

Autism in prisons:

An exploration of lived experiences, challenges and needs

*Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System:
Offending, Police Investigative Interviewing, Courtroom and Prison*

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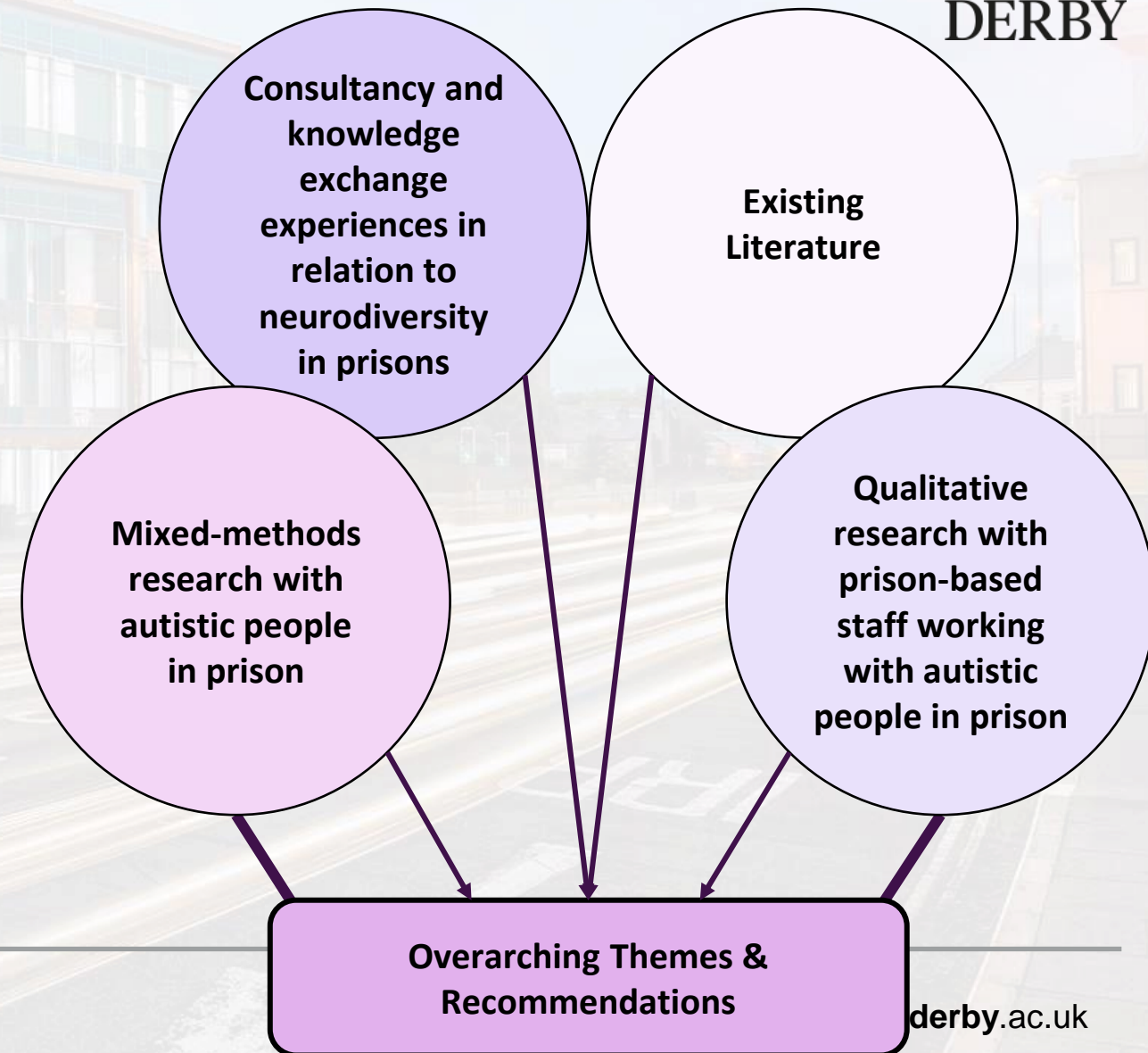
Basis for today's talk

- **Broad questions that have underpinned my work to-date:**

- How do autistic people experience prison and prison-based interventions to address offending?
- What do autistic people find beneficial and/or challenging in prisons and prison-based interventions?
- How can we best support and work with autistic people in the prison context?

- **Content for today's talk comes from a mixture of:**

- Mainly, my own primary research with autistic people in prison, and the people who work with them
- My consultancy and knowledge exchange experiences with prisons
- Synthesis with some existing literature



Autism in Prisons: Background



Background: What is autism?

