

Learning from lived experiences: using the voices of autistic people in prisons to inform staff training

Dr Luke P. Vinter is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Criminology, within the Centre for Applied Social Sciences, Policy, Practice and Research (CASSPPR) at the University of Derby.

In recent scholarly work, policy and practice, there has been an increasing drive to recognise and understand the lived experiences and unique needs of autistic people in the criminal justice system (CJS). Current available evidence does not suggest that autistic people are any more inclined to perpetrate crimes than neurotypical peers,¹ and instead indicates that they are much more likely to become victims.² However, in cases of the minority of autistic people that do engage in offending, it has been suggested understanding an individual's autism can be a relevant and useful precursor to understanding how and why they offended.³

Although it is difficult to reliably establish precise prevalence estimates for autistic people in the CJS, there has been an emerging theme that autistic people are overrepresented in criminal justice contexts.⁴ This extends to prison contexts specifically, where published prevalence estimates vary considerably. These difficulties establishing the prevalence of autistic people in prisons have been attributed to factors such as:

- ❑ A lack of consistently utilised, validated autism screening tools and processes.
- ❑ Methodological limitations and inconsistencies across published prevalence studies.
- ❑ The likelihood that there will be differing proportions of autistic people across different prison sites according to prison and population type.
- ❑ Difficulties acquiring prisoners' early developmental histories as part of the diagnosis process.

- ❑ Autistic people consciously masking autistic traits or concealing diagnoses as a form of adaptation and survival in prison settings.
- ❑ The highly structured prison environment and regime serving to mask some autistic traits.
- ❑ Limitations and/or inconsistencies in autism awareness and understanding amongst individuals working in the CJS, which can contribute to mis- (or missed) identification of autistic individuals.

This latter point is of particular relevance and concern to practitioners and policymakers in the field, indicating a need for improvements to autism awareness and understanding in the CJS. This is particularly pertinent as existing research consistently highlights the implications this can have for how and whether autistic people's support needs are being met in many prison sites. As such, this article will seek to provide insights and recommendations relevant to addressing these issues and informing policy and practice changes.

Aims and scope

This article will begin by discussing key themes that emerge from the lived experiences of autistic people in prisons. This will be followed by a discussion of how these themes can be used positively, to inform and shape changes in practice, in the form of staff autism training and education. For the purpose of this article, as the primary source of information on the lived experiences of autistic people, the author has synthesised their prison-based research work and consultancy experiences to date. This work has included

1. King, C., & Murphy, G. H. (2014). A systematic review of people with autism spectrum disorder and the criminal justice system. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(11), 2717–2733.
2. Griffiths, S. et al., (2019). The Vulnerability Experiences Quotient (VEQ): A study of vulnerability, mental health and life satisfaction in autistic adults. *Autism Research*, 12(10), 1516–1528.
3. Allely, C. S. (2022). *Autism spectrum disorder in the criminal justice system: A guide to understanding suspects, defendants and offenders with autism*. Routledge.
4. Chester, V., Bunning, K., Tromans, S., Alexander, R., & Langdon, P. (2022). The Prevalence of Autism in the Criminal Justice System: A Systematic Review. *BJPsych Open*, 8(S1), S45–S46.

empirical research exploring the experiences of autistic people in prisons generally,⁵ and within the context of offending behaviour programmes and rehabilitation specifically,^{6,7,8} as well as exploring the experiences of prison staff working with autistic people in these contexts.⁷ This body of work has been applied in practice to inform the design and delivery of training workshops for a variety of prison staff across several prison sites, training workshops for others in the criminal justice sector (e.g., third sector organisations), and online training materials for His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Correctional Service Canada. Combined, insights from this work have been used to inform the latter section of this article, which focusses on enhancing autism awareness and understanding in prison staff.

