

## **Diversity, difference or disorder? Neurodiversity in police-community partnerships**

### **N8 Policing Research Partnership**

#### **DIVERSITY, DIFFERENCE OR DISORDER? NEURODIVERSITY IN POLICE-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

The aim of this research was to investigate whether the police use neurotypical practices in their interactions with neurodivergent citizens. This included examining whether the language used in police policy, procedure and practice is predominately neurotypical and assessing partnership relations between the police and organisations that support neurodivergent people. Incident report data from North and South Yorkshire Police was analysed in order to explore the nature of contact between the police and neurodivergent people. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with police practitioners ( $N = 19$ ) about their understanding of neurodiversity and their interactions with neurodivergent citizens, and with practitioners from organisations that support neurodivergent people ( $N = 8$ ) about their partnership working with the police.

*Research conducted by Dr Alice Siberry, University of Sheffield*

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

- **This research found a general lack of understanding of the meaning of neurodiversity and autism among police practitioners, except where participants had prior experience of autistic people either through their role in the police or in their personal lives.**
- **Neurodiversity was not considered a policing priority, unless the autistic person was regarded as vulnerable.**
- **All police practitioners in the research used neurotypical and medicalised language to talk about autism and neurodivergence (e.g. describing autism as a deficit, a handicap, an impairment and behaviour as 'not normal'), often conflating autism and mental health. Some of these misunderstandings came from the way autism is considered under the mental health act 1983.**
- **Partnership working in relation to supporting autistic and/or neurodivergent people was informal, ad-hoc and outcome-related, with relationships appearing to be unidirectional (with the police only reaching out to partners when they required information about an autistic person).**
- **The police reported acting in 'appropriate' or 'needs-based' ways with autistic people. However, participants also reported identifying autism as being no reason to act in discretionary ways. This decision often depended on personal experiences of neurodivergence.**

## **PROJECT BACKGROUND**

The aim of this research was to investigate whether the police use neurotypical practices in their interactions with neurodivergent citizens. This included examining whether the language used in police policy, procedure and practice was predominately neurotypical and also assessing partnership relations between the police and organisations that support neurodivergent people. There is a growing body of literature that focuses specifically on police engagement with autistic people, which has tended to focus on how to improve police processes, namely the interviewing of autistic suspects and autistic people in police custody (Larmour *et al.*, 2015; Crane *et al.*, 2015; Parsons and Sherwood, 2016; Holloway, 2020). However, such research has rarely focused on the potential for neurotypicality in policing. From what can be ascertained, it appears that the police employ policies, practices and ways of thinking that have been developed by and used primarily with neurotypical people. In addition, there is increasing media coverage that highlights the negative aspects of police encounters with autistic people (Higgs and Carter, 2015; Maras 2015; Crane *et al.*, 2016; Chown, Beardon and Cossburn, 2018; Salerno and Schuller, 2019; Gibbs and Haas, 2020). Such negative experiences may be because the differences in behaviours demonstrated by neurodivergent people are perceived as criminal in comparison to the predominant neurotype, however this suggestion has seldom been explored. This research involved North (NYP) and South Yorkshire Police (SYP), exploring how they interact with neurodivergent people, how police practitioners perceive neurodivergent behaviour and how partner agencies who support neurodivergent people are involved in supporting the police in their interactions with this population.

## **FINDINGS**

Findings from analysis of 999/101 calls between 31<sup>st</sup> August 2016 and 1<sup>st</sup> September 2017 identified that there were 2014 cases (out of a total of 449,778 incidents) involving autistic people in SYP, compared to 453 cases (out of a total of 153,609 incidents) in NYP. In SYP, this meant that 0.5% of all incidents reported during the analysis period involved autistic people. In NYP, this totalled 0.3% of incidents. The mean age of autistic people involved with the police was 19 years old, compared to NYP, which was 25 years old. When identifying the circumstances in which the police engage with neurodivergent citizens in local communities, in both SYP and NYP, the most common type of incident attended was a Public Safety incident (1186 incidents in SYP and 238 incidents in NYP). In NYP, this was followed by anti-social behaviour and disorder incidents (100 incidents) and in SYP, violent incidents were second most reported (532 incidents). In SYP, there were almost equal amounts of incidents involving an autistic suspect and an autistic victim (31.1% and 33.2%, respectively), compared to in NYP, where autistic suspects made up 17.9% of all incidents, compared to only 8.6% involving an autistic victim. In both NYP and SYP, the majority of all incidents were attended by a Police Officer (59.8% NYP and 30.2% in SYP), as well as call takers.

