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Autism, School, and Crime: How school can lead those with autism into crime

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Abstract

Background: This paper explores the 'school-to-prison pipeline' and aims to raise awareness about the vulnerabilities of young people with autism in society.

Methods: This study employs an empirical review, with case studies, that combines insights from educational settings with empirical evidence related to autism and crime.

Results: The paper addresses the following topics: (1) risk factors for offending behaviour, (2) the involvement of police with individuals on the autism spectrum, (3) social naivety and the concept of 'joint enterprise,' (4) stimming and repetitive behaviours, (5) types of crimes committed by individuals with autism, and (6) the lack of training for arresting police officers regarding autism.

Conclusions: It is acknowledged that not all individuals with autism engage in criminal activities; in fact, many are highly vulnerable to becoming victims of crime themselves. When arrested by police officers, individuals with autism can experience elevated levels of dysregulation, often resulting in meltdowns that may be misinterpreted as threatening behaviour. This misperception places them at greater risk of facing charges of assault and being detained under mental health legislation.

Keywords: Autism, school, crime, mate crime, prison, joint enterprise

1. Background

The researcher is a neurodivergent educator with extensive experience in primary and secondary education (ages 5-18) in UK schools, where he served as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENDCO). This paper is based on a new book by the author, which focuses on autism awareness and crime, and is part of a wider series exploring the 'school-to-prison pipeline' with those with dyslexia and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder).

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What is Autism

Autism is a neurodiverse developmental condition that individuals are born with (National Autistic Society, 2025a). It can often be diagnosed at a very young age, as early signs, such as not crying or being content with their own company, can be observed, particularly in boys. In contrast, autism in girls may go undiagnosed until adulthood because they tend to exhibit different behaviours, often appearing quiet and reserved, and they may mask their traits by mimicking others (National Autistic Society, 2025a). Many people believe there are subsets of autism based on how symptoms manifest, which can be categorised as internal or external. These manifestations can be present in both males and females. Autism spectrum disorder/Condition (ASD/ASC) is one of the most common childhood-onset neurodevelopmental disorders. In the UK, the estimated prevalence in adults is about 1.1%, with relative consistency across studies (NCCMH, 2023). Comparing this estimated prevalence of autism in adults with that of children (1-2%), researchers suggest that autism is underdiagnosed among adults (Huang et al., 2020; O'Nions et. al., 2023). The proportion of males to females diagnosed with autism varies across studies but always indicates a greater proportion of males to females, mostly ranging from 3:1 to 5:1 (NCCWCH, 2022; BMJ Best Practice, 2023).

Autism is diagnosed as part of a medical process by a psychiatrist using screeners, interviews, and observations. There is a discussion about whether autism is a disorder (medical terminology suggesting something wrong with the person) or a condition (suggesting it's a human difference, and all humans are different, and that is okay), as noted by Morris (2024). Hence, the ASD or ASC abbreviations are options.

Those with autism see their autism as a major part of their personality, so they call themselves an 'autistic person' (Brown, 2025). Compare this with someone with dyslexia who sees this as a 'part' of their personality, who prefers to be called a 'person with dyslexia', as they are a person first and dyslexia is just one aspect of them. Brown (2025) interestingly notes that when we say 'person with autism', we convey that it is unfortunate and an accident that a person is autistic, that they would be better without autism, and would be neurotypical. However, when we say, 'autistic person', we recognise, affirm, and validate an individual's identity as an Autistic person. We recognise the value and worth of that individual as an Autistic person.

Autism manifests in various ways (National Autistic Society, 2025c):

- Problems with social communication and interaction
- Restricted or repetitive behaviours or interests
- Different ways of learning, moving, or paying attention
- Co-occurring conditions such as dyslexia, epilepsy, depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Challenging behaviours like difficulty sleeping and self-injury

Autism in a school environment

Individuals with autism often face challenges in mainstream education, where both social and academic skills are emphasised (National Autistic Society, 2025c). While they may excel academically, they often struggle with the social and environmental aspects of school life. The pressure to be sociable, make friends, and engage in group work and play, especially during breaks and lunchtime, can be daunting. Many would prefer to spend their time alone with a book, immersed in their own world. Unfortunately, this preference can lead to the perception that they are lonely and lack friends. As a result, adults may attempt to encourage them to be more social, which can create additional stress and anxiety, particularly if their autism is undiagnosed or not adequately supported (National Autistic Society, 2025c).