Themes in the Lived Experiences of Autistic People in Prisons

Navigating social interactions

Prisons often have complex social environments, which many autistic individuals can find difficult to navigate. Features of this social environment, such as implicit unwritten social rules, unpredictability, deception and manipulation, and some types of humour (e.g., sarcasm), can pose challenges for autistic prisoners in their interactions with staff and peers in prison. Autistic prisoners often report encountering misunderstandings and confrontations with others in prisons (both staff and other prisoners), albeit often inadvertently. Whilst it can be tempting for others to assign the onus for these issues onto autistic prisoners, it is more often the case that these misunderstandings are a consequence of an interaction between (i) autistic individuals finding it challenging to read other peoples' intentions or feelings and/or intuiting how to respond 'appropriately', and (ii) non-autistic others in the prison experiencing similar difficulties reading and responding appropriately to autistic individuals, sometimes due to a lack of awareness, understanding, and/or willingness to

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accommodate. This resonates with the double-empathy problem,⁹ which theorises that the social communication and interaction difficulties often attributed to autistic people actually emerge as a consequence of a communication mismatch between autistic and non-autistic people, where both sides experience difficulties appreciating or understanding the other's perspective. This can contribute towards challenges in prison life generally (e.g., altercations with others on a wing) and when engaging in specific activities (e.g., conflict in workshops, difficulties understanding and being understood in offending behaviour programmes). Beyond smaller scale social interactions, autistic individuals frequently report feeling overwhelmed, stressed and anxious in busy prison social environments (e.g., corridors during movement periods, waiting areas for activities). These more crowded environments can be experienced as even more unpredictable, with too much social information to process, and more potential to 'get it wrong', thereby elevating feelings of anxiety and apprehension.

Many autistic prisoners report that they feel fundamentally 'different' to others in the prison, and unfortunately synonymise this feeling of being 'different' as being a 'problem'. As such, many autistic prisoners can find it difficult to establish social connections with others in the prison. Autistic people often report feeling alienated, bullied or manipulated by others, less socially confident, sometimes socially isolating themselves or avoid interacting with others, and sometimes expending considerable energy actively attempting to hide or mask that they are autistic. This can extend to specific environments and activities within the prison (e.g., offending behaviour programmes, education, and workshops), where they can struggle to integrate with a group of peers and engage in group-based activities. Therefore, beyond the internal difficulties associated with this social

5. Vinter, L. P., Dillon, G., & Winder, B. (2020). People don't like you when you're different': Exploring the prison experiences of autistic individuals. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 29(3), 243–262.

6. Vinter, L. P. (2020). *Working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions to address sexual offending*. [Doctoral Thesis Dissertation]. Nottingham Trent University.

7. Vinter, L. P., Dillon, G., Winder, B., & Harper, C. A. (2023). A multi-perspective qualitative study about working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions to address sexual offending. *Sexual Abuse*, 37(1), 30–57.

8. Vinter, L. P., Harper, C. A., Dillon, G., & Winder, B. (2024). Mental wellbeing, but not prison climate, mediates the association between autistic traits and treatment readiness among men with sexual convictions. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 1–17.

9. Milton, D. E. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The 'double empathy problem'. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887.

disconnectedness, these issues can also have implications for how and whether autistic individuals feel able to engage with purposeful and meaningful activities, such as offending behaviour programmes.

However, it is important to note that these challenges are not universally experienced. In fact, a smaller number of autistic people report more positive experiences of the prison social environment, sometimes feeling more socially confident in prison compared to their lives in the community. Typically, these individuals can be distinguished by an expressed sense of feeling accepted and understood by others in the prison, with fixed points of contact who have a good understanding of autism and/or their specific individual needs and preferences, and/or becoming more sociable as a necessary adaptation to survive. Nonetheless, the most common experience of the social world reported by autistic prisoners is that of feeling chronically misunderstood by others in the prison. Therefore, this emphasises the importance of enhancing autism awareness and understanding in prisons.

