



INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

BRIEFING 4 - **October 2024**

Awareness, choice and explanation in police contact: exploring the needs of autistic individuals

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Key Points:

- Autistic individuals interviewed for this study consistently identified a need for enhanced training and awareness regarding autism and neurodivergence more generally in police organisations.
- The ability to contact the police using digital forms of contact, such as online reporting, may enhance confidence in the police by reducing anxiety that may otherwise occur in in-person or phone contact, but digital contact is not suitable for everyone, and technology is not a silver bullet that addresses all accessibility needs.
- The use of technology in in-person encounters, such as Body Worn Video, should be explained to the individual. Without explanation this can result in a loss of trust in the police, can increase anxiety, and can damage an individual's sense of social identity.

Background

In recent years policing in the UK has increasingly pursued three related developments for the provision and delivery of policing: policing mediated by technology (Wells et al., 2021), the incorporation of procedural justice theory into the delivery of policing (Tyler et al. 2015), and a drive towards increased awareness of, and responsiveness to, the needs of autistic individuals (Gardner, 2022; [College of Policing 2022](#)).

Autism is a neuro-typology characterised by differences in socio-communication styles and preferences. Autism is experienced differently by each autistic individual, but examples of differences in communication may include increased likelihood to interpret statements literally or misinterpret tone, limited speech or withdrawal of speech in high pressured interactions, repetition of words, phrases or body movements, and discomfort with eye contact. Some autistic individuals may define autism as a disability according to either the medical or social model of disability, depending on their experiences, whereas some autistic individuals may not identify as disabled. It is also important to note that whilst we use the phrase 'autistic individuals' due to the preferences of the participants in our research, some individuals may prefer 'person-first' language, such as 'individual with autism'.

As with all members of the public, autistic people come into contact with the police for a wide variety of reasons: as victims, as suspected offenders, as witnesses, and by requesting assistance. There is a growing body of scholarship that explores the conflict that can arise as a result of differences in communication between autistic individuals and police officers, such as miscommunication, police misinterpretation of intent, and misattribution of deception, apathy, or aggression (Gibbs et al., 2023). Moreover, research has shown that where the police do not understand or respond appropriately to these social communication differences, this can increase an autistic individuals' vulnerability to state power (Williams et al., 2018). The communication preferences of autistic individuals have been explored in general in Howard and Sedgewick (2021), where they have found that, when making contact across a range of public services (but not the police specifically) autistic individuals in their study were averse to making contact via the phone, largely preferring written forms of contact. However, little has been explored in terms of the communication preferences of autistic individuals with regards to policing, which this study seeks to begin to address.



What we did

We undertook semi-structured interviews (6 participants) and 1 small focus group (3 participants) with nine autistic individuals in England and Scotland between 2023 and 2024. Each interview lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and took place online. This is a small group of participants and so these findings are indicative, and we do not make claims to generalisability. We see self-identification and clinical diagnosis as equally valid and did not differentiate between these within our research.



Key findings

- For most participants what matters is the extent to which their needs are met by the police, regardless of the medium of the encounter. Most participants spoke of the need for enhanced training and understanding of autism (and neurodivergence more broadly) within policing, which they felt was currently lacking in both countries.
- In encounters initiated by the public, such as reporting a crime to the police, the option to choose how and when to make contact with the police (sometimes referred to in policing as 'channel choice') across different reporting platforms was experienced by participants as beneficial to ensuring comfort, reassurance, and autonomy.
- Comfort in reporting online was linked to digital infrastructures that can reduce anxiety by enabling increased anonymity and asynchronous reporting so that an individual can take time to reflect on their feelings and accurately convey their experiences without the pressure of an in person or verbal (on the phone) encounter with the police. However, it is worth noting that some participants felt pressured by forms requiring them to select from pre-defined answers, rather than allowing them to use free-text to describe their experiences, underscoring that choice of contact medium is important.
- In in-person encounters with the police, the imposition of technology such as Body Worn Videos, can contribute to loss of confidence in the police if the technology is not explained. This was particularly the case for black autistic participants, where several described experiences of encounters with police using BWV where they felt the unexplained use of this technology communicated that they were a 'suspect' and a 'threat' on account of their being both black and autistic.
- The dependence on written forms of digital contact, such as Mobile Data Terminals for taking statements, online forms, and emails, in policing is not always suitable for individuals with sensory processing differences. Where materials such as statements are not produced in formats accessible to the individual, they can feel 'lost' because of not feeling able to comprehend the process due to the medium of communication. Alternatives may need to be provided, such as the option to use Read Aloud software, or provide printed copies. Individual preferences are different, and these measures ought to be taken following consultation with the individual and not assumed to be universal needs.



Implications

- Individuals in our research highlighted the need for enhanced neurodiversity awareness in policing, identifying police training as a key area for improvement. Examples of good practice often related to individual officers' personal experience and did not suggest that officers are routinely trained in appropriate ways to recognise and respond to the needs of autistic individuals. This will require greater awareness of neurodiversity in policing and measurable steps taken to train officers who are likely to come into contact with autistic or neurodivergent individuals. This should also include police staff such as 999 or 101 operators who are likely to have contact with neurodiverse populations.
- Related to enhanced awareness of autism in policing, all participants spoke of the need for police-community engagement more broadly, not only around technology specifically. Technology ought not to be viewed as a silver bullet or a shortcut to addressing accessibility concerns, rather ought to be understood as an option amongst a suite of practices. Where autistic individuals' needs are not well understood, and the intersectional experiences of race and neurodivergence too, then technology may re-entrench concerns, injustices, and experiences of unfair treatment.
- The key recommendation of this work is for police organisations to engage meaningfully with those with lived experience, and to incorporate their needs into policing more broadly and then to enable that to be reflected in technology provision and design, always being mindful of individual needs.



References:

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