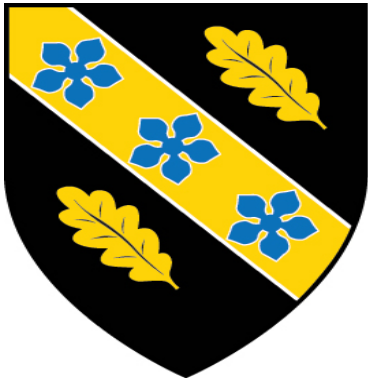




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***An analysis of Interactions between police
officers and members of the public on the
Autism spectrum***

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1920624

BSc (Hons) Professional Policing Practice

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I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to my partner Nathan for his unwavering support this year, and finally a big thank you to my children Frankie, Bobbie, and Ronnie whose unique perspective of the world inspired my research.

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: P.Jones

Date: 07.10.23

STATEMENT 1

This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA.

Signed: P.Jones

Date: 07.10.2023

STATEMENT 2

This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: P.Jones

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I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for interlibrary loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Abstract

This paper examines and compares research already conducted relating to interactions between police officers and members of society who are on the Autistic spectrum. The researcher has identified the Aims of her research and outlined the Objectives set to guide her research.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and inductive research methods were utilised to gather information.

The researchers' analysis of results found that there is a case for increased Autism training for police officers.

However, the researcher has identified other studies that support these findings and other studies that do not support these findings. The researcher has also identified further research areas that they believe this project would benefit from, to assist its' development.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study aims to explore interactions between police officers and adults on the Autistic spectrum. 'Are officers provided with sufficient training to enable them to identify and support persons presenting with behaviours associated with those on the Autistic Spectrum?'

The researcher has chosen to base her research around neurodiversity, as this is a topic that she considers to be extremely close to her heart. She has three children on the Autistic spectrum, each with varying support needs. Her youngest son is severely Autistic/ non-verbal and has a profound learning disability, he requires an extremely high level of care, and all aspects of his daily life are impacted by his disability. The researcher's two eldest children attend mainstream schools and are academically in line with their peers, however, both children present with significant impairments in their social communication skills. Their ability to mask and hide their unique differences often prevents those with little knowledge of neurodiverse conditions, from correctly interpreting their behaviours. The researcher hopes that her research will help to improve the quality of life for her children, and many others within the neurodiverse community.

Autism is universally referred to as a 'spectrum', of traits, behaviours and deficits in skills and development, which can have an impact on how the person views and experiences the world around them. For many years the Autistic Spectrum has been likened to a straight line. Those with more obvious behaviours and deficits are often described as being at one end and those who appear to function more typically within society, placed at the opposite end. This gives rise to the assumption that those who function more typically and appear to blend in with society are less affected by their condition.

Aims

The aim of this research is to critically examine literature and information documented by the media related to the topic and discover whether there is a need for further police officer training.

Objectives

- *Research the law relating to the police and Autism.*
- *Research and explore interactions between frontline police-officers and persons with Autism.*
- *Research and explore officers' knowledge and understanding about Autism.*
- *Research and explore the need for an increase in police training.*

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The aim of this chapter is to carry out a review of the literature that is currently available linked to the theme of this dissertation. The review will be completed through research in books, journals and on-line resources.

2.1 What is Autism?

College of Policing 2023 described ASD as a neuro-developmental condition that is characterised by persistent deficits in impulse control, sensory regulation, and the ability to initiate and sustain reciprocal social interaction, and communication. It is also characterised by restricted, repetitive, and inflexible patterns of behaviour and interests. There is a vast spectrum of behaviours associated with Autism- stimming, exaggerated body movements, rocking, self-harming behaviours, need for routines, lack of eye contact, obsessional interests, social communication difficulties- not understanding jokes, taking things literally, sensory issues in relation to all senses, over sensitive or under sensitive to noise, touch, taste, and smell. Other symptoms include meltdowns/ shutdowns, when person with Autism is unable to regulate emotions and aggressive behaviour.

