

Policing & Neurodiversity: The Challenges Faced by Frontline Police Officers Facing People with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight the challenges frontline police officers face whilst managing incidents associated with people of autism spectrum disorder. The officers often encounter incidents and crimes involving the neurodiverse community, having to deal with behaviours associated with autism and managing those situations. This remains an under-researched area within academic and professional rigour, despite the frequent media reporting on police management of autism related incidents and the lack of training received by the officers. The article concludes that providing police officers with appropriate training and placement opportunities will equip them to manage and understand the complex needs of people with ASD and associated behaviours efficiently. In a diverse society, the complexities affecting Black and minority ethnic people with neurodiverse conditions could further contribute to the intersectional oppressions leading to distrust in the police. Therefore, emphasising raising awareness and working alongside external agencies in this field would be greatly beneficial for the police officers to provide better support for people with autism.

Keywords: *Autism, neurodiversity, BAME, intersectionality, police.*

Contextual background

As neurodiverse conditions become more prevalent in society today, so do the challenges presented to frontline police officers serving the diverse communities. This article aims to address those challenges faced by officers and explore how specific skills and awareness can be developed through relevant training and partnership working to ensure appropriate support is available for people with autism.

Neurodiversity is “*the idea that people with brains that work differently are part of the normal range in humans.*” Everybody is unique, and they all respond to events and circumstances in separate ways (The Oxford Learners Dictionary, 2024). The term “*neurodiversity*” was coined by Judy Singer in the 1990’s who believed it to be essential for “*cultural stability*” She felt that by encouraging the term would gain access to a variety of forms that might manifest in unforeseen circumstances (Singer, 2017, p. 87). Neurodiversity lends itself to a variety of neurological variations, including Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (The Royal College of Nursing, 2024). In the UK, neurodivergent people make up 15% of the population; of these, around 700,000 have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Henley & Julie Jordan, 2021).

This study will concentrate on the challenges that frontline police officers encounter while engaging with individuals who have ASD. The condition is often referred to as a disorder, which insinuates it is a deficit; however, Baron-Cohen (2017) suggests the condition should be viewed as a disability, as this allows people to understand that a person can function in everyday life if their complex needs are met. Taking this into account, the guidance for protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination arising from disability and the failure to make reasonable adjustments. Existing research has identified that the training provided to police officers in managing ASD is very limited. Police officers failing to recognise the specific issues affecting neurodiverse people are facing constant criticism by ASD specialists, families, the media and the public in general.

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges associated with ASD, the complexity of the behaviours linked to the condition has to be understood and recognised first. Debbaudt and Rothman (2001) stated, police officers should receive training to prepare them to evaluate information and physical cues or body language that may indicate the person they encounter has autism. The article also looks at public expectations of police interactions and emphasises that the police are expected to manage a variety of situations, inclusive of behavioural conditions. Officers are not routinely exposed to ASD and its challenges, often having to rely on families to educate them during interactions. Gill et al. (2018), highlight that effective and efficient policing would benefit from proactive collaboration. Moreover, the negative media exposure can exacerbate the pressures already placed on police services to do things correctly.

Considering recent events that have been highlighted by the media regarding officers' mistreatment of the public, abuse of their authority, and lack of respect, it is even more critical to address the training gaps. Recent research conducted by Cambridge University (2022) revealed that although all autistic people are considered vulnerable by law, it revealed that only half of autistic adults (52%) were regarded as such by the police. The article seeks to answer the following research question,

How to address the barriers and difficulties in implementing the necessary changes, to fill the gap in the knowledge on current demand due to a lack of training and a data collection system on police interactions with people suffering from ASD?

Methodology

For this research, a secondary data collection method has been applied to **gather** existing academic research findings and relevant data published by official sources that are already available in the public domain. The theoretical foundation of the research is based on Critical Theory and intersectionality, which question societal injustices and power disparities, and interpretivism, which holds that knowledge is created through social interactions and human interpretation (Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023). The article evaluated the work and viewpoints of other academics through secondary research. This kind of study offers a variety of data sources for analysis, allowing for a more thorough approach. Additionally, it offers historical data that can be used to identify patterns and modifications that have occurred over time. This method helped to understand the prevalence of autism and how behaviours linked to the condition have come to be accepted as meaningful, which was useful for this research. In addition to highlighting data collection gaps regarding the frequency of police officer interactions with communities affected by ASD, the secondary perspective of this research has also laid the groundwork for future primary research.