Rules, routines and structure

Consistency, routine and structure can be extremely important and supportive for many autistic individuals in their daily lives generally, in and beyond prisons. The presence of clearly communicated and consistently applied rules, boundaries and routines can add a sense of predictability to what may otherwise be experienced as an unpredictable social world for many autistic people. Therefore, it may be expected that the highly structured and regimented features of prison life would be ideal for autistic people to thrive in. However, whilst these features can be supportive for some autistic prisoners, these same regimes can be a tremendous source of stress, anxiety and frustration. For instance, when considering the broader prison experience, the transition from life in the community to life in (and between) prisons can represent a multitude of fast-paced (and sometimes unexpected) changes. Whilst this can be challenging for any individual, this can be particularly difficult as an autistic person.

Moreover, within prison, there can be a variety of unexpected changes. For example, cell or wing changes, and daily routines seemingly advertised as

strictly imposed and fixed (e.g., unlock times) can often be particularly prone to delays, disruptions and alterations with little warning (e.g., appointment cancellations). This issue is often associated with the importance of knowing what to expect, and what is expected of them, and extends to other structural aspects of prison. Some specific examples include limited detailed information provided about what to expect during the reception process or for specific activities, inconsistent room layout arrangements in offending behaviour programme rooms, mixed experiences of request processes being followed through as advertised (e.g., the 'app'¹⁰ system in UK prisons), and the communication and application of prison rules. In relation to prison rules specifically,

autistic prisoners have reported that the communication and application of some rules and instructions can sometimes be experienced as ambiguous, unclear or interpreted and applied inconsistently; or that they themselves can have difficulty interpreting rules or instructions (e.g., if they interpret these too literally). Because of these various issues, many autistic people report a mixture of acute and longer-term feelings of distress, anxiety, frustration and instability. Moreover, some autistic people find that they face negative responses or reprimands from prison staff if, for instance,

they exhibit what is perceived as an adverse reaction to sudden changes (e.g., an outburst at a sudden unannounced change to their schedule or resistance to changing cells), or if they have struggled to interpret and adhere to a particular rule as it was intended.

To mitigate some of the challenges described above, some autistic prisoners have shared examples of good practice that can embed more predictability and structure into their prison experience. These include (but are not limited to): the provision of clear, concrete, specific and accessible information about what to expect and what is expected of them; maintaining consistency and predictability in activities (e.g., seating arrangements); advance warnings of routine changes, and being supported to develop contingency plans for when routines are disrupted on short notice and/or to manage difficult feelings associated with changes (e.g., engaging in a comforting activity that aligns with an individual's special interest area).

Many autistic prisoners report that they feel fundamentally 'different' to others in the prison.

10. Shorthand for 'application' system.

Overstimulating sensory environments

Overstimulating sensory environments in prisons are frequently identified as a challenging feature of prison life for autistic people. Sensory issues more generally can be diverse between and within autistic individuals, typically taking the form of either hypersensitivity (i.e., heightened reactivity) and/or hyposensitivity (i.e., lower reactivity) to specific sensory inputs. In prisons, overstimulation from the auditory environment is most often flagged as problematic, with many autistic individuals reporting difficult experiences associated with heightened reactions to the aversive noises that are prevalent and difficult to avoid in prisons. The types of noises cited by autistic prisoners vary but typically fall into two categories: (i) general background noises (e.g., frequent creaking and banging of heavy metal gates, keys jangling, overlapping voices in busier areas), and (ii) more particular or specific noises (e.g., alarms, whistling, ticking clocks, pens squeaking on a whiteboard). The overstimulation that autistic prisoners describe as a reaction to these noises can vary from irritation, frustration and anxiousness, to more intense feelings of anger, distress, disorientation, nausea and/or pain.

Whilst sound is most commonly referenced as problematic, other overstimulating features of prison sensory environments have also been identified by autistic people in prison, including: light and other visual stimuli (e.g., fluorescent lighting, busy walls and noticeboards), smells (e.g., perfumes and body sprays, air-fresheners, cleaning products, particular foods), and touch (e.g., harsh or irritant clothing and bedding textures). Like the auditory environment, these sensory inputs can contribute to similar difficult feelings of overstimulation, with limited opportunity to avoid or escape them. These feelings of overstimulation can then have implications for how and whether an individual participates and engages with (or attempts to avoid) purposeful activities in the prison (e.g., offending behaviour programmes, education, workshops and work environments). Within the context of some activities, challenging sensory environments and the difficult feelings associated with them can further contribute towards distraction, switching-off and disengaging, and, on some occasions, verbal and physical outbursts (e.g., becoming verbally confrontational or defiant, shouting at others, storming out). Furthermore, these inner

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experiences of feeling overwhelmed are not always immediately obvious to others on the surface, which can further contribute to instances of misinterpretation and misunderstanding as described earlier.