ASD It is often described as a spectrum of behaviours, traits and impairments that impact on the way in which the affected person lives their life and interprets the world around them. A lesser-known subtype of ASD is Pathological demand avoidance (PDA); this is an Autism spectrum condition that describes those whose main characteristic is to avoid everyday demands and expectations to an extreme extent. A PDA profile is often attributed to those who are higher functioning i.e., live independently with little/no additional support. Due to the vast spectrum of behaviours associated with Autism it is understandable that without adequate training ASD traits may not be recognised or considered and could easily be mis-understood, causing communication issues for police officers and persons with ASD.

2.2 The Equality Act

The Equality Act (2010) placed a requirement on public services to anticipate and prevent discrimination against people with disabilities including people with a learning disability, Autism, or both. The Act placed a legal duty on service providers to make, 'reasonable adjustments for Autistic people to ensure that they are not at a disadvantage compared to people without Autism.' It stated that providers were required to make reasonable adjustments for Autistic people on a case-by-case basis. The Act clearly identifies the need for frontline police to have a proper understanding of ASD as they go about their duties. Charities in the UK stress that effective police responses need to be purposely tailored for ASD. The Autism Act 2009 required the Government to introduce and keep under review an adult Autism Strategy.

2.3 Police understanding of Autism

Autistic people can become involved in the criminal justice system, as witness', victims, suspects, or perpetrators of crime. The College of Policing 2021 recognises that an officer's early recognition of neuro-diverse difference (ASD) in a person will result in a more successful interaction and response from all parties. Archer et al in their 2015 study gave an insight into the needs of people with Autism when they encountered the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Interestingly, the paper highlighted that there is a lack of information on how many people with Autism encounter the CJS. It also noted the impact that lack of Autism awareness in the CJS can have on a person with Autism. The study stated that there is a need for an increased awareness of Autism in the CJS. It stated that often people with Autism enter the system because of misunderstandings about their condition. Archer's study inferred that there was not a proper understanding of ASD within the CJS, which is disappointing, as the Equality Act 2010 recommended that police officers should have a proper understanding of ASD. In 2015 Archer et al found that only a few police forces had undertaken Autism awareness training and the study highlighted a need for further training for all police forces and for the other organisations that make up the wider CJS. This study concluded that there were simple and cost-effective changes or services that could be easily implemented both by the CJS and local authorities, to address the issues. Archer believed that these services were not being implemented due to a lack of clear policy and direction from government. It was disappointing to note five years later that Salerno's 2020 study also suggested that adverse outcomes could easily be avoided if more officers were appropriately trained and informed about ASD traits and individual coping strategies, and the following year in 2021 it was disappointing to note that Chown et al's study once again highlighted the lack of the officers' knowledge and understanding of ASD and misinterpretation of traits, which is extremely discouraging. Chown refers to 'a triad of impairments,' that could disadvantage those with Autism when they come into contact with the criminal justice; he noted that Autistic behaviours could be perceived as the person being intoxicated, non-communicative, or aggressive. Archer, Salerno and Chown all believed that there were simple and cost-effective changes or services that could be easily implemented both by the CJS and local authorities, to address the issues.

The misinterpretation of the characteristics of people with Autism by the police was a familiar theme throughout the research, Archer, Chown and Salerno all believed that the unawareness and lack of knowledge by the police could escalate a situation and affect a person with Autism's ability to communicate clearly with officers. Interestingly in Christiansen et al's 2021 study noted that police officers with previous training or with personal knowledge were more likely to recognise features of ASD. This study would like to gain further knowledge from front-line police officers. However, it is interesting to note that this view is not always shared by police officers, as noted in Crane et al's 2016 study, 49% of police officers stated that they were satisfied with the training that they had received, inferring that the respondents felt confident to recognise traits and communicate with Autistic people. This study would like to gain further knowledge from front-line police officers about their training, knowledge and understanding of the subject and the obstacles that they encounter.