Moreover, qualitative underpinning of the research has been used to conclude the opinions, experiences and processes of others using non-numerical data. This method worked well for this research, as there was little information available on the number of interactions of police officers managing incidents associated with ASD. However, there was plenty of information relating to ASD behaviours and available research on police officer opinions. The use of this method for this type of research is supported by Bryman (2016), who affirms that it would be challenging to use a quantitative research method, favouring the qualitative method, if there is little or no

research available. This method does come with limitations, as it can be subjective and biased depending on the researchers' beliefs and experiences. It is also reliant on collecting sensitive information, raising concerns of an ethical nature surrounding confidentiality and informed consent. Since ASD is a global disability, it was decided not to restrict the countries of origin because it may have been possible to find resources that highlighted strategies used by police forces in other jurisdictions to manage cases that proved to be beneficial for this research. The research had to go through the ethical application process and received appropriate ethical approval from the Leeds Trinity University Academic Ethics Panel.

Autism Spectrum Disorder and associated behaviours

Over the last two decades, the diagnosis of ASD has significantly increased; Russell et al. (2021) believe this to be partially due to the recognition of the condition and the importance of diagnosing children at a younger age. Furthermore, with the added requirement by law for local authorities to provide adult autism diagnostic services in the UK, the rate of increase in prevalence will keep rising (Autism Act, 2009). It also emphasises the need for additional training as well as the shifts in knowledge and comprehension that exist today. NHS England recorded data between March 2017 and August 2023, which identified an increase of 7.3% in autistic inpatients with or without a learning disability and an increase of 51.3% in those who did not have an associated learning disability. In West Yorkshire alone, a further survey conducted covering the years of 2021 – 2022, showed that this area in particular accepted 12,741 ASD and ADHD referrals, which was an increase of 83% of referrals shown in the same six-month period for the previous year (MindWell Leeds, 2023). This shows that there are many more adults and children with ASD compared to a few years ago. Though ASD has always existed, recognition of it has gained more exposure due to an increase in diagnostic accessibility. However, the lack of recognition throughout the years has contributed to the current rise in awareness. This theory is supported by Simonoff (2012), who questioned whether it is an increase of individuals living with autism that has risen or merely the diagnostic practice surrounding it. Hill (2024) implies that the increased availability of diagnostic pathways and increased public awareness of autism may have been influenced by the condition's prevalence. On the other hand, in contrast, it could be that autism is being over diagnosed; for example, Fombonne (2023) suggests that deficits in the overall

diagnostic process and formulation, or diagnostic instruments, may lead to overdiagnosis. He also acknowledged that receiving an autism diagnosis is harmless and that the priority should be access to services for those who require them. Alternatively, the combined increase of public understanding of ASD, its destigmatisation, and the availability of services tailored to ASD that are unavailable to children with other diagnoses, may also be the cause of clinicians over-diagnosing (Davidovitch et al., 2021).

ASD presents with challenges and the implications of associated behaviours which are linked to autism. For instance, a lack of knowledge about the behaviours is the source of the stigma surrounding the condition. This is supported by Turnock et al. (2022), who surmise that visual characteristics of autism may be perceived unfavourably due to a lack of education about the condition. The requirement for police intervention, for example, could be the result of an inadequate understanding of autism. Negative police interactions may also stem from inadequate knowledge and behavioural management, which affects how a situation is managed. According to Gibbs et al. (2021), the research participants with ASD believed the police had not treated them with respect or dignity and spoke of ignorance and misguided beliefs about autism. Autism is a neurological condition that is characterised by social and communication difficulties (Jurecic, 2007, p. 421) and the behaviours associated with the condition can be challenging for those individuals having to manage situations. However, Osgood (2019, p:4) suggests we now have more understanding about the specific functions of challenging behaviours. To an individual person with autism, a behaviour can be meaningful to them, it can be a way of communicating or a need for a decent quality of life. The requirement for police intervention is generally due to the presence of aggressive behaviours, the destruction of property, self-injury, or disruptiveness. Nicole (2022) suggests that there will be points in their lives at 59% of people with autism will engage in such behaviours. Admittedly, though, it is not only these behaviours that warrant police interaction. We must also take into consideration the involvement of witnesses and victims who also have a diagnosis of autism. Regardless of the motivation behind engagement, it must be carefully thought out and executed. Wallace et al. (2022) focused on the actions autistic people exhibit when they encounter the police and found several behaviours displayed were similar to police training on deception, compliance, and passive resistance, such as failing to

