

# research snapshot

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## Different Rate of Emergency Service Use in Girls and Women with Autism Compared to Boys and Men

### What is this research about?

Girls and women in the general population present with a distinct profile of clinical needs and use more health services compared to boys and men, but we know very little about the service use patterns of girls and women with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The purpose of this study was to describe the clinical needs and health service use patterns of adolescent girls and women with ASD and explore differences with boys and men with ASD.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed parents of 61 female and 223 male 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 (average age was 18 years old). 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 a 12 to 18 months later about their child's health service use. 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:

A significantly greater proportion of girls and women with ASD use psychiatry and emergency department services as compared to boys and men with ASD even though overall clinical needs and service patterns are similar. More research is needed to ensure girls and women are receiving appropriate care.

### What did the researcher find?

The researchers found many adolescent girls and women with ASD had co-occurring mental and physical conditions and their parents reported high levels of caregiver strain. Parents of women with ASD reported higher caregiver strain than parents of men with ASD. Both males and females frequently used multiple services, particularly adolescent girls and women with intellectual disability.

Overall, few differences in service use were found between males and females, although a significantly greater proportion of girls (54.5%) and women (64.3%) used psychiatry services as compared to boys (29%) and men (41.4%). More girls (39.4%) and women (46.4%) also went to the emergency department as compared to boys (21.8%) and men (23.2%). The researchers note that their sample size was small and relied on parent report. Future research with administrative data is needed.

## How can you use this research?

Girls and women with ASD share many of the same high clinical needs and patterns of service use as boys and men with ASD, yet they remain underrepresented in research. Mental health services are clearly an area of significant need for girls and women with ASD and the increased use of psychiatry and emergency department services is concerning. It is important for future research to continue to clarify the health service experiences of girls and women with ASD to ensure they are receiving appropriate support.

## About the Researchers

Yona Lunsky, Ph.D., C.Psych, is a clinician scientist in the Adult Neurodevelopmental Service at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario. Jonathan Weiss, Ph.D., C.Psych, is an Associate Professor, and Ami Tint, MA, graduate student, are associated with the department of psychology at York University in Toronto, Ontario.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Autism, Health Service Use, Sex, Mental Health

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