2.4 Autistic person's experience of the police

The findings of Young et al 2019 highlight some of the difficulties that Autistic people have when co-operating and communicating with police officers when they are involved in an incident or event. Research suggests that people with Autism are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become victims of crime than their neurotypical peers. Christiansen et al's 2021 study noted that before the age of 21 approximately 20% of young adults with ASD had been involved in dealings with the police. The study also noted that persons with ASD are seven times more likely to come into contact with the police than their neurotypical peers, the study highlights the fact that first contact officers are most likely to be their first contact with the CJS. Crane et al's study discussed the responses of the police in respect to the experiences of the ASD community (31 adults with ASD 49 parents,) more than half of people with Autism (69%) were largely dissatisfied with their experience of the police and felt that their needs were not met or taken seriously, reiterating the need for police training on ASD. In this study Crane et al noted the Procedural justice theory (Lind & Tyler, 1988) which provided a framework for considering how persons with ASD understood their encounters with the police. Interestingly it suggested that views about the police were not formed by the outcome of an encounter (e.g., whether or not the person was eventually found guilty,) it was based on whether the person believed that they had been treated fairly, with dignity and respect.

The Equality Act identified the need for frontline police to have a proper understanding of ASD as they go about their duties. However, it could be argued that evidence from the review of literature does not substantiate this. There have been several cases documented when police encounters with an Autistic person have not been favourable. Crane 2016 highlighted the findings of the *ZH v The Commissioner of Police for the Metropolis* case (reported in the Guardian 2012) which found that excessive force had been used on a young vulnerable male with severe ASD and epilepsy, by the Metropolitan Police. In 2019 the BBC news covered the story of a man with ASD who was wrongly handcuffed and put in the back of a police van. The man was held after a woman rang officers because he was, "shouting about random things". Lawyers for the man said that officers, 'lacked understanding,' because he was, 'almost immediately handcuffed,' and taken home in the back of a police van. An appeal to the IOPC found that the man should not have been handcuffed or taken home against his will. The solicitor who represented the man said that lessons had to be learned by police officers because there was, 'a clear lack of understanding on how to deal with members of the public who suffer from such disorders.' S. Lepore, in the Daily Mail January 2023, reported an incident that had occurred in Virginia USA where a boy aged 12 years old, who had ASD, was taking part in a law enforcement-run tennis programme. Following one session, when the mother returned to collect her son, she found him in handcuffs, shocked and in need of medical attention for concussion. The mother explained that her son's strategy for self-regulating when he was upset was to walk away from a situation, she believed that the police officers running the programme did not know this. They viewed his behaviour as defiant and thought he was running away. These examples confirm the need for improved training to enable police officers to recognise ASD traits and communicate effectively with members of the Autistic community. Salerno – Ferraro et al 2020 conducted a study regarding the challenges facing the police when interacting with Autistic people. Thirty-five adults with ASD completed an online questionnaire and provided

recommendations as to how those interactions could be improved. Respondents reported a variety of different potential challenges that could develop in an interaction between the police and people with ASD. Many felt that typical Autistic behaviours, such as stimming could be misinterpreted by police officers and lead to unfavourable outcomes. There were also concerns from the respondents regarding communication including answering questions literally and being given enough time to answer questions. Respondents also raised concerns about the sensory obstacles, visual, auditory and hypersensitivity, that they may encounter during an interaction with a police officer e.g. loud environments and flashing sirens or being handcuffed or searched.

2.5 Police training

In 2016 Crane et al's survey gathered the experiences and views of 394 police officers (from England and Wales) regarding autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Less than half, (42%) of officers were satisfied with how they had worked with individuals with ASD and reasons for this were varied. Conversely, just under half of the officers (49%) of the officers stated that they were satisfied with the training that they had received. Officers acknowledged the need for adjustments, organisational/time constraints were cited as barriers; 37 % of officers had received ASD training but a need for bespoke training, tailored to policing roles was identified.