Challenges experienced by prison staff

Finally, it is important that challenges experienced by staff working with autistic prisoners are not overlooked, as their perspectives can be integral to holistically understanding some of the challenges discussed above, and how autistic people can be more effectively accommodated in prisons. Often, staff report personal challenges and feelings of frustration or exasperation when working with autistic prisoners. Despite having their best interests in mind, wanting to convey understanding, and effectively adapt to the needs of the autistic individuals they work with, many staff find that they experience compassion fatigue. This often comes from repeated trial and error attempts to understand and effectively support autistic individuals, sometimes with few successes. In some cases, these feelings of exasperation can contribute towards reluctance to interact with some autistic prisoners, followed by feelings of guilt, rumination, and sometimes internalising challenges as representing incompetency, damaging their sense of self-efficacy and competence at work.

In making sense of these challenges, staff often refer to the limitations or gaps in the information and training available that could be helpful to guide how to work more effectively with autistic prisoners. For example, some staff lament at inconsistencies and difficulties related to identifying whether an individual is autistic, and what that means for working with them in the context of their role. Also, whilst many staff report challenges when working with autistic prisoners, those who find success in accommodating autistic prisoners they have worked with typically describe a rewarding sense of fulfilment in knowing that they have helped those individuals. Therefore, staff frequently express a wish for more training on how to work with autistic people in prison, as well as more detailed information to understand and support specific individuals that they work with. There can also be benefits for staff in having the opportunities to have non-judgemental reflective discussions with colleagues, where they have the opportunity to openly vent feelings of frustration or exasperation, followed by collaborative identification of potential action plans and solutions.

Raising Autism Awareness and Understanding in Prisons

In response to the themes discussed thus far, and the growing recognition of neurodivergent people in the CJS more generally, a call for more autism awareness training for staff across the criminal justice sector has become a recurring theme in the existing literature.¹¹ As such, a number of individuals, teams and organisations have sought to develop such training for prisons. However, whilst there have been pockets of good practice and innovations in this regard, this has not been consistent across all prison sites or regions and may be implemented in a more siloed fashion or in the form of one-off isolated events. Therefore, this section of the article will outline and discuss research-informed suggestions for prison-based autism awareness training. It is hoped that this will serve as an impetus for a more collaborative and unified approach to autism training across the prison estate.

To begin, with regards to the design of autism training, it is important that training is contextually relevant, practically useful, and interactive; moving away from more general, passive autism awareness talks. Whilst the latter can provide a broad understanding of autism and how autistic people experience the world generally, it is vital that this is embedded into the prison context to convey the utility and relevance of such content for prison staff. For example, when describing autistic traits and needs, it is important that content is clearly related to the prison context (e.g., how an autistic person may respond to sudden disruptions in the prison routine), rather than providing less prison-relevant examples (e.g., how an autistic person may respond to a bus schedule change or cancellation). As an extension of this, when integrating suggestions and strategies for how to respond to said issues, it is crucial that guidance is adapted to be practically feasible in the prison context, and is sensitive to competing considerations such as security, safety and resource availability. For example, an individual may have a highly focussed interest in model vehicles, which serves as a helpful means for them to achieve calmness when anxious or distressed. However, due to security restrictions

associated with items like glue in a prison environment, this may need to be adapted to providing other similar materials (e.g., books relating to model vehicles). As another example, it may not be practically or financially realistic to soften the auditory environment of a whole prison wing or cell (e.g., through changes to flooring and doors), but protective earbuds may offer a useful defence for those hypersensitive to sound.

