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Policy brief: June 2024

Autism and policing

The importance of understanding and recognising autism for police officers



Summary

More than one in 100 people in the UK are autistic. Despite the prevalence of autism within society, autistic people face barriers in their everyday lives. One example of this is within the criminal justice system.

Autistic people are more likely to encounter the police, despite being no more likely to commit an offence than non-autistic people. Yet there is a lack of awareness of autism and other neurodivergent conditions within the police force that can cause distress to autistic people when they interact with the police.

We found that the custody process and the environment of the custody suite were maladaptive for autistic peoples' needs. In response to this, we co-developed training with autistic people and police officers to improve awareness of autism within the police force. We also improved the physical environment of a custody suite in a Nottinghamshire police station to make it better adapted for neurodivergent individuals. An evaluation of our training showed a significant increase in police officer's knowledge of autism. Many police officers also said this new knowledge would help them change their interactions with autistic people in future interactions.

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The Problem

Autistic people are **highly likely to come into contact with the police** for various reasons and often report **negative experiences** from these interactions.

This can lead to autistic people not disclosing their autism because they do not think the police will understand and this can result in negative experiences with the custody process.

In addition, many environmental features of custody suites and police stations, such as bright lights and noise levels, can also present barriers to engagement.

Currently, **it is not mandatory for police officers to have autism and neurodiversity training.**

Many police officers are unaware of how to interact with autistic people to support communication and sensory needs.

Autistic individuals are eligible for more support in police custody than non-autistic people. This is outlined by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Equality Act 2010.

However, research has found that **autistic individuals are not always supported.** Without appropriate support there is a risk that their **welfare and legal rights may be compromised.** It is clear changes are needed in the criminal justice system to **better support neurodivergent individuals.**

Recommendations

- The College of Policing should be **recommending training in neurodiversity to all police officers across the UK.**
- The College of Policing should **prioritise** incorporating the **needs of neurodivergent people** into everyday police practice.
- The custody process and the custody suites should be designed to **address the needs of neurodivergent individuals.**

Our Research

We interviewed autistic people to understand their experiences of the criminal justice system. We also conducted a walk-through study in which two autistic individuals with no prior experience criminal justice system completed the police custody booking-in process.

We identified which parts of the process were difficult for them, and which aspects impacted their social communication or sensory experiences to develop an autism training package. An evaluation of this autism training showed a significant improvement in police officers' knowledge of autism and increased intention to change future behavior to support autistic individuals.

Quote

"The training has made such a difference...the feedback from the training is that it should have happened much sooner"

**- Learning and Development Officer,
Nottinghamshire Police**

Our Findings

We identified specific aspects of the **custody process** that had **negative impacts on autistic people**. We found that language used during the booking-in process was **ambiguous**, so people were not disclosing their autism. **This has now been clarified.**

In Nottingham, the custody suite had **environmental factors that negatively impacted autistic people**. We helped to redevelop the suite by using matte instead of gloss paint and dimmable lighting. We also helped design less intimidating cells.

We also developed a training package including a 45-minute video, and a toolkit which contains extra information. This can be used as reminders for police officers and provides information for autistic people when encountering the criminal justice system. These were **co-produced with the police and autistic individuals**. To date, five police forces in East Midlands have been trained, but as there are 43 police forces in England and Wales, more forces need to do the training. This will **increase understanding of autism within the police force.**

- Most police custody officers **rated our training highly** based on content, delivery and information about autism.
- Police officers reported an **increase in their knowledge about autism.**
- Many officers said they would **consider changing their behaviour** in the future **when working with autistic detainees.**

Call to Action

"Adapt and roll [the training video and toolkit] out for the **larger, wider policing family...**the target being [the] first responders"

- Learning and Development Officer, Nottinghamshire Police

Implications

Our training had a **significant impact on increasing autism awareness within the police force**. This should lead to more **positive experiences for autistic people** when they encounter the police. We need to increase awareness of autism and neurodiversity in the UK police force. This will **improve the experiences of individuals** and will have **positive consequences for autistic people and for police officers.**

References

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