Following a review of policy for autism spectrum disorder of police officer training in 2017, D. Hepworth highlighted the need for change. Her findings were that police policy and staff training was insufficient during all initial stages of the criminal justice process. The study acknowledged that there were emerging policies and schemes which were promising but would require further research and national participation. Hepworth concluded that policy reform and improved training was required to ensure minimal opportunities for miscarriages of justice to those individuals with ASD. Including the police, fire service, courts, and the National Offenders Management Service. Several recommendations were discussed that were aimed at improving police interactions and contact with Autistic people, including involving Autistic people in the training of police officers. This study provided insights into how interactions between the police and people with ASD can be improved and the findings could be used in the development of police training programmes or integrated into pre-existing training programmes about Autism, contributing to the important perspective of the Autism community.

The Welsh Government Autism Code of Practice

In 2019 Susan Elan Jones co-sponsored a bill in Parliament that would make Autism understanding training mandatory for all police officers in England and Wales with the aim of raising more Autism awareness amongst police officers. The Police Officer Training (Autism Awareness) Bill was supported by the National Autistic Society and introduced by Welsh Labour MP Ann Clwyd. Miss Clwyd believed that it was essential that police had training to make sure they could support Autistic people. Unfortunately, the Bill was rejected, which is hard to believe, considering the research to date all indicated that there was a real need to improve police officers knowledge and understanding of Autism.

In 2021, following the rejection of the Autism Awareness Bill, the Welsh Government made a commitment to focus on the needs of Autistic people by issuing a statutory Code of Practice. The Welsh Government Autism Code of Practice 2021 sets out what Autistic people, their parents and carers can expect from public services in Wales. The government pledged to work collaboratively with other organisations dealing with non-devolved matters to raise awareness of Autism.

A study in 2021 by Christiansen et al assessed the experiences of police officers linked to persons with ASD. The survey assessed prior experience, comfort, knowledge, and ability to identify a person with ASD. Fifty-one officers completed the survey: 52.9% reported previous training, 34.8% reported personal experience with ASD, and 56%, over half of the officers, endorsed low overall knowledge of ASD. Officers reported neutral comfort (mean 3.24) and moderate practical knowledge (3.74) (Likert scale 1-5: 1 = lowest, 5 = highest.) Those with previous training or with personal experience were more likely to recognise features of ASD in clinical vignettes. The study also noticed that persons with ASD are seven times more likely to come into contact with the police than their neurotypical peers, the study highlights the fact that first contact officers are most likely to be their first contact with the CJS.

Crane et al's study discussed the responses of the police in respect to the experiences of the ASD community (31 adults with ASD, 41 parents.) More than half of the adults with ASD (69%) were largely dissatisfied with their experience of the police and felt that their needs were not met or taken seriously., reiterating the need for more police training. The study noted the Procedural Justice Theory (Lind and Tyler 1988) which provided a framework for considering how persons with ASD understood their encounters with the police. Interestingly it is suggested that views about the police were not formed by the outcome of an encounter (e.g. whether a person was found guilty,) it was based on whether the person believed that they had been treated fairly.

The common themes that emerged between the studies of Crane 2016 and Christiansen 2019 were, 'recognition of ASD traits and 'communication'. In both surveys approximately half of the respondents considered that they were not satisfied with their knowledge of ASD. In Christiansen's 2019 study it was interesting to note that there was an increase in officers who had received training. However, in this study over half of the officers reported that they had low knowledge of ASD. These statistics suggest that the training that the officers had received was not adequate.

When comparing Crane and Christiansen's studies it was disappointing to note that in five years little had changed. Less than half (42%) of the officers in the Crane et al 2016 survey, stated that they had received ASD training and identified a need for bespoke training and respondents in Christiansen's study reported a low or moderate overall knowledge of ASD and less than 53% (52.9%) acknowledged previous ASD training.

