

How do autistic individuals interact with the criminal justice system?

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Across the United States, reports of autistic youth experiencing dangerous, life-altering and even fatal interactions with the criminal justice system are becoming more common. Research suggests that autistic individuals interact with police at high rates and individuals with disabilities disproportionately experience police violence.

Researchers from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University recently published research that identified the experiences of [autistic individuals](#) and their caregivers across their interactions with the criminal justice system through analysis of a statewide survey in Pennsylvania.

The study analyzed free-text responses and multiple-choice questions about types of justice system interactions from the 2018 Pennsylvania Autism Needs Assessment (2018 PANA), a large survey of autistic individuals and their families that included questions about demographic and clinical information, as well as service needs and experiences.

The study sample of 3,902 individuals represents 47% of the full 8,240 respondents to the 2018 PANA. A total of 839 respondents reported information about their [criminal justice system](#) interaction through the free-text question.

The findings highlighted the detailed experiences of autistic individuals and their caregivers as victims of an interaction, criminal offenders and witnesses to a [crime](#), with respondents reporting both positive and negative experiences. Researchers also identified an increased risk for interaction with the justice system, including being male and having a co-occurring psychiatric diagnosis.

- Among autistic adult respondents, males were almost twice as likely to be stopped and questioned by police, arrested or charged, while females were at 32% greater odds of being the victim of a crime.
- Having a psychiatric co-occurring diagnosis was associated with about 2.7 times the odds of any justice system interaction and 2.4 times the odds of being a victim of a crime among autistic individuals.
- Among caregiver respondents, having an annual household income greater than \$40,000 were protective against being a victim of a crime.
- Living with a roommate or family member was protective against being the victim of a crime among caregiver respondents regarding their autistic child.



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Analysis of the free-text responses yielded several themes.

- One-quarter of respondents described being the victim of a crime.

- One-quarter of respondents described being an offender.
- A small number of respondents (1.5%) described being a witness to a crime.
- Almost equal proportions of respondents described a positive perception of the justice system (8%) and negative perception of the justice System (9%).
- Finally, a small but notable proportion of respondents (1.5%) identified having a concern for there being a future interaction with the justice system.

"These findings are impactful because they come directly from the voices of autistic individuals and their families," said Kaitlin Koffer Miller, lead author of the study and director of Policy Impact in the Policy and Analytics Center in the Autism Institute. "Understanding the type and scope of justice interaction helps to plan for and address issues that could prevent future interactions of all types."

The research team explained that increasing access for autistic individuals to home and community-based services and supports can prevent or mitigate interactions between autistic individuals and the justice system, both as victims and offenders. It is the hope of the study team that findings from this study will propel policy to increase access to the needed supports to prevent these unwanted outcomes for autistic individuals.

Additionally, expanding pilot justice programs that include [mental health professionals](#) in crisis responses, like the co-responder model, will be beneficial to ensure minimal trauma and escalation of a [justice](#) system interaction.

The study, "Justice System Interactions Among Autistic Individuals: A Multiple Methods Analysis," was recently published in the journal *Crime & Delinquency*.

More information: Kaitlin H. Koffer Miller et al, Justice System Interactions Among Autistic Individuals: A Multiple Methods Analysis, *Crime & Delinquency* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00111287211054733](https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287211054733)

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