There are also environmental sensory challenges in mainstream schools. Classrooms with noisy children, very colourful rooms, and large gatherings can be highly dysregulated, e.g., dining rooms at mealtimes and assembly rooms. Autism specialist schools tend to have fewer students per class and are designed to minimise noise and clutter, thereby reducing sensory overload (National Autistic Society, 2025c).

Many young people with autism say they would be fine at school, apart from the other children there. They also comment that they find people illogical in their use of language. Most with autism struggle with illogical actions, and people say things they don't mean. They will hear what people are saying and accept it literally, so ironic language, jokes, and idioms often go unnoticed. If someone says 'It's raining cats and dogs', they will expect cats and dogs to fall from the sky (Leicestershire Partnership, 2025).

Understanding expression, the ability to read people, and how they feel is a known area of difficulty. Autistic young people struggle to understand both tonal range and read facial expressions, not knowing if others are angry or sad. They can find themselves reacting 'perceived' inappropriately to a person who is sad or angry, making them seem cold and without feeling (National Autistic Society, 2025c).

More boys are diagnosed as young children due to how they react to school environments, generally adversely, with meltdowns (reacting by unconsciously screaming, hitting out), compared to girls who will withdraw and stay silent, being perceived as distant, being in their own world (Loomes et al., 2017).

2. Autism and Crime

Before we proceed, the author wishes to note that not all young people with autism will get involved in crime; however, research indicates what happens when support networks break down, and vulnerable young people and older adults are left unsupported. Even when autistic individuals present as capable, especially high-functioning autistic individuals, they will still struggle in certain situations, which can lead to criminal activities, or their fascinations can lead them unintentionally into criminal activity.

This paper offers a review of current empirical evidence and does not present any new firsthand research. The choice of topics was informed by a broad study by the author, as the wider study evolved.

An Introduction

Weinman (2023), an autism advocate in the USA, discusses the chances that a young person with autism could be arrested. She notes that most of the defendants she works with tell her they did not intend to commit a crime or harm another person. Rather, any criminal acts are a reaction to given situations. They acted in the only way they knew to protect themselves from a perceived threat. She offers several scenarios:

- You receive an alarming call from your son's school. The police are there to arrest your son for striking a teacher. You later discover that your son was reacting to something the teacher said.
- You and your son are at the supermarket. You proceed down an aisle with your son close behind. Suddenly, you hear a scream. You quickly turn to see a stranger face down on the floor, and your son nearby. A store employee calls the police, who arrest your son for assault. Later, you learn your child believed the stranger was staring at him.
- Your 20-year-old son is attracted to a girl he sees walking down the street. Being naïve and possessing the emotional maturity of a much younger child, he approaches her and inappropriately touches her buttocks.

Risk Factors for Offending Behaviour by People with Autism

Allely (2019) and Howlin (2006) suggest the following explanation to better understand how those with autism can be drawn into criminal offences:

- SOCIAL RULES: Activities appropriate in childhood can be perceived as inappropriate in adulthood, e.g. picking up or tickling toddlers that belong to strangers.
- FRIENDSHIPS: Can have difficulties with developing and maintaining friends; their increased social naivety may leave autistic people open to manipulation by others, and a preoccupation/adoration for an individual could lead to stalking.
- INTENSE INTEREST: Convictions for arson have been found to have preceded by an interest in fires (e.g., Barry-Walsh & Mullen, 2004). Tantam (1988) describes an individual with a fascination with National Socialism, who dressed in Nazi uniform before assaulting a soldier. A fascination or 'special interest' could be fatal, e.g. fire or poison. Other examples can include a young man who had such an interest in washing machines that he would break into shops and people's houses to examine them!
- Stimming: Attempts to discourage certain repetitive behaviours, which are calming to them, could trigger reactive aggression from individuals with autism, accounting for the association between repetitive behaviours and aggression.
- SOCIAL MISINTERPRETATIONS: Bjorkly (2009)'s literature review of risk factors for violence in Asperger's Syndrome (high-functioning autism) found that 35% of violence towards others was reportedly attributed to social misinterpretations of the victims' intentions. Burdon and Dickens (2009) highlighted that impairment in understanding social cues may influence criminal behaviour in individuals with Asperger's Syndrome (high-functioning autism).
- INTERNET/SOCIAL MEDIA: The Internet provides a safe environment (degree of control); however, Internet/social media 'Friends' who validate skills and promise 'justice' and 'moral certainty' can influence an individual very quickly (Al-Attar, 2018; 2020). Technical skills coupled with social impairments can make an individual with autism a target for exploitation (Al-Attar, 2018; 2020).
- SENSORY: A strong dislike, such as the sound of a baby crying or a dog barking, might lead to an aggressive outburst (meltdown). A lack of knowledge of appropriate and inappropriate touching could lead to accusations of sexual harassment. Individuals may love the feel of a particular texture or material, such as velvet, and think nothing of stroking the back of the lady in front of them if she happens to be wearing a velvet jacket, which may have been seen as cute as a young child, but as an adult can be perceived as threatening.
- UNEXPECTED CHANGE: Unexpected violence and outbursts provoked by certain random and unexpected triggers in the environment, e.g. a fire alarm, a fire, roads being shut, or a train or bus breaking down.