- **Autism is a heterogenous (i.e., diverse), lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition, approx. 1-2% prevalence in the general population (APA, 2022)**
- **Autism is regarded as an example of ‘neurodivergence’ (or ‘neurodiversity’)**

Difficulties with social communication and interaction

E.g., social-emotional reciprocity and reading others, non-verbal communication and unwritten social rules, literality, processing verbal information, developing/maintaining relationships

Restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interest and/or thought

E.g., repetitive behaviours, adherence to routines/rituals, preference for sameness, highly-focussed interests

Sensory Differences

E.g., hyper/hypo sensitivity, sensory seeking/avoidance

Background: Autism and the Criminal Justice System

- **Autistic individuals are no more likely to offend than the rest of the general population** (King & Murphy, 2014; Mouridsen et al., 2008)
 - **HOWEVER;** in the minority of autistic individuals who *do* offend, their autism can often provide some context for their offending (Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011; Ledingham & Mills, 2015; Sabet et al., 2015)
 - Common examples of offences can include: sexual offending, property destruction (e.g., arson and criminal damage), assault, stalking, cyber-crimes
- **Prevalence of autism in prisons yet to be reliably established, but evidence suggests an overrepresentation of autistic individuals in CJS generally:**
 - Estimates based on secure settings (e.g. secure hospitals) range between 1.4%-18% (Enyati et al., 2008; Hare et al., 1999; Rutten et al., 2017; Scragg & Shah, 1994; Siponmaa et al., 2001; Söderstrom et al., 2005; Söderstrom et al., 2004; Søndena et al., 2014)
 - Estimates in prison settings 2%-8.5% (Ashworth, 2016; Fazio et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2012; Young et al., 2018)
 - **Take home message:** Generally thought to be higher than the 1-2% reported in general population
- **HOWEVER:** prevalence of autism in the CJS generally, and prison especially, difficult to establish...

Background: Identifying Autistic People in Prisons

- **Why is autism prevalence difficult to establish in prisons?**
 - Limited autism screening tools/resources and protocols validated for use in prisons
 - Methodological differences and limitations between prevalence studies
 - Difficulties acquiring developmental histories for prisoners
 - Autism awareness issues in the CJS, which can lead to misattribution/misinterpretation
 - Masked by the structured prison routine and/or through individual adaptation
- **Large proportion only receive autism diagnosis after contact with CJS** (Kumagami & Matsuura, 2009)
 - Mean age of diagnosis 25-31 years old (Hellerschou et al. 2015; Murphy, 2007) compared to 3-10 years old in general population (Daniels & Mandell, 2014)
- **Implication?**

Likely a hidden population of undiagnosed/unidentified autistic individuals serving prison sentences

Autism in Prisons: Key Challenges & Needs



Navigating Social Interactions

- **Prisons tend to have complex, sometimes overwhelming, social environments, which autistic individuals may find tricky to navigate (e.g. unpredictable, deception and manipulation, humour/sarcasm etc.)**
 - Autistic individuals may (inadvertently) encounter misunderstandings and confrontations with others in the prison
 - They may find it challenging to 'read' other peoples' intentions/feelings or to know how to respond 'appropriately', which can contribute towards misunderstandings and/or confrontations.
 - In many cases, this can also be triggered (or exacerbated) by others' lack of awareness/understanding, or willingness to accommodate! (i.e. the double empathy problem)
- **Many autistic individuals report feeling different to others, and may find it difficult to establish social connections**
 - Possible consequences: feeling alienated, isolation (self-imposed or through exclusion), damaged social confidence, bullying
- **In crowded or busy, closed-in social environments (e.g. wing landings or waiting areas), some autistic individuals may feel overwhelmed.**
 - In these environments, it can feel too unpredictable and like there's too much information to process, and may lead to feelings of stress or anxiety.

"Like I get into like... an altercation with the staff and it'll just escalate, because I can't see like how they're feeling, because of autism, I can't see their side of it."

"I was attacked regularly there, so I really did isolate myself, I didn't go out the cell at all."

Navigating Social Interactions

- **Challenges within the social environment are not universal → the social context is important**
- **Positive experiences of the prison social environment tend to be attributed to:**
 - Increased sociability and confidence in prison
 - Autism awareness, understanding, acceptance and supportiveness conveyed by others
 - Necessary to adapt to prison life
 - Fixed points of supportive contact in the prison
 - E.g. specialist IDD teams, friends, personal officers/key workers, Listeners

“I was very antisocial outside, didn’t like being around people at all. Inside, I know about 250 people now, by name!... I am quite popular with people.”

