

research snapshot

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Correlates of Police Involvement with Individuals with Autism

What is this research about?

Police officers play many different roles in the community. Past research has shown that individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may interact with police at high rates, however, very little is known about why these police interactions take place, who may be at greater risk of interacting with police, and how involved individuals feel about these police interactions. This study aimed to better understand the police involvement of adolescents and adults with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed 284 parents of adolescents and adults with ASD from across Ontario. Participants were recruited from ASD support agencies and advocacy groups, and from email lists associated with these organizations. Individuals with ASD ranged in age from 12 to 56 years old (averaging 18 years).

Parents completed an initial survey about their demographic information, their child's health, and their level of caregiver strain. Then, parents completed five brief bi-monthly surveys and a longer final survey 12 to 18 months later about their child's service use, including police interactions. All participants had the option of completing their surveys online, by telephone interview, or on paper; most preferred online surveys.

What you need to know:

Individuals with ASD that have been involved with police are more likely to be older, have a history of aggression, live outside the family home, and have parents with high caregiver strain and financial difficulty.

Most parents are satisfied with their children's police interactions; however, future research is needed to ensure safe and successful interactions for everyone involved.

What did the researcher find?

Approximately one in six (16%) individuals with ASD interacted with police at least once. Physical and verbal aggression directed at others in the community was the most common reason for police involvement (32%), followed by aggression in the family home (28%).

In most cases, police assessed the crisis and left without any further action; however, physical restraints were used in approximately one in five encounters. Only three incidents resulted in the individual being taken into police custody.

Those who interacted with police were more likely to be older, have a history of aggression, live outside the family home, and have parents with higher ratings of caregiver strain and financial difficulty. Most parents (63%) reported being satisfied to very satisfied with their children's police encounters.



ASD
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The researchers caution that their sample was made up of mostly white parents with high levels of education and the results may not generalize to all families of individuals with ASD.

How can you use this research?

Community-based family supports and services for adults with ASD may help prevent some police interactions. Clinical variables were not linked with police interactions, meaning that it is important for police to be prepared to interact with all individuals with ASD.

Likewise, it is important for all individuals with ASD and their families to prepare for police interactions. Future collaborative research between police and members of the ASD community is needed to ensure safe and successful interactions for everyone involved.

About the Researchers

Yona Lunsky Ph.D., C.Psych, clinician scientist, and Anna Palucka, Ph.D., C.Psych, clinical psychologist, are associated with the Adult Neurodevelopmental Service at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario.

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About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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