The National Autistic Society - Guide for Police Officers'

There are several on-line courses, reference documents and publications that can be accessed by police officers. The National Autistic Society 2017 booklet – 'Autism: A Guide for

Police Officers' is a very useful reference document for all police staff. It contains lots of information and explanations about communication and sensory difficulties. It explains how the distress of being arrested is likely to be much greater for Autistic people and advises that reasonable adjustments need to be made because people with ASD are vulnerable. Recommendations include, keeping physical contact to a minimum and avoiding use of handcuffs or other restraints (if possible); checking whether the person is carrying any information about their needs, reading it and following it; explaining simply and calmly where you are taking the person and why; telling them what they should expect on arrival to the custody suite; calling ahead to warn the custody staff if the person appears to be distressed; asking if arrangements can be made to avoid having to wait in a busy reception area; telling the custody sergeant that the detainee is Autistic and explain any related concerns and delivering the caution slowly and clearly. The National Autistic Society' Guide for Police Officers - 2020 explained that initial police contact can easily worsen a difficult situation. The use of handcuffs and restraint is likely to be very frightening to an Autistic person who doesn't understand what is happening and may not be able to communicate their fears in an appropriate way. This, together with the use of loud sirens, may result in sensory overload, causing the person to try to run away or hit out at people, including the police. The very presence of the police may cause great anxiety to a law-abiding Autistic person who has no comprehension of the crime they may have committed.

Salerno – Ferraro et al 2020 were in agreement with Clywd and Elan Jones 2019 that mandatory training was the way forward. Salerno acknowledged that there were many useful on-line guidelines and reference documents available to police officers but concluded they did not compare to regulated, mandatory training. Salerno et al emphasised that it was necessary to understand the type of training that would be helpful.

Analysis and scrutiny of the literature has justified the need for further research in this field to investigate ASD training within the South Wales Police Force. The object of the study is to gather data from frontline officers to understand the type of training that would be helpful and come to a conclusion which has a positive effect on the ASD community and the policing community.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methods that will be used by the researcher to determine whether frontline police officers recognise traits and behaviours of persons with ASD, and know how to interact positively with these individuals, to support their decision-making.

Data in the review of literature revealed that negative interactions with the police affected the views of the ASD community towards the police and could influence the opinions of others. Crane's 2016 research revealed that 69% of the people with Autism who took part in the study were dissatisfied with their experience of the police; they considered that their needs were not met and were often not taken seriously. Initially the researcher considered formulating a questionnaire to be completed by people with ASD. However, this was not viable due to the ethics involved in questioning vulnerable persons. It was decided that for this study the questionnaire should be aimed at front line police-officers employed within the South Wales Police and designed to draw attention to areas for improvement. The researcher's aim was to reach a conclusion which would have a positive effect on both the police and ASD communities in Wales.

The pros and cons of several research strategies were considered: taking into consideration the short time-scale and busy work schedules of frontline police officers. Much thought was given to the use of questionnaires because it is the primary tool used by researchers to gather data from a target audience. The researcher decided that the use of an on-line questionnaire was best suited to this study because it is an in-expensive and practical method of gathering data. Questionnaires are cost-effective due to their ability to reach a large number of respondents at a relatively low cost. Lindemann 2023 stated that data quantification in questionnaire answers allows researchers to assign numerical values to responses, enabling analysis, statistical exploration, and clearer communication of the findings. This process helps researchers uncover insights, identify patterns, and make informed decisions based on the numerical representation of the data. Lindemann also explained that flexibility allows researchers to customise the questionnaire design and content to gather specific information, accommodate diverse respondent needs, and ensure the relevance and accuracy of data collected. The researcher has devised a questionnaire which includes open ended and closed questions. Cleeve 2017 believed that having open ended questions within a survey allows the respondent to include information which gives the researcher more useful, contextual feedback. The main benefit of this type of data collection is that it will provide both quantitative and qualitative data and create a holistic picture of the research topic. Quantitative data, obtained through structured questionnaires with predefined response options, will provide numerical information that can be analysed statistically. This data will allow the researcher to measure trends, make comparisons, and draw objective conclusions. On the other hand, qualitative data, gathered through open-ended questions or free-text responses, will offer an in-depth insight into participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The qualitative data will also provide a deeper understanding of individual perspectives, motivations, and subjective experiences that cannot be easily captured by quantitative measures alone.