“I’ve got some good friends now... and people do like me, and it’s, kind of, a confidence booster... when I’m given some time, I can be quite outgoing... now that I know I’ve got lots of people that like me, I tend to leave the cell more... So, like my favourite friend, today, that I’m quite close to, is gone today, now on my own, and it’s really hard, ‘cause I’m quite close to him... for the past few days it’s, I’ve said this before, it’s like an execution, kind of, don’t want it to happen but it’s gonna happen”

Rules, Routine and Structure

- **Routines and structure can be *extremely* important for many autistic individuals in their daily life**
 - Routine, rules, structure and sameness= add predictability in an unpredictable social world
- **However, these can become a source of challenges for some autistic individuals in prison**
 - Transition from life outside → life in (and between) prisons → back to life outside= a lot of change!
 - Daily routines can be prone to delays or sudden disruptions/changes, and rules can feel inconsistent or may be misinterpreted
 - **Possible consequences:** distress, anxiety and/or frustration, reprimand

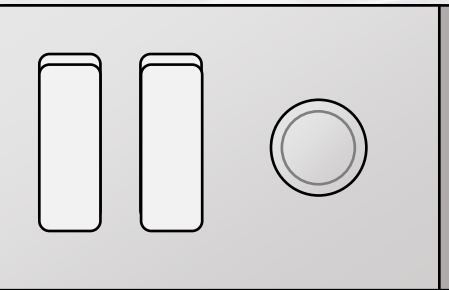
“Sometimes the routine, kind of, changes without warning... it’s kind of a shock to the system. So, we’re supposed to be open at eight o’clock, when they unlock you, so, eight-fifteen is, kind of, stresses me out... I like things to be on time, I like things to be set... As long as it’s continuous, and nothing changes during that, I’ll be fine”

“Sometimes in the past when they’ve had to change the routine slightly... routine has changed, why has it changed? Nobody has told me why it’s changed, and I go off into my cell and I’m like swearing at myself”

“when my schedule goes off, everything gets to a point and it just goes boff... and then everything collapses”

Rules, Routine and Structure

- **Routines and rules: importance of knowing what to expect and what is expected of them**
 - Facilitated through clearly and consistently communicated information and concrete guidance
 - Examples: Reception process, unlocking/movement times, cell 'emergency' buzzers, meeting/appointment times, detailed information about activities, cancellations and changes to routines
- **Coping with disrupted routines:**
 - Advance warnings can be beneficial, but are not always possible → What to expect next? Alternative activities?
 - Some autistic prisoners will develop self-imposed routines or contingencies that can function within the less predictable prison routine
 - Being able to pursue highly-focused interests can be helpful too, and may help to cope with challenging aspects of prison life. (note: may be difficult to facilitate in the prison, but could be considered through things like job allocation or related activities)



“They were telling me you know, ‘if you need anything just press the bell and I’ll come and help you, I’ll help sort you out’. It’s supposed to be an emergency bell... when you press it, and they don’t deem it an emergency, they can really have a go at you, and they shout at you... it’s taken me ages to just build myself up to press it, because I just don’t want to press it... I had a panic attack and it was really bad, I didn’t want to press it... I was just thinking what If I press it and they think it’s not an emergency... So, suddenly, I’ve pressed this bell and he’s come to me and says ‘oh, what do you want?’, ‘I just need this-’, ‘well don’t care, I don’t care! It’s not an emergency, don’t press it! I’ll give you a strike’ and walks off. They treat it like it has to be an emergency only, but you don’t quite know what an emergency is. But, at the same time, I don’t see how it can be an emergency bell, because there’s so many things that don’t count as an emergency, but need to be dealt with pretty quickly.”

Sensory Environment

- **Sensory differences can be diverse within and between individuals**
 - Hypersensitivity (i.e. heightened reactivity) & Hyposensitivity (i.e. lower reactivity)
- **Hypersensitivity particularly challenging**
 - **Noise:** E.g., specific noises (e.g., alarms, whistling, flip-flops, whiteboard pens) and/or general noise (e.g. overlapping voices in crowds, shouting, gates squealing/banging, keys jangling)
 - **Light and visual:** E.g., fluorescent lighting, busy walls and notice-boards
 - **Smell** E.g., perfumes/body sprays, air-fresheners, cleaning products, particular foods
 - **Touch:** E.g., clothing and bedding textures, specific fabrics
- **Consequences**
 - Anxiety, frustration, distress, distraction, disruptiveness, stimming, switching-off, nausea
 - These may not always be obvious on the surface → possible misinterpretation and misunderstandings

