

Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by police personnel when interacting with autistic adults across operational contexts

Key details

Lead institution	Lancaster P-ACE
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Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northumbria Police • Cleveland Police • KeyRing
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	August 2026
Date due for completion	July 2027

Research context

To achieve the Policing Vision (2030), the National Policing Culture and Inclusion Strategy has tasked local forces with improving their ability to understand and respond appropriately to vulnerable communities, including autistic individuals. Policing personnel frequently interact with autistic individuals as they are seven times more likely to be a victim, witness or a defendant than non-autistic adults (Debbaudt, 2004). Such interactions can be uniquely challenging as autistic adults experience difficulties with verbal communication, display unpredictable (and at times self-injurious or violent) behaviours, and can struggle to follow instructions which can escalate situations

(for example, ZH vs. The Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis).

Existing research has primarily explored these challenging interactions from an autistic perspective and overlooks policing perspectives. Some UK officers report feeling unsatisfied in their interactions with autistic adults (Crane and others, 2016), but research has yet to investigate why, or how other policing personnel (for example, custody sergeants and interviewers) feel when interacting with autistic individuals. Without directly asking policing personnel what they need to work effectively with autistic adults, and what role-specific challenges they face when communicating with them, it is impossible to identify realistic ways to improve the inclusivity of policing across different operational contexts.

To address these needs, our project will:

- examine frontline officers', custody sergeants' and interviewers' existing awareness, skills and training in relation to autism
- elucidate the role-specific operational challenges that frontline officers, custody sergeants and interviewers face when interacting with autistic adults
- identify knowledge and support that frontline officers, custody sergeants and interviewers would find most valuable when interacting with autistic adults

We will work alongside Northumbria and Cleveland Police to identify the needs of the workforce and produce recommendations for professional development including actionable guidance on the need for more role-specific autism training, which is feasible and practical.

Research methodology

Survey

Frontline officers, custody sergeants and interviewing officers will be emailed a brief survey (under five minutes in length) in which they will answer questions about their:

- background/demographics
- ASD training
- experience and knowledge related to autism

Focus groups

Frontline officers will participate in focus groups. The focus group sessions will follow a semi-structured interview schedule developed in collaboration with participating police forces. They will cover confidence in interactions with autistic adults, challenges experienced during operational duties and development needs. We will also present officers with case studies based on autistic adults' lived experiences of interacting with police. These case studies will be created in collaboration with our charity partner, KeyRing. The case studies will be used to prompt discussion and will ensure officers with limited autism experience can meaningfully participate. The qualitative data from the focus groups will help us to elucidate role-specific operational challenges and identify knowledge and support needs.

Interviews

Individual interviews will be conducted with custody sergeants, interviewing officers and officers working on Northumbria's specialised mental health team. Interviews will follow a semi-structured guide that will be co-developed with policing partners and informed by the focus groups to ensure they address topics most relevant to policing practice. Topics will be related to their specialised role and specific support needs. The qualitative interview data will also contribute towards addressing our second and third research aims.

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to analysis. Thematic analysis will be used to identify themes relating to how policing staff across different operational contexts understand autism, their experiences working with autistic adults and their support-needs (for example, gaps in knowledge or training which may be contributing to operational challenges).

Research participation

We will recruit approximately 10–12 frontline officers, 5–8 custody sergeants, and 5–8 investigative interviewers from both Northumbria and Cleveland police forces. We will also recruit an additional 5–8 frontline officers who work in Northumbria's specialised mental health team.

Through the partnered police forces, we will advertise for participants via their internal communication systems (including intranet platforms, police contacts in relevant teams and digital

noticeboards).

References

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