The use of the term 'Asperger's' is now understood and commonly defined as high-functioning autism and is not part of the current use of language, being part of 'autism spectrum disorder'. It was removed from the DSM in 2013 (National Autistic Society, 2023; APA, 2013).

Hammond, Adkin, and Elma (2021) note remarks by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen that *"Autistic people are vulnerable to being misunderstood and to ending up in the criminal justice system, accused of crimes when they have had no criminal intent. It is vital that they have well-informed advocates and legal advice and that the police and the courts are well-trained to make reasonable adjustments for an Autistic defendant. Autistic people deserve proper support, especially when they make mistakes, given their disability".*

Professionals and criminal justice professionals noted by the National Autistic Society (2020) that the main risk factors in school-aged autistic young people are: difficulties with socialisation, being

easily led, and aggression. 'Difficulty with socialisation' was reported as the highest-rated risk factor, followed by 'easily led or influenced by others'.

Autism and police involvement

Davis and Schnunick (2002) argue that individuals with autism might also come to the attention of the police for the following autistic symptomatic reasons:

- Self-stimulatory and self-injurious behaviour such as hand flapping, pinching oneself, self-biting, repetitive actions, and thrashing.
- Wandering alone, e.g. dressed inappropriately for the weather, wandering alone, or darting into traffic.
- Peering into windows.
- Behaviour that may mimic drug abuse or mental illness.
- Bizarre or disruptive behaviour such as lining up objects, eating inappropriate objects, toe walking, and robotic-like speech.
- Hitting or biting people.
- Suspected child abuse, parents may be restraining their child with what may appear questionable force.

In situations involving interaction (e.g. an interview or questioning) with a police officer, Davis and Schnunick (2002) also comment that if the individual has diagnosed or undiagnosed autism, they could be seen as behaving in an extremely socially inappropriate way, causing offences without being aware they are doing so. They could be perceived as appearing aloof, rude, egocentric or insensitive. This could be due to a lack of understanding of how to react to unfamiliar situations and other people's feelings, difficulty interpreting and utilising non-verbal communication, and taking what is being asked literally in the interview. Being unable to understand the implied meanings or follow a lengthy set of instructions.

Regarding sensory difficulties, being touched, or reacting to extreme intolerance to certain sounds and smells or other sensory stimuli. This could include the sensory overload of being in a police car/van, interview room, or police holding cell.

A criminal intent study by the Welsh Assembly (2010) interviewed autism specialists, police officers, and autistic youngsters about their experiences with the police and their parents. Some said they had found themselves in situations where their social communication had led to misunderstandings. For example, one young man said, "I have been in trouble and they (the police) thought I was being cheeky, but I was just being honest. When asked by a police officer, ' *Do you promise never to do this again?".* One young man answered, *"No, I do not know if I will ever do it again".* In his mind, he did not want to make a promise that he was unsure he could keep. Another, when asked if he had been involved in a shoplifting incident, answered *"Yes".* He had not committed the crime, but he had been in the shop at the time when the incident occurred. His interpretation of the word 'involved' differed significantly from that of the police officer, which may have contributed to his arrest. Therefore, individuals with autism may appear to be behaving uncooperatively when they are trying to be as open and honest as they can be.

