

Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA)



Background

Historically, the adult years have been ignored in autism research, despite that these years representing the greatest proportion of individuals' lives. Hence, limited information and guidance exists for autistic adults, their families and those who may provide support (e.g., health services, employment services, higher education) about trajectories from late adolescence through old age.



Aim

The aim of the SASLA project was to provide a comprehensive profile of autistic young people (aged 15-25 years at entry) in Australia as compared with a similar aged cohort of non-autistic young people, over a period of 2-years.

An additional aim by the SASLA team was to examine the role and experiences of parents/carers of transition-aged autistic young people over this time period.



How we did the research

Participants from all groups were surveyed three times over two years:

- baseline
- 1 year later
- 2 years later.

Surveys were online, but participants were offered a hard copy on request.

The information that participants provided was analysed by the SASLA team and students under their supervision.

The information was reported to the Autism CRC, at conferences, in scientific journal articles, in student research theses, and in reports to the Victorian and Australian governments (e.g., Senate Select Committee on Autism).



Who took part

Australian residents (baseline survey figures):

- 115** Autistic young adults without an intellectual disability
- 27** Autistic young adults with an intellectual disability
- 117** Parents of autistic young adults
- 218** Non-autistic young adults

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What we found



Autistic young people reported more bullying experiences and perceived a lack of support in education and employment settings. Despite this, they were just as likely to complete higher education and function independently in post-school settings; however, they had less paid employment.



Parents/carers of autistic young adults also reported mental and physical health challenges and a perceived lack of support.



The abilities and strategies used by autistic young people and their parents/carers to deal with distress were found to relate to differences in mental health symptoms. This suggests that there may be therapeutic benefit in supporting adaptive strategy usage.



Mental health diagnoses (anxiety and/or depression) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder were reported as more prevalent among autistic than non-autistic youth but, both autistic and non-autistic young adults reported similar levels of mental health symptoms on questionnaires.



The information provided by SASLA participants contributed to the critical evaluation and refinement of established mental health, vocational and other measures for use with autistic people.



Mental health was associated with multiple, interrelated risk factors:

- female gender
- more autistic traits
- feelings of loneliness/worry
- dissatisfaction with social supports
- intolerance of uncertainty
- emotional characteristics



Lastly, in 2020 we explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a small sample of Australian young people and found that those on the autism spectrum were twice as likely than non-autistic youth to report the pandemic as having a very negative impact on their lives.



The presence of mental health difficulties, in turn, predicted an increased risk for sleep difficulties, lower quality of life and suicidal thoughts and feelings.

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Who did the research



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Autism Research Centre



UNSW
SYDNEY



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA



Curtin University

Acknowledgments

We would like to offer special thanks to our amazing participants and autism community without which we would not have the data to further our knowledge of the lives of autistic young Australians.

Note: This project was established at a time when 'with autism' was commonly accepted language.

Find out more

Download the final report and executive summary on the Autism CRC website:

autismcrc.com.au/reports/SASLA



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