“I don’t like loud noises... I sometimes wear earplugs... with the TV, I have to wear headphones, because if it’s not, and it echoes round the cell, it freaks me out... we get that on the wing, people making sudden noises, that’s the other reason why I wear my headphones as well. I suffer panic attacks. So, that doesn’t help, sudden noise, my heart starts racing, start sweating, and sometimes I have to get on the bell to speak to somebody”

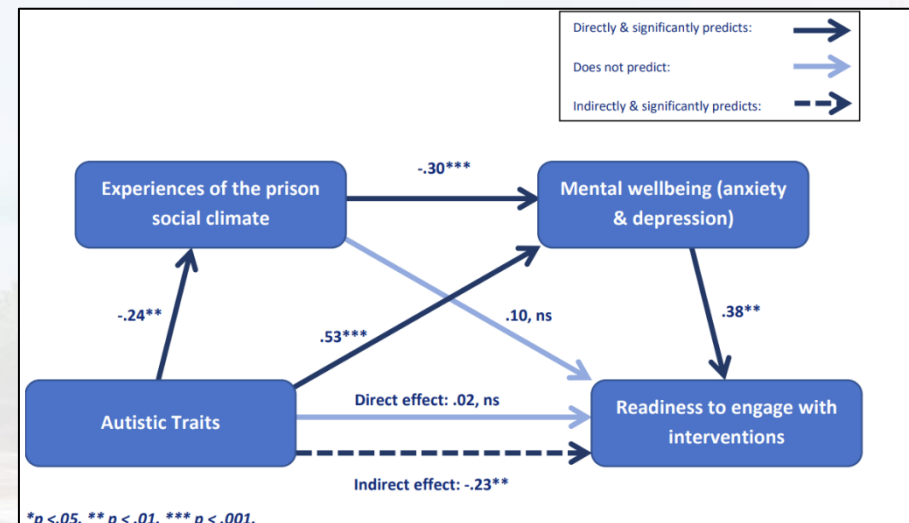
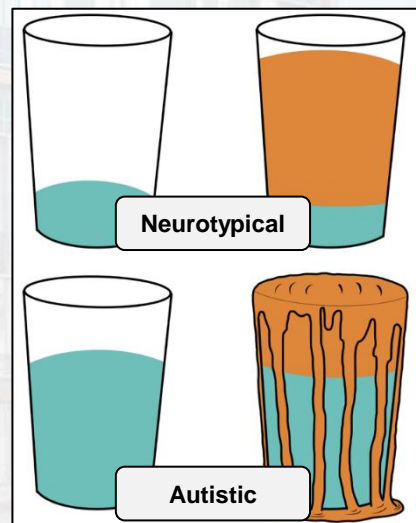
Challenges faced by staff

- **Despite having an autistic individual's best interests in mind, staff can be at risk of feeling frustrated when working with autistic individuals in the prison.**
 - This may contribute towards compassion fatigue, which may impact how they work with an autistic individual
 - Feelings of guilt for their frustration and internalising challenges
- **Being able to adapt pivots on the information staff have available**
 - i.e., "is X autistic?", "What does that mean?", "How do I work with X in this context?"
 - **HOWEVER:**
This information can be difficult very difficult for staff to find, as autism-related information is often limited and not centralised + general autism understanding can be mixed due to inconsistent training provision/experience

"I got really frustrated... it actually made me have quite negative feelings towards him, even though I tried to understand that he's not doing this to wind us up, it was just difficult try'na have that professional connection with him I suppose... he would just push my buttons, even if I knew he wasn't doing it on purpose... talking to other facilitators, they felt the same, and then that poor guy, if all the facilitating team's feeling the same, that, actually, he was getting on our nerves, he was annoying us, even though he didn't mean to, that must have alienated him even further"

Implications for Rehabilitation: Ripple Effect

- Rehabilitation does not happen in a vacuum
- What's going on in their life outside can impact on readiness for (and engagement with) rehabilitation
 - E.g., interactions with others (other staff and residents), disrupted routines, waiting area, sensory experiences can all impact engagement with activities... i.e. how full is their glass already?



1. During interventions

- Challenging/beneficial features

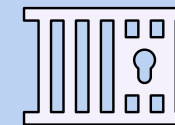
Need to consider how interventions delivery format/content may be usefully adapted to the needs of autistic individuals



2. Beyond interventions

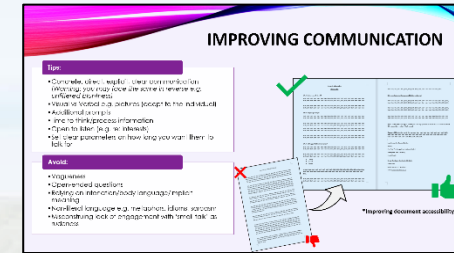
- Issues re: prison context

Need to support autistic individuals generally, at broader prison level



What can be done?

