robust quantitative data and analyses, we cannot infer genuine cause and effect between vulnerabilities identified and sexual offending behaviours. As such, insights captured in this paper should be treated as indicative and interpreted with caution, pending a larger, more robust piece of research on this topic.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to reaffirm that autistic people are not inherently more likely to engage in sexual offending. However, it is nevertheless important to consider why a minority do, and what can be done to prevent this. As such, this article has utilised the perspectives of professionals in the field to identify what factors can make some autistic people vulnerable to engage in sexual offending, and how these vulnerabilities, when not addressed during childhood and adolescence, may create pathways to sexual offending. It is also likely that, at least for some autistic individuals, these vulnerabilities, when not appropriately addressed during youth, can affect an individual's ability to recognise that they are committing a sexual offence upon adulthood. These insights have been used to formulate several recommendations for policy and practice, which centred on the theme of prevention of sexual offending through enhanced sex and internet education, and more effective early autism diagnosis and autism-related needs identification.

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