maintain eye contact and having trouble answering questions. It is not the prevalence of an autism diagnosis that has increased the pressures on this area of policing, but more so the challenges that are associated with the condition and how officers can be best equipped to manage these interactions. When dealing with ASD, there is not one typical pattern of behaviours described for the condition. Autism is a spectrum, meaning the diverse characteristics and the level of abilities of those who have received a diagnosis may vary. The functions of ASD are typically divided into two categories: low functioning, which describes people with severe developmental difficulties, such as difficulties in communicating, and high functioning, which describes people with less difficulty with language and intellectual capacity (Schouten, 2024). In addition to this, there are sensitivities to touch, lack of social understanding and heightened anxieties, and for those who are unable to express their distress, certain sensory stimuli can induce aggressive and self-destructive behaviour (Marco et al., 2011). Police officers must take these behaviours into account and comprehend them when responding to an incident involving an individual with autism or when someone exhibits behaviours linked to the condition.

No one individual with a diagnosis of ASD presents with the same behavioural challenges; there may be similarities and differences that need to be recognised, needing different techniques to be implemented. Therefore, any training received to fully ensure police officers are thoroughly diverse in knowledge and understanding of the condition could be highly intense. It would eventually equip officers to manage situations involving ASD more efficiently. Wallace et al. (2022) confirmed that positive outcomes were dependent on teaching police officers, people with autism, and their loved ones how to interact with the police. It is evident that professionals such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and nurses who work closely with autism only receive approximately 1 – 3 hours of lectures throughout their training. This training and knowledge received by professionals was reviewed by Dillenburger et al. (2016), who reported that, in general, autistic adults and parents believed that professionals lacked sufficient training or knowledge, which prevented them from providing adequate support to their children. This implies that most autism-related training programs and support services are deficient. Railey et al. (2020) acknowledge this problem, stating that it can be challenging for officers to promptly and accurately assess situations and take action to protect others and

themselves; however, due to the negative consequences of these encounters, they identify that more ASD-specific training is necessary for officers. Teagardin et. Al (2012) argues that police officers run the risk of exacerbating a situation and causing needless trauma, injury, or death if they are not trained to recognise and react to people with ASD. With the array of behaviours associated with autism, for example, the behavioural challenges, the communication difficulties, sensory issues and misunderstanding social interactions, there is much needed by way of training. While families spend all their time with the individual, officers occasionally need to act fast in these circumstances and make choices based on the information that is presented to them. For example, a police officer is not necessarily going to recognise that a person is autistic straight away. The only indication would be a warning marker if there had been previous police contact or being told by a family member had been told. Officers not only need to be equipped to identify autistic behaviours, but they also need to be afforded the time to assess situations beforehand.

With the array of associated behaviours, there is much to learn and understand. Likewise, this is the same for police officers. Police officers can't receive this kind of training on their own; they need assistance and pertinent training. When determining the criteria and the most effective training approaches for police officers to identify related ASD behaviours while also ensuring their own and others' safety, there are a lot of factors to consider. In addition, officers must be equipped with the techniques to manage the behaviours to either prevent offences from taking place or to support victims, suspects, and witnesses throughout the criminal justice system (CJS). Although the police are there to protect, they are powerless to address issues that families might be facing. Undoubtedly, given the prevalence of autism, officers must receive appropriate training that involves collaboration with other support organisations.

Race and autism intersection

Black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities often are subjected to disproportionate treatment by the police and other professionals, leading to exclusion and discrimination fuelled by conscious and unconscious biases. The frontline officers need to be mindful of racial, religious and cultural differences and how these factors may affect people with neurodiverse conditions within ethnic minority communities.