In SYP, warning markers were applied to only 479 cases (23.8%), however over half of cases in NYP had warning markers (58.5%). There were no markers related to autism or neurodivergence, rather using “Mental Health”, “Mental Disorder”, “Ailment” and “Vulnerable”. Neurodiversity was also not a concept frequently understood by police participants from qualitative interviews with them. The language used by police practitioners and partner agencies was predominately neurotypical, medicalised and conflated autism with mental health, vulnerability and risk. Vulnerability and risk were important aspects of understanding and conceptualising interactions with autistic people, with

the majority of participants highlighting neurodivergent people as inherently vulnerable, particularly if they were also a child or a young person. Considering these layers of vulnerability, there is an increased need for differentiated treatment. An autistic child, who is perceived as lacking capacity in regards to both their autism and their age, may need differential treatment, compared to a neurotypical child and/or an autistic adult. Participants also suggested that their ability to make decisions about their own practice influenced their treatment of autistic people. As such, discretion allowed officers to exercise a level of autonomy during encounters with autistic people, meaning they could act in ‘appropriate’ or ‘needs-based’ ways. This autonomy was impacted by the expectations of their role (e.g. the level of decision-making autonomy afforded to PCSOs was different to Police Officers). Despite their role and/or levels of discretion, some participants noted that autistic people should not be treated any differently to a neurotypical member of the public.

The nature of multi-agency partnership working in promoting neurodiversity was found to be informal, ad-hoc and outcome-related. Police responses rarely involved partner agencies, with partners only being contacted when it was necessary to obtain information or expertise, in order to achieve a particular outcome. It remains undetermined whether such fleeting partnership relationships are beneficial for supporting autistic people who have contact with the police. McCarthy and O’Neill (2014) highlight that, although the police are often the first port of call in an emergency, they are not always the best equipped to support with a situation. Hence police and partner agency participants in the research attempted to identify the ‘right’ person or agency to deal with a situation. The ‘right’ person was often associated with who was the ‘expert’, with police practitioners regarding themselves the least suited agency to support neurodivergent people due to their inexperience and lack of expertise. As police practitioners did not consider themselves experts, they instead relied on more informal forms of knowledge gleaned ‘on the job’ or in their lives outside the police, such as their personal connections to autistic people (as family members or close family friends).

## **CONCLUSION**

This thesis concludes that neurodiversity needs to be embedded into police organisations, not just through individualised initiatives or through informal partnership working, but through profound structural, cultural and linguistic change.

Recommendations for future police practices:

- Improving opportunities for all police practitioners to work more closely with autistic and/or neurodivergent people and their families.
- A holistic review of the language used related to neurodivergence in policy and practice, particularly when considering vulnerability protocols, with the assistance of neurodivergent people and specialists.
- Assessing neurodiversity initiatives that already exist within the organisation to ensure a joined-up approach.
- Neurodiversity training delivered by neurodivergent people, specifically targeted at Police Officers and call takers, over any other type of police practitioner.
- A reflection of neurodivergence within Police and Crime Commissioner priorities, even if this is situated as vulnerability.

- Changes to the way language is used and documented on police records (including call logs and warning markers) to ensure more neuro-inclusive understandings within police practices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Incident report data (from 101/999 call log records) from NYP and SYP was quantitatively analysed to establish the types of incidents autistic people encountered the police. Due to the police organisations' and the University of Sheffield's data protection processes, accessing both sets of call log data from NYP and SYP took approximately one year. In addition to this, due to different methods of accessing the data and the involvement of each police force, additional time was required to extract, anonymise and subsequently analyse the data (approximately six months). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with police practitioners ( $N = 19$ ) about their understanding of neurodiversity and their interactions with neurodivergent citizens. Practitioners from organisations that support neurodivergent people ( $N = 7$ ) were also interviewed about their partnership working with the police. The involvement of autistic people was originally planned as part of the methodology, but due to personal and practical challenges, this could not be completed, but remains a fertile area for future research.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In the original proposal of this research, a third phase hoped to involve creative visual methods to explore the experiences of neurodivergent people who had previously engaged with the police. Further research might take forward this third phase. Researching the involvement of neurodivergent people and their families would also extend to investigating their role in police partnership working, as per the findings of this research which suggest that the police consider autistic people and their families as experts and formal partners in their work. Further to the widening of the sample to neurodivergent people and their families, it is important to broaden the scope of police practitioners that are involved in research such as this. Police practitioners who were interviewed in this research volunteered to take part, showing an established interest in the topic of neurodiversity and autism. Therefore, it might be assumed that these participants knew more about neurodiversity than their colleagues who did not volunteer to take part. At present, there is no universal autism and/or neurodiversity training for police practitioners (Hepworth, 2017). Therefore, further work could be used to establish the viability of neurodiversity initiatives developed by individual police organisations. A possible research questions could include "*how are individual police initiatives into neurodiversity adopted into mainstream policing practice?*" As identified in this research, narratives from those in lower-ranks point to the slow but real impacts of reform (Campeau, 2019). Therefore, future research must take these variables into account, investigating whether the use of singular police organisation-based initiatives, as opposed to mandatory UK-wide initiatives, are beneficial or better than the other.

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