

## Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mental Health Problems Among Prisoners

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### Background

The provision of support for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within the community is improving as a consequence of policy and legislative changes. However, specialist services are not currently provided in prisons.

### Objectives

This aim of the study was to determine the extent of ASD and co-occurring mental health problems among prisoners. We tested the hypothesis that ASD traits would be unrecognised by prison staff and would be significantly associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression and suicidality.

### Methods

ASD traits were measured among 240 prisoners in a resettlement prison in London, UK using the 20-item Autism Quotient (AQ-20). Anxiety, depression and suicidality were assessed using the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI).

### Results

There were 39 participants (16%) with an AQ-20 score  $\geq 10$ ; indicating significant autistic traits. Mental health data were available for 37 'high autistic trait' participants and another 101 prisoners with no/low ASD traits. There was a significant positive association between AQ-20 and suicidality scores ( $r=.29$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Participants with ASD traits had significantly higher suicidality scores (means=15.1 vs. 5,  $p=0.001$ ) and chi-square analysis showed that they were more likely to have a high suicidality rating (27% vs. 8%,  $p=0.003$ ) than those without ASD traits. Moreover, those with ASD were significantly more likely to be experiencing a current episode of depression (30% vs. 6%,  $p<0.001$ ) or Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (27% vs. 11%  $p=0.019$ ).

### Conclusion

Our initial data suggests that severity of ASD traits is a risk factor for suicidality and common mental health problems among prisoners.