# Autistic People's Experiences with the Justice System: An Umbrella Review

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### Umbrella review aim

To synthesise reviews of both qualitative and quantitative evidence pertaining to autistic people and their access to, or experience with, the justice system.

# Background

Autistic people have reported poor knowledge of autism, and a lack of accommodations, within the justice system. We conducted an umbrella review to collate and synthesise systematic reviews on autistic interactions with the justice system (legal, policing, judicial, and custodial services) as victims, witnesses, and offenders.

### Methods

This umbrella review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for umbrella reviews and was pre-registered on PROSPERO (CRD42023393051).

### Eligibility criteria for inclusion

- Publication type: review with clear systematic methodology, published in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Report on autistic people, either self-report or reports by proxy.
- Setting: justice system services: legal, policing, judicial and custodial.
- From an original 450 studies, 20 reviews met inclusion criteria. These 20 reviews included from 2 to 89 studies and searched 2 to 13 databases.

# Results

#### Key findings across reviews

Court experiences and outcomes: n = 2

they are more likely to consider therapy and supports as an alternative to prison.

Justice system orofessionals' autism knowledge and experience: n = 5

 Most justice system professionals are unable to identify key characteristics of autism. Many have identified a need for training on autism.

When judges and jurors know a defendant is autistic,

Interviewing autistic individuals: n = 2

 Autistic people experience challenges with interviewing procedures; the use of intermediaries can help autistic interviewees.

Treatments for specific offence types: n = 3

 While accommodations/adjustments have been reported, treatments are not autism-specific and lack sufficient evidence for reducing re-offending.

Victimisation of autistic people: n = 4

 Autistic people (particularly children) experience sexual victimisation, abuse, assault, and robbery at higher rates than the general population.

Custody and confinement experiences: n = 3

 Autistic people experience challenges in confinement, including sensory difficulties, unmet communication needs, and victimisation from others in confinement.

There are no Australian studies on the prevalence of

Prevalence and factors related to contact with the justice system: *n* = 16

and perceptions of,

police: n = 2

autistic offenders. Studies on prevalence need well matched control groups. Autistic experiences with,

 Negative experiences with police relate to unmet needs and lack of knowledge of autism.

It is critical to consider autistic people's experiences of interaction with the justice system as victims and witnesses.

#### Quality appraisal, participants and study overlap

Using the JBI quality appraisal tool, studies rated between medium and high quality. Of 705,693 participants, 30,693 were autistic. Participants aged from 7-84 years, and, where reported, 89.81% were male. The 20 reviews included 192 non-overlapping articles, and the overall overlap was slight at 2.48%

# **Future Directions**

Gather Australian data on autistic people's experiences within the justice system.



Ask autistic perspectives on how to improve the justice system for autistic people and their supporters.



Co-develop and objectively evaluate autism-specific training for professionals in the justice system.

## Conclusion

Autistic people feel unsupported by justice system professionals, and within justice system environments. Research is lacking on the experiences of autistic people with intersectional identities within the justice system. Studies of autistic people as victims, witnesses, and offenders (using well matched controls) are needed.

### Community participation

Autistic and autism community members were involved throughout this umbrella review. Autistic and neurodivergent people, and members of the autism community, were on the authorship and review team. They provided input into the search terms, results synthesis and interpretation. Community involvement was only described in one included review. One other review reported on community involvement in one primary study.

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