Green (2020) contends, “pre-existing stigmas within other communities play a part in avoidance of acknowledging difference – if you are already being oppressed by society due to your ethnicity, it makes sense that you would avoid being identified as being neurodiverse”. Children and young people with autism are often misunderstood and identified as “cursed” and genetically deformed, bringing shame and embarrassment to the family and parents within certain Asian and African culture. Green (2020) also expressed that in “Asian and African communities, giving eye contact to an adult or to someone in authority is considered to be rude, and children are actively taught not to do this. Yet, not maintaining eye contact is widely considered to be an autistic trait and something most, if not all, professionals will be looking out for when offering a diagnosis of autism”. Leach (2019) stated that cultural and religious differences often affect the initial diagnosis of autistic behaviours, such as behaving in a loud and extroverted fashion could be taken as a sign of mania. Similarly, engaging in a prolonged period of mourning following a close bereavement could be interpreted as grief that has spilt over into clinical depression. Moreover, children and young people from Black and Asian backgrounds are twice as likely to have a proper autism diagnosis (Green, 2020). Hence, being Black or Asian and neurodivergent at the same time can add to an extra layer of oppression to pre-existing systemic racial discrimination that they already face. It is sometimes inevitable for the police officers and health professionals to uncover the complexities of the intersectional invisibility of a particular individual or group of people. Nick Walker (2014) explains,

“The social dynamics that manifest regarding neurodiversity are similar to the social dynamics that manifest regarding other forms of human diversity (e.g., diversity of ethnicity, gender, or culture). These dynamics include dynamics of social power inequalities, and also the dynamics by which diversity, when embraced, acts as a source of creative potential” (Neurodiversity Paradigm section para. 4).

The lack of recognition and awareness surrounding the impacts of autism and other neurodiverse conditions on people from minority communities with diverse cultural backgrounds will continue to contribute to the social inequalities that they face. Therefore, making it a pressing case for the frontline officers to be educated in this specific area and be intersectionality aware.

Collaborative working

The number of people receiving diagnoses for autism has increased significantly over recent years. It has been crucial for families dealing with the behavioural challenges, sensory problems, and communication difficulties that people with the condition exhibit. Professionals now have the answers to appreciate ASD thanks to the development of the diagnostic pathway and their understanding of the behaviours, enabling them to provide the vital support families require. According to Okoye et al (2023), receiving a diagnosis also facilitates better coping mechanisms, lowers parental stress, and increases adult independence by giving families access to the right support services, educational materials, and community programs. But, as more people receive a diagnosis, the need for support services also rises. The National Autistic Society reports that there are over 700,000 adults and children in the UK estimated to be on the autism spectrum, which also reports that one in every one hundred people is on the spectrum (Air Quality News, 2024). This signifies the need for more professional support. In addition to this, it is not only the learning and understanding of the condition that is needed, but families also require support during those challenging times when they are unable to cope. Lozzi-Toscano (2004) identified that the management of ASD can be powerful if working in partnership to create connections between families, local resources, and medical and mental health professionals. If policing professionals were also included in this equation, they would be better equipped when attending to deal with these demanding situations. The challenges arise during times, as previously mentioned, when the police are the first service called to respond because of aggressive behaviours, disruption, and property damage. NHS England identified that many admissions and extended stays in mental health inpatient units may be prevented with early, focused community support. If the police and supporting agencies could collaborate during incidents, then inpatient stays could be reduced. The function of a police officer, as described by the College of Policing, is to prevent and detect crime and act when there is an immediate risk to life or serious harm (College of Policing, 2019). When a person is at risk of the latter or in crisis due to their mental health, they have access to a crisis line and the police work in partnership with mental health services. This means that a mental health specialist is on duty alongside police, giving the officer the chance to meet the person's needs by granting them instant access to the necessary services. Gill et al (2018) believe

that proactively working in partnership to close this gap for behavioural health-related calls is in the interest of both effective and efficient policing, as these calls present significant challenges for both police and communities and consume a significant amount of police time. The significance in partnership working is supported by Tracy Brabin; Mayor of West Yorkshire who states in the Policing and Crime Commissioning Strategy 2022- 2024 the importance of redesigning services and interventions to better meet the needs of our communities, placing partnership working at the core of the commissioning approach as a key role as service demand increases (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2022).

Right Care Right Person

The importance of dealing with families and the public to ensure their needs are met and dealt with appropriately is paramount within the policing profession. The CoP, guidance for ethical and professional behaviour in policing, says officers should act in an *“ethical and professional way that it respects, listens, responds, improves and serves the public”* (College of Policing, 2024). This justifies the need for officers to be specifically trained for dealing with ASD, as it is a community that is potentially misunderstood. The Right Care Right Person (RCRP) national guidance was launched and advises officers when responding to mental health incidents to use the RCRP toolkit. This involves collaborating with external agencies to ensure that individuals who are vulnerable receive the best possible care and support (College of Policing, 2023). The toolkit has been implemented by a number of forces, but it was Humberside Police who initially created the model in 2021. Taking this initiative into account, it would be beneficial to adopt a similar approach to ASD and therefore address the challenges faced by officers. In 2018 the government conducted a review of autistic services and support for children and adults with the minister Nadhim Zahawi stating, *“This pivotal review will help to find out how we can further our understanding of all forms of autism, improve how children and adults are supported and transform the life outcomes for people with autism”* (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018, p:1).