Autistic individuals sometimes comply with requests to please and make friends. It could be argued that they can be easily manipulated, making them vulnerable. For example, they may get involved with drug dealing because they see it as a way of making and keeping friends without thinking about or realising the consequences of their actions. Police, legal, and court professionals need to assess whether the person with autism understands that they have committed a crime. Sometimes, a person with autism will not realise that their behaviour could be classed as illegal. Conversely, an individual with autism may not understand that a crime against them, such as robbery or rape, has been committed.

The following examines various risk factors and vulnerabilities that may lead an autistic person to engage in criminal activity.

Social naivete and 'Joint enterprise'

Being socially naïve may result in those with autism being easily led into criminal behaviour by others (Howlin and Moore, 1997). People with Asperger's syndrome (high-functioning autism) may seek out friendships with others to gain status without realising the risks associated with a particular group's community identity (e.g. criminal gangs, terrorist groups) and their vulnerability to exploitation (Shine & Cooper-Evans, 2016).

"He was being taken advantage of and influenced by the wrong individuals." Parent of an autistic young person (National Autistic Society, 2020)

"They could be and still are influenced by others to fit in with a crowd; he didn't understand he was being used." Parent/carer of an autistic young person (National Autistic Society, 2020)

They may also go with others committing crimes, to please them; however, if caught, they would make them equally guilty under 'joint enterprise' legislation (where persons who assist or encourage another to commit a crime are legally known as accessories or secondary parties in the crime committed). There have been recent cases of this with autistic individuals, but it has been very hard to argue their innocence, Alex is one such young man convicted for joint enterprise with undiagnosed autism, guilty of murder even though he did not kill anyone because he was 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'. (Henry, 2018; O'Brien, 2014).

Robins (2022), a special adviser to the UK's All Party Parliamentary Group on Miscarriages of Justice, notes *"The justice system cruelly stacks the odds against the neurodivergent".* He says it striking how many cases in the sorry history of miscarriages of justice feature the wrongful conviction of people with significant cognitive impairment—for example, Stefan Kiszko, the shy Inland Revenue clerk with the mental age of a 12-year-old who served 16 years after being wrongly convicted of the murder of Lesley Molseed; or Stephen Miller of the Cardiff Three, mental age of 11, who confessed to killing Lynette White (after more than 300 denials); or any number of 'joint enterprise' cases in which autistic people (e.g. Alex Henry) have been convicted of murder under the controversial common law doctrine.

Barry Sheerman MP, chair of the UK's all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice, challenged Justice Secretary Dominic Raab on the inequity of joint enterprise, which is often characterised as a 'dragnet'. As Sheerman points out, *"Many of the young people charged and convicted of joint enterprise are later found to be on the autistic spectrum"*, being undiagnosed throughout their school life and into adulthood. *(*Robins, 2022).

Case Study (Godfrey, 2022)
The BBC News reported that an autistic 23-year-old man was arrested and jailed for being around a group of youths, known as a 'joint enterprise'. It is argued that he was not fully aware of the crimes being committed, and therefore, due to his autism, he was incapable of committing the offence and was not given a fair process in court when arrested, and whilst he is serving a prison sentence. His mother is working with lawyers, who allege institutional discrimination, to overturn a "miscarriage of justice". His lawyers said that the joint enterprise principle - in which guilt may be deemed by an individual's presence within a criminal group - was an option available to the jury at Mr Brown's trial, although the extent to which the jury applied it when making convictions was unclear.

Robins (2022), Henry (2018), and O'Brien (2014) have all investigated 'joint enterprise' and note that it is very hard to argue an autistic individual's innocence, as it seems so unlikely a person would be so naïve, even with very eminent supporting expert witnesses like Professor Baron-Cohen.

Stimming, repetitive behaviours

Repetitive/stimming behaviours often increase when an autistic person is feeling anxious or stressed (Howlin et al, 2004). Other examples of stimming may include pacing, spinning, tapping, or hitting an object, e.g. a person hitting/tapping their head or hitting their head on something.

For example, a young autistic man in his day setting wanted to shake everybody`s hand whenever he saw them. This was potentially an issue, but generally manageable. The problem stemmed from the fact that he would constantly have his hand down his trousers as well! Combine the two, and suddenly, numerous issues arise. How he reacts to others not shaking his hand and running away or having strange reactions to him forcing his dirty hands in their direction, leads to confusion and meltdowns.