While there are many positives' reasons to use questionnaires conversely the researcher is aware that a questionnaire could be overlooked due to an officers' workload, or ignored due to an overload of student officers making similar requests. However, as the questionnaire is online, it is anticipated that officers will complete the questionnaire at a time that is convenient to them. Dishonesty could also be an issue and there is a chance that respondents will not be 100% truthful with their answers. Research revealed that this can happen for a variety of reasons, including social desirability bias and to protect privacy. In attempt to avoid dishonesty the writer will assure respondents that their privacy is valued, that the process will prevent personal identification and the information is for this research project only. Because of the confidentiality, personal privacy, and commitment issues involved with this study, relating to the Data Protection Act 1998, (GDPR) the researcher will ensure that all questionnaires are anonymous and, with ethical concerns in mind, the researcher will ensure that data is not shared with any other persons. Due to time scale the questionnaire was only distributed to front-line officers in the South Wales Police, the researcher is aware that this will limit the results of the study.

The questionnaire is designed to be easy to navigate so that police officers, who have a busy work schedule, will be more likely to complete it. The questionnaire is aimed at front-line officers who are more likely to engage with persons with ASD on a regular basis. The questions focus on the current awareness, knowledge and understanding of police officers regarding the barriers that many people within of the Autistic community face daily, which might impact on their behaviours during the officers' interactions with them. 'Microsoft forms' was used to e-mail the questionnaires to 50 front- line response officers via the station secretary. The returned questionnaires require the respondents to disclose minimal personal details and will be anonymous. The researcher realistically expected a response from 20-25 officers; however, she is aware that a higher number of responses would improve the quality of the data.

When all the questionnaires have been collated the responses will be analysed. The data will be formulated into graphs and charts which will be translated into percentages; this will provide a visual picture of the data. The written answers will be documented in order before being analysed, to ensure that no answers are missed.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to analyse the results of the primary data collected from the on-line questionnaire which was outlined in the previous chapter of this research project. The data will be displayed using charts and graphs to show the main findings. The online survey was sent to front-line officers who are currently serving in the South Wales Police Force. Fifty questionnaires were distributed via e mail and twenty-one questionnaires (42%) were returned with all sections completed, therefore qualitative data was gained.

See Appendix A for a copy of the online questionnaire.

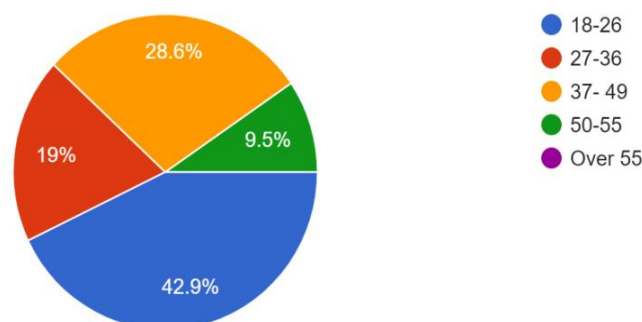
4.2. Data Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed and completed via Google forms; all questions were answered by all of the 21 participants. This was a quick and efficient way of circulating the questionnaire to the chosen sample group. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, there are some disadvantages of using an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was not published for as long as would be desired for this type of study and with multiple choice questions there is an opportunity for respondents to any tick boxes. This is impossible to know.

4.3 Information about the sample group

Question 1.