Following the review, a national strategy for autistic children, young people and adults was developed for 2021 to 2026; this included police awareness of autism so individuals with the condition can receive the right support and adjustments throughout the criminal justice system (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). This support

is required during the initial contact with the police; by ensuring officers have been provided with autism awareness training and can provide therapeutic management of aggression, we can ensure positive outcomes for all involved. Salerno-Ferraro and Schuller (2020) identified that the majority of training programs focus on increasing autism awareness rather than teaching how to effectively meet the special needs of people with ASD. Unfortunately, without the correct training, understanding and knowledge to manage the behavioural challenges, the outcomes will be less favourable.

Public expectations and media representation of the police

The public has elevated expectations of the police today, believing that they should be able to manage the majority of the situations they encounter. This includes understanding the behaviours associated with autism and having the skills to manage them appropriately. Although these complaints are not necessarily directly linked to the interactions between the police and individuals with ASD, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) collated the statistics for complaints throughout the police force in England and Wales. In the 2021/22 report, they found that complaints received regarding police action following contact were 28,043, which was 23% of the total allegations. The general level of service amounted to 21,444, which was 18% of the total allegations (Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), 2022). These were the two highest areas for complaints received. Of these top two categories, statistics recorded by the IOPC for West Yorkshire recorded 1,299 for police action and 926 for general service 2021/22; however, in 2023/24, the general level of service increased to 1,298, and police action following contact reduced by approximately 50% to 654 complaints (IOPC, 2024). These figures show the importance of police action and service delivery, including the pressures of media reporting. The media representation of the police and the relationship between the police and Black and minority ethnic communities has not been positive. This is mainly due to several high-profile cases from recent years, due to gross misconduct and illegal behaviour. With these cases being reported in the media, the pressures on forces across the country have become significant. For example, the recent murder of two sisters in 2020, whose bodies had been photographed by attending officers and shared on social media (BBC News, 2022), the following year in 2021, a police officer, Wayne Couzens, was sentenced for kidnapping, raping and murdering Sarah Everard (Dodd & Walker, 2021).

The year 2022 saw the IOPC publish a report following an investigation of misogyny, bullying and aggressive behaviour within Charing Cross police station. In 2023, police constable David Carrick was sentenced to several life terms for rape and exploitation (Burns, 2023). Each of these police officers had been in a position of power and trust with the general public relying on them to treat them fairly and with dignity, respect, and trust. Dowler (2002) believes that the public's perception of police effectiveness is more intricately linked to preconceived notions than to media consumption, which serves to reinforce preexisting attitudes and opinions. The public's trust will continue to decline as long as negative events involving officers are frequently reported. Families who have had negative experiences with police officers in relation to ASD will communicate these negativities to the media, having a big impact on how the public perceives the police. Another recent case of a West Yorkshire Police officer arresting an autistic teenage girl. The management of the incident was scrutinised by the IOPC, who found that the actions of the police officers fell short of expectations set out in the Code of Ethics. The Free Speech Union also sent a letter to the Chief Constable addressing the incident and queried if officers should be urgently trained in "Free Speech" (Attenborough & Attenborough, 2024). To clarify, the girl with ASD made a comment that the officer took offence to. Further to this, a video of the officers attempting to manage the situation circulated, which has also fed into the preconceived ideas that the police are not trained to deal with autism. The outcome of the incident was an apology from West Yorkshire Police, for the officer to undergo reflective training, and the teenager had no further action taken against her (Jones, 2024). Had the officers in question received specific training in relation to autism, it could be argued that the management of the situation would have had a more positive outcome for everyone involved. To investigate the nature of interactions between the police and neurodivergent individuals, research using incident report data from the North and South Yorkshire Police was examined, and findings suggested officers had limited information and felt themselves to be the wrong person dealing with the incident. This report concluded that police organisations need to make significant changes in structure, culture, and language to integrate neurodiversity. It was identified that this could not be conducted through individualised initiatives or unofficial partnership working as had been the case (N8 Policing Research Partnership & Siberry, 2021). The report is supportive of the fact that police officers have specific training needs in relation to autism. Without this training, officers are already

challenged in this area due to individuals whose needs are not being met, from families who require assistance and further scrutiny from media reporting. Bradford and Jackson (2024) reported that results from the Crime Survey of England and Wales (CSEW) stated 52% of respondents said that police work is "excellent." They continue to confirm that over the past five to eight years, there has been a decline in public trust in the police in England and Wales. Whether or not there is a true "crisis," this shift is significant.