The type and intensity of the repetitive behaviour can make the difference between acceptable and unacceptable. However, there are other issues, such as age (Howlin et al., 2004), gender, the person`s size, and even the autistic person`s visible level of disability, which are also important. If a person appears to be the same as others, commonly referred to as acting 'normal', then there is an expectation that they will behave similarly (also acting 'normal'). The author appreciates that the concept of 'normal' is highly subjective, and this adds to the difficulties that autistic young people experience in society. It is better to use the term 'socially acceptable' behaviour than 'normal'.

In another example, a young child in public wishing to smell a person's hair or touch a particular type of clothing someone is wearing, because they like the material, may be seen as 'odd' or 'strange', but within the realms of acceptability. However, a 6-foot autistic adult male behaving in the same way may be interpreted very differently, maybe threatening. It might lead to police involvement and even criminal proceedings.

It could be argued that all stimming behaviours can easily be misinterpreted as unsociable or threatening, and should be discouraged by families, carers, or professionals in childhood. However, this is not always realistic or desirable for the autistic person. Attwood (2002) makes the point that autistic people often have very few enjoyable activities, so rather than stop all (unsocial/threatening) repetitive behaviours, a level of compromise is needed. For example, boundaries are set, such as this is a home or a bedroom activity, not one for outside.

Whilst this seems a sensible approach, as with most things, there is a level of risk involved. If an autistic adult finds themselves in a new and unexpected situation, e.g. their normal travel route is blocked, or a train is cancelled, this may lead to enormous anxiety and a need for comfort from a certain repetitive activity; the fact that they are not at home can become irrelevant due to their immediate situation. The use of stimming is used by many autistic people to avoid meltdowns; however, when prevented from being able to stim, this may lead to autistic meltdowns and possible explosive manifestations.

Case study (Purser, 2016)
A young autistic adult with associated learning difficulties liked looking out of his bedroom window for long periods at a time, as he liked to feel the heat from the sun on him. The difficulty for others is that although there appeared to be no apparent or visible sexual motivation or gratification for this behaviour, the gentleman found the activity more enjoyable and relaxing naked. Neighbours started to complain to the police as well as the family. His parents were quite elderly and found it increasingly difficult to deal with his 'meltdowns' when he was stopped from undertaking this activity. A builder friend of the family suggested a film coating to go on the window, which meant the young man could still look out, but people could not see him; all parties were satisfied with this outcome.

Many autistic people appear to be anxious about the police (Purser, 2016), and therefore, being confronted by them in an already volatile environment can lead to an escalation. If the behaviour

is seen as serious enough and the autistic adult is taken into custody, the anxiety levels are almost certain to increase further. Therefore, the stimming increases too, and there is a huge risk of a meltdown. If the police believe they are a danger to themselves and others, they may section the person so they can be moved to a hospital for psychiatric observation, as per many case studies (Bunn, 2024).

Types of Crime Committed by Autism Individuals

The National Autistic Society's 'Youth Justice Report' (2020) studied 203 autistic people, 167 family members, 40 criminal justice professionals and 115 professionals working with autistic people outside the criminal justice system. The samples were made up of autistic people and their families who had been involved in the criminal justice system (aged 25 years and below). Participants indicated early concerns/risk factors in their children with autism in Table 1.

Table 1: Early parental concerns regarding acts that might lead to criminal activity (National Autistic Society, 2020).

Concerns	**Percentage**
Being easily led/influenced by others	66%
Violence and/or aggression towards others	52%
Being excluded from school	38%
Damaging property and/or fire setting	38%
Threats to harm or kill others	23%
Taking drugs and/or dealing drugs	20%
Stealing	17%
Inappropriate sexual behaviour	17%
Hacking personal networks and accounts	6%

Crimes committed by individuals with autism vary; a review of court decisions in Freckelton (2011) found that offenders with autism tended to disproportionately commit arson, computer offences, stalking offences, sexual offences, violence and neglect offences, and dishonesty offences. Common crimes manifested in those with autism are believed to be:

- Stalking
- Knife use and collection
- Computer crimes, stalking, and getting into hard systems
- Intense anger during a meltdown, hurting people
- Intense anger to kill people
- Carrying drugs after being befriended
- Sexual offences

Lindsay et al. (2019) and Fitzgerald (2013) suggest that evidence regarding the prevalence of offending in autism is equivocal; however, it is generally agreed that people with autism are more likely to be victims of crimes rather than perpetrators, especially victimisation (Collins et al., 2022). Nevertheless, people on the autism spectrum do offend, and it is therefore useful for management purposes to consider if there are any particular risk factors for offending behaviour in this population.