Staff also often emphasise the value of training with interactive, practically relevant exercises. This can include a move away from more traditional PowerPoint slide-based, front-led, didactic talks to more interactive learning approaches, such as applying knowledge in group scenario-based case study and skills practice exercises (with opportunities for constructive feedback),

and opportunities to experience simulations of what it can be like to be autistic in prison (e.g., simulating sensory overstimulation), to encourage greater compassion. By combining and balancing broader front-led content and principles with interactive exercises, autism training for prison staff can enrich participant's broader knowledge and understanding about autism in prison settings, as well as co-explore unique nuances, challenges and solutions associated with the particulars of

their prison site with colleagues. This can be especially useful where training participant groups that are comprised of multi-disciplinary staff from across a prison site, where peers can effectively support others to find creative solutions to challenges that they experience in their role, whilst also challenging misconceptions that may arise.

With respect to the design of training, it is imperative that the voices and lived experiences of autistic people in prison are used to inform the design of training materials. In its most basic form, this can simply involve capturing the lived experiences of autistic prisoners, to provide illustrations of key themes and points to be covered in the training. Integrating the voice of lived experience in this way can be a powerful tool to bring themes and learning points to life, and to encourage compassionate engagement, empathy and receptiveness from training participants. However, moving beyond this more basic approach, it is likely to

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11. Woodhouse, E., Hollingdale, J., Davies, L., Al-Attar, Z., Young, S., Vinter, L. P., Agyemang, K., Bartlett, C., Berryessa, C., Chaplin, E., Deeley, Q., Freckelton, I., Gerry, F., Gudjonsson, G., Maras, K., Mattison, M., McCarthy, J., Mills, R., Misch, P., ... Allely, C. (2024). Identification and support of autistic individuals within the UK Criminal Justice System: a practical approach based upon professional consensus with input from lived experience. *BMC Medicine*, 22(1), 157–30.

be more meaningful, authentic and effective where autistic people in prison are invited to co-design, co-produce and review training; to ensure that training resonates more closely with the needs and priorities of the population it aims to benefit.

With regards to specific content that could be embedded into training, based on existing research into the lived experiences of autistic prisoners, the following types of content may offer useful starting points:

- ❑ Introducing autism as an example of neurodivergence (i.e., difference, not problem), addressing common misconceptions, and emphasising diversity in what it can mean to be autistic.
- ❑ Neuroinclusive communication principles and strategies, with emphases on clarity, consistency and accessibility.
- ❑ Open-mindedness in the interpretation of behaviours and moving beyond assumptions, with balanced recognition of challenges and strengths.
- ❑ Integrating structure and predictability into how autistic prisoners are worked with and supported.
- ❑ Practical adjustments and accommodations in the physical or sensory environment.
- ❑ More specified accommodations that may be useful in specific prison roles or activities (e.g., specific responsivity approaches to adapt offending behaviour programme delivery and materials).
- ❑ Encouraging training participants to work collaboratively with autistic people as individuals to identify their needs and preferences, and to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches.

Ultimately, it is important to note that there are a wide variety of excellent resources, ideas, tools and training packages that exist beyond the criminal justice sector, which can be usefully repurposed and adapted to be useful in prisons and integrated into prison staff training too. For example, the Autistic SPACE framework, which was recently created to capture the

needs of autistic people in healthcare settings.¹² This adaptable framework is simple, memorable, and practical, and the main SPACE needs and subprinciples (i.e., Sensory, Predictability, Acceptance, Communication, Empathy, Physical Space, Processing Space, and Emotional Space) could be helpful for prison staff to consider when working with autistic people in prison. Therefore, the development of autism training for prison staff does not necessarily require the creation of completely new or unprecedented strategies and materials, and it can perhaps draw inspiration from existing good practices in other sectors.