Police training on autism

The current police training delivered to frontline officers around ASD is limited. Hepworth (2017) identified that seventy percent of police officers in England and Wales who participated in a study on their knowledge of ASD reported never having received any official training in the subject. Move forward five years, and the dialogue does not appear to have changed. Research conducted by Holloway et al. (2022) reiterates that a major contributing factor to the unpleasant experiences that people with autism have when interacting with police is the apparent absence of appropriate autism training provided by police forces. Police training on ASD appears to focus on increasing awareness of the condition rather than understanding and learning how to manage a situation. Much criticism has come from the police management of individuals with ASD throughout the CJS process. As previously highlighted, the study completed by Cambridge University (2022) unequivocally demonstrates that adults with autism are not treated fairly by the criminal justice system. In light of this, developments have been implemented within police custody training for ASD, there has been the introduction of sensory boxes and stimming aids, and there is also an easy-read version of their rights. Suspects were also asked to confirm if they have or believe that they have ASD. Having taken this requirement on board, ASD training should continue to evolve and include frontline officers. West Yorkshire Police confirmed in a freedom of information response in 2022 that no specific mandatory training was delivered in relation to ASD, and any training received formed part of other courses. They also confirmed that any training delivered was conducted by other police officers or members who have a neurodiverse condition (West Yorkshire Police, n.d). The current public police safety training (PPST) delivered provides minimal to no focus on ASD, choosing to concentrate on one scenario based on mental health, and

only basic de-escalation techniques. This is inclusive of the usual escalating challenges faced by police officers daily. The management of behaviours associated with ASD requires a more specific training programme due to the complexities of the condition. Unfortunately, despite recognising the need to implement ASD training within the police force, there has been little movement in this area. Love et al. (2022) found that providing police officers with practical experience in addition to allowing them to build personal connections with the autistic community will be essential to modifying their behaviour. As ASD becomes more prevalent throughout the UK, the requirement for specific training provided to police officers relating to the condition is paramount. With the implementation of ASD initiatives such as custody training, RCRP, and the support offered to neurodiverse colleagues, not to mention the trial of the ASD passport scheme used by the Guernsey police force. The autism passport scheme provided a positive impact to officers who needed to communicate with those who had signed up to the scheme and was conducted in partnership with a local charitable organisation (College of Policing, 2023). It could be said that the police force is moving in the right direction.

Police forces across the UK already recognise the diverse communities to which it serve and work to form partnerships and develop community engagement (College of Policing, 2016). The Strategic Policing Partnership Board also encompasses the growing diversity and complexity of the communities, which aims to promote more inclusive, equitable, and productive public participation whilst also being meaningful and courteous (Policing Vision 2030, 2020). However, although there is mention of collaborating with partners aimed at reducing crime and criminality, there is little focus on working in partnership with external agencies to support the police when dealing with the issues surrounding mental health and neurodiversity. The approaches to using this within a policing context identified that a wide range of disciplines and services must respond to the needs of the population and that working in partnership is essential to these public health strategies. However, there are challenges to providing the evidence in relation to partnership working and preventative measures; 80% of calls are unrelated to crime, and many are about issues of vulnerability and people with complex social needs, which the police are unable to address on their own (Christmas et al., 2019). At present, the Police do not collate data to identify the needs of the autistic community. There is no system in place to identify the number of calls

where the police have been requested to respond to assist in managing the behaviours faced by the public or families dealing with autism. The North and South Yorkshire forces, as previously mentioned, gathered information to determine the kinds of interactions they were having with neurodivergent people. Having access to this information has helped to identify the need for partnership working and additional training in this area (N8 Policing Research Partnership & Siberry, 2021). The lack of data to support the demand in this field emphasises how difficult it is to get the specialised training that is sorely needed.