Please state your age group
21 responses



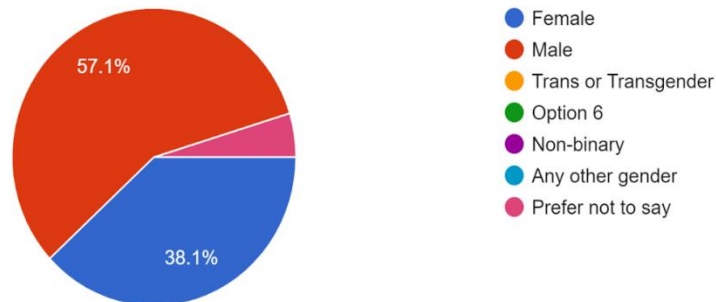
This question was designed to gauge the age of the officers and to correlate their age and understanding of Autism traits. Interestingly the highest number (42%) of respondents were in the 18-26 group indicating that they may be in their probationary period (2-3 years) The second

largest group was 37-49, 19% were in the 27-36 group and the 50-55 group had the lowest number of respondents.

Question 2

Please indicate your gender

21 responses

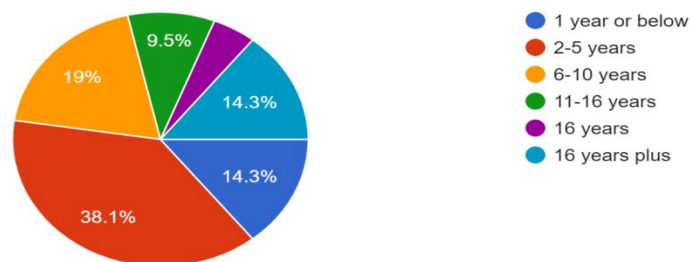


This question was included in the questionnaire to determine the age of the respondents. Over half of the officers (57.1%) stated that they were male, 38.1% stated that they were female and 4.8% preferred not to say. When compared to the Home Office 2021 data, this appears to be a fair representation of the South Wales Police workforce.

Question 3

Please indicate your length of service

21 responses

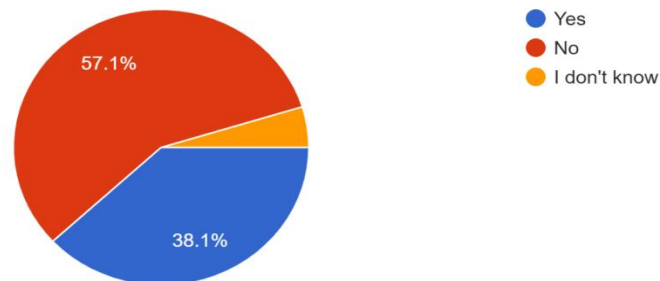


This question was to ascertain the experience of the respondents. Interestingly the highest percentage (38.1%) for length of service was in the 2- 5 years category, this implies that several of these officers are within their probationary period (2- 3 years.) The number of respondents in the 1 year or below and 16 years plus were equal (14.3 %.) and there were just 9.5% who fitted into in the 11-16s year group. Therefore one can assume that over half of the respondents (52.4%) were either in their probationary period or had recently completed it.

Question 4

Do you have any family members or friends who are on the autistic spectrum?

21 responses



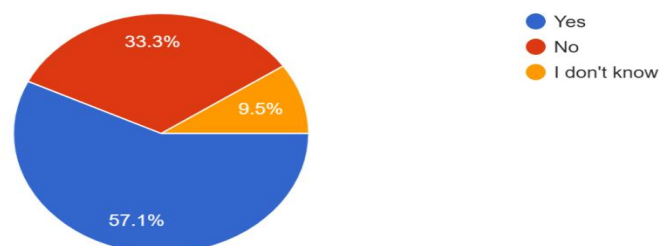
57.1 % of the respondents stated that they did not have any family members or friends who were on the Autistic spectrum, 4.8% of officers stated that they, 'did not know,' and less than half, (38.1%) of the respondents stated that they had family members or friends who were on the Autistic spectrum. This implies that 69.9% of respondents have no experience of dealing with Autistic people outside of work. Christiansen et al's 2021 study noted that police officers with previous training or with personal knowledge were more likely to recognise features of ASD.

4.4 Interactions

Question 5

Whilst on duty have you had any interactions with a person who is on the autistic spectrum ?