Recent example of autism awareness training for prison staff

To illustrate some of these principles in practice, in 2022, myself and colleagues Dr Nell Munro and Dr Chloe Holloway worked in collaboration with staff and prisoners at the Design and Print Workshop in HMP Hull to co-create online autism training videos for prison staff working within HMPPS. These have since been added to HMPPS' virtual learning environment platform (MyLearning).¹³ Videos were designed to be brief and easily digestible to a range of prison staff audiences, typically lasting

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around 5 minutes each and following a consistent structure. It was anticipated that this design would lend itself to staff engagement and would not be too onerous on staff time (e.g., each video could be viewed during a work break). Each short video centred on a key theme relating to autistic individuals' experiences of prison, and adhered to the following structure: (i) an introductory overview of a specific issue (e.g., the reception process for autistic prisoners), followed by (ii) audio-recorded accounts of autistic prisoners' lived experiences of said issue, and concluding with (iii) a brief overview of the types of adapted practices, principles and accommodations that may be helpful to support autistic prisoners in relation to those issues. The themes used to frame each video were informed by the lived experiences of autistic prisoners, which had been captured through existing interview-based research and consultations with autistic prisoners at HMP Hull.

12. Doherty, M., McCowan, S., & Shaw, S. C. (2023). Autistic SPACE: A novel framework for meeting the needs of autistic people in healthcare settings. *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 84(4), 1–9.

13. Vinter, L.P., Munro, N., Holloway, C., & HMPPS. (2022). *Understanding Autism in Prisons* [Online Training Videos]. Ministry of Justice (MoJ) MyLearning Online Training Platform. Available for MoJ employees at: <https://mydevelopment.org.uk/course/view.php?id=9143>

Anecdotally, these videos have garnered positive feedback from professionals who have engaged with the content, with the integration of the lived experience perspective regarded as a particularly impactful highlight. However, whilst this may be a promising example, there is scope to enhance this approach further. For example, future developments could include the integration of more themes, more elaborate practical guidance, and perhaps more specialist or focussed topic areas that may be more specific to particular populations or prison type (e.g., intersectionality between autism and gender, issues relating to autism and self-harm or suicide, or nuances associated with open prisons). Moreover, the creation of shared open-access resources that complement the training content could be beneficial, to equip prison staff with practically useful tools beyond the knowledge, principles and tips conveyed in videos.

Conclusion

To conclude, the central purpose of this article was to highlight themes in the lived experiences of autistic prisoners and convey the crucial need for more consistent, accessible autism awareness training and education for prison staff. Whilst this paper has not provided a highly specified design for such training, it has proposed several priority areas for consideration in its development.

There is a further need to ensure that training is not only developed, but that this is rolled out in a consistent way across the prison estate (e.g., as part of staff induction training), avoiding more isolated or fractured approaches and to enable the development of a more neuroinclusive prison system as a whole. It is important to recognise here that whilst existing research indicates the importance of autism awareness training for prison staff and provides some direction for its design, there remains limited tangible empirical

evidence whether prison staff autism training is effective and in what ways. Therefore, following the development and rollout of autism training to prison staff, it is important that this is continuously evaluated to examine specific impacts (e.g., outcomes for autistic prisoners, and staff confidence, job satisfaction, and performance) and to identify opportunities for enhancement.

Ultimately, whilst this article has focussed exclusively on autistic people in prison, it should be clearly stated that neuroinclusive principles and adaptations that can be embedded into staff training and supportive for autistic people can be, and often are, beneficial to all neurotypes. For instance, enhancing accessibility in communication, being more sensitive to signs of underlying distress and moving away from making assumptions about others can be helpful principles when working with anybody. Therefore, improving how prison staff work with and support autistic people in prison should not be interpreted as coming at a cost to or overlooking others' needs, and may instead enhance how people of all neurotypes in prison are supported.

Finally, whilst this paper has primarily focussed on training and education, it is important to note that training alone is not sufficient to overcome the challenges experienced by autistic people in prison. Whilst it is a fundamental need and could create seismic shifts in how equipped staff are to work effectively with autistic people in prison, there nevertheless needs to be a multi-pronged approach, which considers other improvements that can be made in prisons (e.g., adaptations to physical environments, access to specialist support for autistic prisoners, and enhanced screening tools and processes to identify autistic people and their needs in prisons). Overall, these various changes in the prison context could contribute one step closer to a more neuroinclusive society as a whole.