

research snapshot

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Emergency service experiences of adults with autism without intellectual disability

What is this research about?

Individuals with autism have high rates of emergency service use. Although there has been a lot of work describing the rates and predictors of emergency service use in individuals with autism, much less is known about emergencies experienced by adults with autism who do not have an intellectual disability. This study describes emergency service use as reported by 40 adults with autism.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers described emergency service use from the perspective of individuals with autism without intellectual disabilities. Descriptions of emergency service use (i.e., police and emergency department visits) were collected as part of a larger survey that examined health service use in adults with autism from across Ontario. As part of the larger survey, participants completed bimonthly questionnaires on their service use every 2 months for a 12-18 month time period. Most of the participants completed their surveys online (97.5%). Of the 40 people that met the inclusion criteria (e.g., had a formal autism diagnosis, were over the age of 17) 23 people (58%) reported that they had used at least 1 emergency service over the course of the study period.

What you need to know:

Autistic adults who do not have intellectual disabilities commonly report being in emergency situations. Over the course of a 1-year period, 58% of the adults with autism in our sample reported using an emergency service at least once. On average, participants reported greater satisfaction with police compared to ED visits.

What did the researcher find?

Of the 23 people that reported using an emergency service, 17 people used the hospital emergency department (ED; 42.5%) and 13 people were involved with police (32.5%). Seven people used both police and ED services at least once during the study period.

Of the 17 people that reported using the ED, 11 people provided detailed accounts of 25 separate visits. Almost half of the reported ED visits were due to individuals presenting a danger to themselves (N= 14, 56%).

Of the 13 people who reported police involvement, 10 provided details of a total of 16 police visits. The reasons for using police services ranged, in most cases the police assessed the situation and left without any further action (62.5%).



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On average, participants reported that they were somewhat satisfied with police visits and somewhat dissatisfied with their ED visits.

How can you use this research?

Individuals with autism without intellectual disabilities used emergency services for a number of different reasons. Given the high rates of emergency service use in ASD, it is important to consider how individuals with a wide range of abilities interact with emergency services. Findings from this work may help improve preventative care and service provision for individuals with autism who may or may not have an intellectual disability.

About the Researchers

Yona Lunskey Ph.D., C.Psych, senior scientist, and Anna Palucka Ph.D., C.Psych, clinical psychologist, are associated with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario.

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