It has been suggested that autistic offenders may be more likely to engage in certain types of crime than others (King & Murphy, 2014); such as crimes against the person such as sexual offences, assault, and robbery (Cheely et al. 2012; Kumagami & Matsuura, 2009); and less likely to engage in property crimes such as burglary, arson and trespass, driving offences and drug offences (Cheely et al., 2012; Kumagami & Matsuura, 2009).

In terms of offences, the most common crime category found in an autism/crime study by Hofvander et al. (2023) was a violent crime, present in 75.5% of the prosecutions. Sexual crimes were the second most common crime, present in 16.1% of prosecutions. This is in line with previous studies where different interpersonal crimes are dominant among offenders with autism. These individuals commit various offences, but there appears to be a high proportion of violent offences, particularly arson and sexual offences (Hofvander, 2018).

Lack of training by arresting police officers

Recently, Fallon (2021) reported that a school-based police officer in a UK school assaulted an autistic child having a meltdown at school. In this case, a police officer was seen threatening to kick the 10-year-old boy lying on the ground. The officer then grabbed him and dragged him along the floor into a room. This police officer resigned after losing a disciplinary hearing regarding this incident, highlighting the need for more autism training.

The following case studies suggest that autistic people are adversely affected by a lack of autism training in police officers, leading to arrest, where understanding would be more likely to result in a more positive resolution to situations.

Case Study (Powell, 2021)
A national newspaper reported on a 12-year-old boy diagnosed with autism, on his first day at a school, being challenged for his trainer shoes, which were an agreed allowance for his autism. After he was challenged, he began to be dysregulated and pushed out, which resulted in a dinner lady being pushed. This resulted in it being classed as an assault, and the person was physically restrained by a police officer. Sharron Faiq says staff called officers in after 5ft tall Rayan, 12, pushed a dinner lady who insisted he change his trainers, despite the academy allowing him to wear them. This mum arrived to see her son restrained by a police officer. Rayan had been out of education since primary school due to classroom support funding problems. Sharron said, "The school called me saying there was a problem. I found Rayan pinned down in handcuffs on a table, being treated like a criminal." She filmed the incident, which has been watched more than 900,000 times on Facebook. Whilst not arrested, the school suspended Rayan and then removed him from its roll.

Case Study (Robson, 2015)
The parents of a 9-year-old autistic boy say they are launching a $500,000 lawsuit after he was arrested at school and allegedly placed in handcuffs and a straitjacket. Brittany and Larry Granito said their son Colton's school called in police after the boy hit a teacher during a 'meltdown' despite having a crisis plan to deal with his occasional violent outbursts due to this condition. The couple from Sumner County, Tennessee, USA, claim their son has been traumatised ever since left in a straitjacket for an hour, locked in a prison cell, and charged with assault. The couple said the R.T. Fisher Alternative School should have followed the action plan last February, when Colton was eight, which lists his high-risk behaviours, including hitting and kicking, and how teachers should react, such as trying to reduce aggression with caring gestures or moving him to a safe area.

3. Discussions

Failed by schools

The research discussed in this paper highlights the crucial role that mainstream education plays in the educational and social development of vulnerable young people with autism, whether

diagnosed or undiagnosed. It emphasises that autism is often misunderstood and that a lack of resources and awareness puts these young people at risk, not only of harming themselves but also potentially harming others.

There is a saying: "Once you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism". This underscores the need for a personalised approach. However, many schoolteachers believe they possess all the knowledge they need about autism and do not require further training. This belief is a common mistake, as educators are often seen as the experts in this field.

Mainstream education can be a challenging environment for students with autism, particularly for boys, who may express their struggles through more visible physical meltdowns. In contrast, girls with autism often withdraw and internalise their difficulties, which can lead to various mental health issues, compounded by a lack of diagnosis and support.