In summary, it is evident that the training police officers receive in relation to autism is limited. The police lack the necessary training to proactively diffuse a situation and stop it from getting worse because there is insufficient emphasis on identifying behaviours and knowing how to deal with them. This was highlighted during the involvement of the 16-year-old autistic female in Leeds. On the other hand, difficulties arise when data cannot be gathered to comprehend the present needs regarding ASD-specific training. Working in partnership with external agencies would assist officers and families to manage the challenges presented and help signpost them to relevant agencies for preventative measures. But the limitations of this need were highlighted by Thacher (2024), who confirms that more work is urgently needed to determine what resources front-line officers can use to fortify the natural support network that a more accommodating society needs, as well as what obstacles and problems are likely to arise along the way.

Conclusion & recommendations

The interactions between the police and people with autism have been heavily criticised by the media. With the diverse changes within society today and the prevalence of autism, it is vitally important for police forces across the UK to recognise these changes, including intersectional oppressions, and adapt their practices accordingly. There is significant emphasis on diversity, equality, and inclusion within the police; they are committed to collaborating with diverse communities and engaging members of the public to better understand their needs. Progress has been made by UK forces in embracing officers with neurodiverse conditions, with assistance being extended to guarantee that all officers with neurodiverse conditions receive the same opportunities as their counterparts. Using this initiative, it is important to further extend

this to the training officers receive on autism. As recognised by Holloway et al. (2022), research indicates that people with autism are more likely to interact with the police, even though there is little information on the number of autistic people who do so, and the importance of relevant training is paramount to improving the interactions between police officers and autistic people. There has been movement within the CJS, which has recognised that people with complex needs require additional support and understanding, particularly those with autism. With the introduction of sensory and stimming aids offered and the further training provided to custody officers, the experience of autistic people in this area should improve. However, the challenges for frontline police officers are still to be addressed. Currently, there are no methods of collating the data within most forces recording the number of police encounters of people with autism. Therefore, it is recommended that to assist officers in dealing with autism and overcoming the challenges, they would need to work in collaboration with external agencies to receive specialised training, also the introduction of immediate access to specialised support services during challenging interactions and finally a method to collate the data that indicates the demand for these services and helps signpost families to the correct services.

An officer must be able to recognise and identify behaviours linked to autism through training, and they must also be able to appropriately manage these behaviours. Unfortunately, autism associated behaviours are complex, even more so for people from Black and ethnic minorities. Police provide specific training to officers who want to become Sexual Offence Liaison Officers to deal with victims of sexual offences. This is to better understand the stigmas associated with these offences and the sensitive approach that victims require. It also equips officers with the knowledge of obtaining the best evidence and management. Considering this, it would be advantageous to offer autism-related training to committed officers who aspire to become liaison officers with the same level of attention and focus. Working in collaboration with specialised outside agencies and families, a special training program designed just for police officers could be created, which is supported by Maxwell and Kramer (2024). Furthermore, it would be beneficial to introduce placement opportunities for officers in a secure autism service or in a community setting for individuals with autism, enhancing their expertise and experience. This type of specialist training was indicated by Crane et al. (2016) following their research of

police officers and ASD who surmised that to guarantee the appropriate training in the variety of police settings, this should also be evidence-based, guided by individuals who are directly impacted by ASD, and customised to particular policing roles. Crawford (2024) contends that public safety and policing must be managed by need, but also by developing capability and fostering genuine problem-solving partnerships to effectively address the needs of vulnerable groups. This is accomplished by making sure that the most appropriate care and protection are available to the right people or services at the right time. Families will feel like they have been provided with a responsive service if frontline police officers have access to the appropriate services during their interactions with autism and the behavioural challenges from the onset. They can be signposted immediately, similarly to the public protection notice (PPN) and mental health referral system, to highlight the needs of the individual or families.

The autism passport has already been trialled, and although this was limited to one force area, it was deemed to be beneficial, which is another method of collating data, collaborating, and understanding the needs of individuals. It is also important to ensure that police officers are equipped to deal with these challenges within their areas and receive the support to do this. Prevention and Management of Violence and Aggression (PMVA) training could assist officers to deal with any physical violence and help to prevent an individual from hurting themselves, others or causing criminal damage. Working alongside these services and sharing relevant information could assist in collating this data. It would also be beneficial to note if the interaction is autism related or due to something else. However, there has been a start and slow progression in this area through some of the CJS pathways such as custody, vulnerability assessments and victim support, etc., but this now needs to be extended to frontline officers dealing with people with neurodiversity as a part of their day-to-day job.

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