

How Features of Autism may Provide the Context of Vulnerability to Engage in Offending, and Recommendations for Improving Support for Individuals with Autism

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, which is characterised by varied differences in social communication and interaction, and restrictive or repetitive patterns of behaviour and/or thinking (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Autistic individuals are no more likely to engage in offending than non-autistic peers, in fact, they are more often victims of crime (Collins et al., 2022; King & Murphy, 2014). However, in the small subset of autistic individuals who do commit crime, some offences are statistically more frequent such as sexual offences (Allely and Creaby-Attwood, 2016). We conducted qualitative research with practitioners to explore how the features of autism may provide the context of vulnerability to engage in sexual offending. We also explored areas to strengthen support for autistic people to prevent offending and re-offending.

In 2022, we interviewed 11 United Kingdom-based practitioners who have experience working with autistic people in relation to the prevention, or perpetration of offending and analysed these interviews using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We identified 4 main areas where autistic individuals (particularly young men) offend: Sexual abuse in person; viewing and/or collection of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM); terror and terror-related offences; and gang related crime. The most common crimes that the practitioners discussed were sexual offences (that is, sexual abuse in person and/or viewing and collecting CSAM).

Vulnerabilities for offending across these 4 crime areas, but particularly with regard to sexual offences, were found to be complex and sometimes overlapping. Individual-level vulnerabilities highlighted by interviewees included: communication difficulties of autistic individuals and their struggle to understand social cues, social norms or 'rules'; naivety; self-interest; limited empathy; rigidity in thinking; obsession with

patterns and searching for order; the desire to be an expert of a specific subject area; and being impulsive or inclined to risk taking.

When individual-level vulnerabilities interact with contextual factors, an individual may be at increased risk of offending.

Contextual level vulnerabilities identified in the study include: an autistic individual feeling that they do not 'fit in' and, as a result, being bullied and/or abused; feeling lonely, socially isolated and wanting to make friends; being drawn to online spaces; not understanding norms and 'rules' regarding romantic relationships and sexual intercourse; families and others not considering autistic young people as sexual beings; and, limited opportunities to engage in relationships and sex with other young people.

The interaction between these individual and

contextual factors may result in behaviours that could lead to criminal charges, including: inappropriate behaviours (e.g. touching); problematic internet use and viewing of illegal content (such as CSAM); obsession and collecting/hoarding behaviours (e.g., CSAM); and poor communication and lack of awareness of social norms and 'rules' that result in some autistic individuals appearing menacing and threatening to others.

In practice, autistic individuals who are apprehended tend to find interactions with police officers particularly stressful and intimidating.

They may not understand or appreciate the illegality of their actions and any potential consequences. While interviewees stressed that practice had improved considerably in many areas in recent years, for example with police officers becoming more sensitive to the needs of autistic individuals, interviewees also stressed that many practitioners did not know how to respond to the needs of autistic people. Interviewees highlighted that there have been very few, or even no adjustments made for autistic individuals during trial, leading to them having trouble keeping up with criminal proceedings. Furthermore, the behaviour of autistic individuals in the courtroom, such as limited eye contact and a perceived lack of empathy for the victim(s), may influence judgements (including sentencing decisions) made about them in courts and by other criminal justice practitioners.

There is, therefore, an urgent need for training for practitioners who work directly with autistic individuals, police officers, and criminal justice officials and scope for flexibility in criminal justice processes to be adapted to support them.

Interviewees believed that preventing offending could be achieved with more support for parents of autistic children and education professionals, and age-appropriate education, starting at primary school, to strengthen the communication skills of autistic children, highlight social/communication norms/rules, address internet and legal knowledge/awareness gaps, provide sex education and teach what is appropriate and safe behaviour in sexual relationships.

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