Case study (the author)
In one school where the author taught, he encountered 15-year-old twin boys and girls. The boy had been diagnosed with autism at 3 years old and manifested his autism externally with explosive meltdowns. The girl's twin was perceived as fine; however, at 13-14 years old, she developed an eating disorder and began to have emotionally based school avoidance. After many meetings with her mental health worker and parents, noting her masking, the author suggested this might be a female presentation of autism, which was rejected by the health professionals present. However, it took many months to convince CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the UK) to reconsider autism, and after a long wait, autism was finally diagnosed. This began a journey to understand why she chose eating disorders as her autism coping-controlling mechanism.

Misunderstood by society

Autism, like many other invisible disabilities, often leads society to make judgments about those affected. When someone does not use a wheelchair, they are typically perceived as able-bodied. This perception places immense pressure on parents and caregivers of individuals with autism, as they seek the understanding and acceptance of others.

For example, when a child with autism has a meltdown in a supermarket, bystanders often judge the parent as a 'bad parent' who cannot control their child. Similarly, if a parent restrains their autistic child for safety in public, they may be viewed as harming their child, leading to concerns that they should be reported to social services. Such judgments can result in the exclusion of individuals with autism from society because conclusions are often drawn quickly and without consideration.

While this discussion focuses on the consequences of inadequate support structures, it is essential to recognise that many individuals with autism lead independent lives, getting married and raising children. However, there remains a percentage of those with autism who rely on support from family and social services as adults. This group may be more vulnerable to criminal activities, both as victims and potential perpetrators.

4. Conclusions

The topics of autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are commonly investigated as part of the 'school to prison pipeline', as neurodivergent groups are commonly found in prison populations. They are a unique but large group in UK prisons, also reflecting their vulnerability to being involved in crime.

The examples discussed in this paper highlight the ease with which those with autism can be misunderstood by the public and the police, leading to an arrest. The sensory overload of being questioned and placed in a holding cell or a police van can lead to police officers using restraint

for their safety and perceived for the safety of the autistic person themselves. The resulting meltdowns leading from such situations will just exacerbate their vulnerability.

Social naivete and 'Joint enterprise' are a concern, as they can lead to criminal activities through innocent intentions, sometimes resulting in 'mate crime' when others take advantage of their naivete and exploit them as victims of crime.

Education is key for both the teaching and police professions, so they can quickly recognise key autistic traits and put in place the support structures needed. Along with suitable sex and relationship education for young people with autism. It is argued that this needs to be more explicit and offered in more sessions than the programmes currently offered in mainstream schools. However, as such explicit programmes with acting out scenarios and very explicit photographs can be uncomfortable for most teachers in schools, it is argued that autistic specialists should provide such programmes, and these should be part of ongoing preventative schemes.

This paper is an amended part of a new book, 'Autism Awareness and Crime' (Alexander-Passe, 2025), being the third in a book series investigating the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander-Passe, 2023, 2024). This study was conducted by a neurodivergent researcher and involved individuals with autism and their parents, supported by empirical evidence.

Community Involvement Statement:

The subjects of autism, ADHD, and dyslexia are often examined in the context of the 'school-to-prison pipeline,' as neurodivergent individuals are disproportionately represented in prison populations. This group is significant and vulnerable, reflecting their susceptibility to involvement in criminal activities.

Key points

- It is known that many young people with autism have a tough time in mainstream schools and that many fall foul of school behaviour policies, leading to suspensions and permanent exclusions.
- It is also known that young people with autism manifest their dysregulation in school through meltdowns, which can cause harm to others and property, leading to removal from mainstream education and into alternative education.
- It was unknown how deeply mainstream and special education schools struggle to cope with those with autism, and how meltdowns could be treated as violent and criminal damage. Also unknown was how highly vulnerable autistic persons are due to their fascinations or 'special interests', which can lead to stalking and assaults on others. But also, how their vulnerability can lead them to be victims of crime, e.g. Mate Crime.
- It was also unknown how widespread the manifestations and traits of autism could lead to illegal and criminal activity.
- This paper offers a new understanding of how the many manifestations of autism can lead to possible criminal behaviours, such as sensory fixations leading to assaults, and the lack of awareness by police officers could lead to investigations based on autistic symptomatic behaviours.

Ethical Consideration

This paper was deemed not to require ethics committee approval as it did not include any research subject data. However, it is effectively a creative empirical review combining new sources of information.

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