- Broadly, there are a variety of things that can be done, from small day-to-day adaptations to bigger picture changes and developments:
 - Enhancing autism awareness in prisons (and the broader criminal justice system) and contextually-relevant training on how to put that awareness into practice
 - Collaboration across the prison and *with* individuals
 - Streamlining of information access and sharing (inc. support plans/summaries)
 - Improved identification of autism and related needs (*and other ND needs*) in prisons. Focus on more than just diagnosis (i.e., needs, strengths, practical adjustments, interests etc.)
 - Supported engagement in activities (e.g., interventions) through adjustments to communication, materials and delivery
 - Adjustments and accommodations in the physical/sensory environment



IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

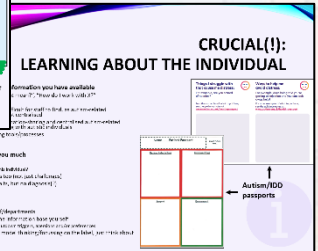
Topic

- Consider who will be affected: user, staff, management, other users, you may also be able to reverse the affected equipment
- Think of how you can address the needs of the individual
- Try to think of practical solutions
- Think about how you can help the individual
- Think about how you can help the individual

Assess

- Open-ended questions
- Addressing alternative ways of communication
- Training
- Knowledge (e.g., the person, their support)
- Supporting a look or engagement with 'small talk' as a baseline

Improving document accessibility

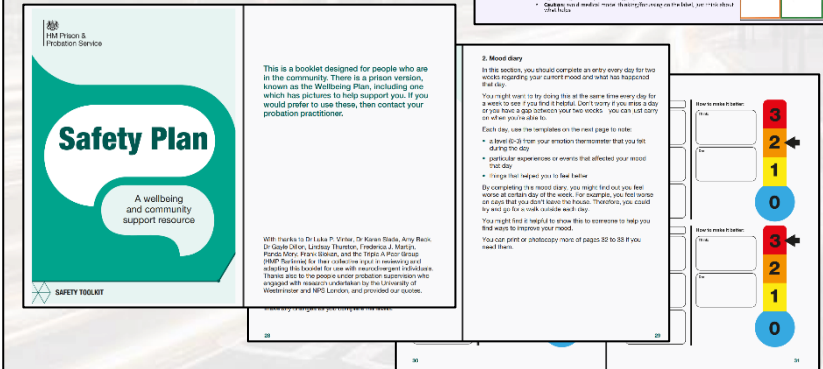


CRUCIAL(!): LEARNING ABOUT THE INDIVIDUAL

Information you have available

- A diagnosed client may not tell you much about their support needs
- Collaboration can be helpful

Action/ROD passports



Safety Plan

A wellbeing and community support resource

HM Prison & Probation Service

2. Mood diary

In this section, you should complete an entry every day for how you are feeling regarding your current mood and what has happened that day.

You might want to try noting that at the same time every day for a week to see if you find it helpful. Don't worry if you miss a day or you don't feel like you're doing it well, you can still carry on when you're able to.

Each day, use the templates on the next page to note:

- a level (0-2) from your emotion thermometer that you felt during the day
- particular experiences or events that affected your mood that day
- things that helped you to feel better

By completing the mood diary, you might find out you feel worse at certain days of the week, for example, you feel more anxious that you can't leave the house. Therefore, you could try and get to work outside every day.

You might find it helpful to know this to someone to help you that will help to improve your mood.

You can print or photocopy more of pages 22 to 23 if you need them.

How to make it better

3	+
2	+
1	
0	

How to make it better

3	+
2	+
1	
0	



UNDERSTANDING AUTISM IN PRISON

1. WHY IT MATTERS

to autism | why to offend

Concluding points

- **Take-home messages:**

- This presentation outlined general issues/starting points, but may be more/less relevant depending on the individual and specific prison site
 - i.e., There is no one-size-fits-all approach
- Collaboration is critical
 - Important to work with the individual, do not make assumptions, allow them to tell you what they need
 - Working with others in the prison
- Creating and being part of an enabling context through accommodation and support

- **Avenues for future work I'd be interested in (*please get in touch!*):**

- Exploring how autistic women experience prison and prison-based interventions
- Exploring experiences of neurodivergent prison staff
- Exploring experiences of (and support during) release, through-care and resettlement for autistic individuals



**Thank you for listening!
Any questions?**



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