21 responses

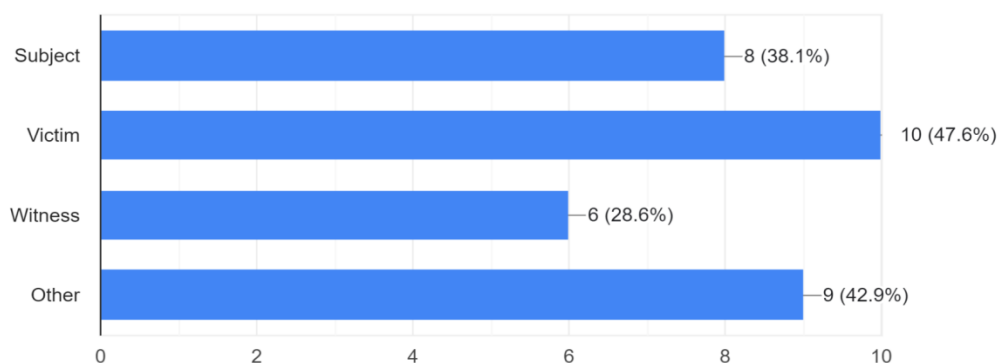


The purpose of this question was to determine how many of the responding front line police officers had been involved in an interaction with an Autistic person. 57.1 % of the respondents stated that they had been involved in an interaction, but 33.3% stated that they had not been involved in an interaction and 9.5% 'did not know.' 42.8 % of respondents did not consider that they had been involved in an interaction with an Autistic person. This result is surprising as Christiansen et al's 2021 study noted that persons with ASD are seven times more likely to come into contact with the police than their neurotypical peers, this could indicate more officers than the data suggests had been involved in incidents but had not recognised Autistic traits.

Question 6

Only answer this question if you answered yes to question 5 Who was the interaction or interactions with? (tick more than one box if required)

21 responses



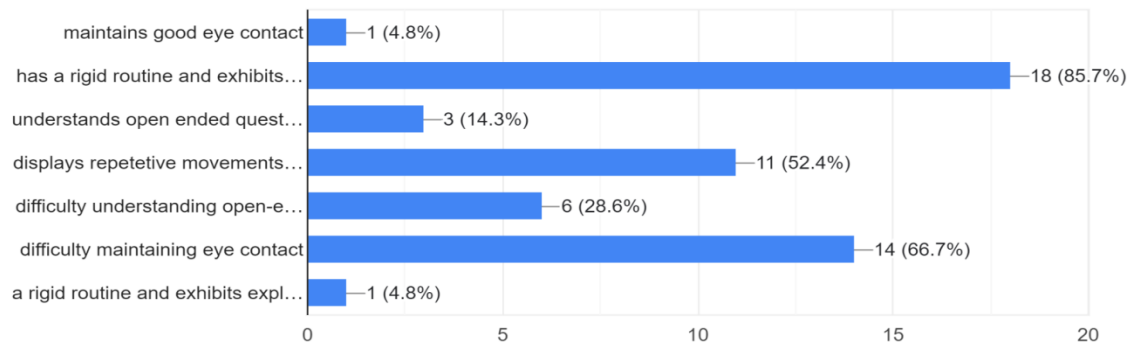
Respondents who answered yes to Question 5 were asked to complete question 6 in order to gauge with whom the interactions were with. Officers were instructed to tick as many boxes as they required. The highest number of interactions were with 'victims' (47.6%), which aligns with Christiansen et al's 2021 research which suggested that people with Autism are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become victims of crime than their neurotypical peers. Respondents stated that they had (38.1%) interactions with a 'subject' 42.9% with 'other' and 28% with 'witness'. Data indicating how many of each interaction respondents had been involved with would have been useful and informative. An additional question could have been, 'How many interactions have you experienced with a person on the Autistic spectrum?' This question would encourage the respondent to compare the interactions and provide a deeper insight into their thoughts.

4.5 Knowledge

Question 7

Which of these traits do you commonly associate with persons on the autistic spectrum? mark one or more

21 responses

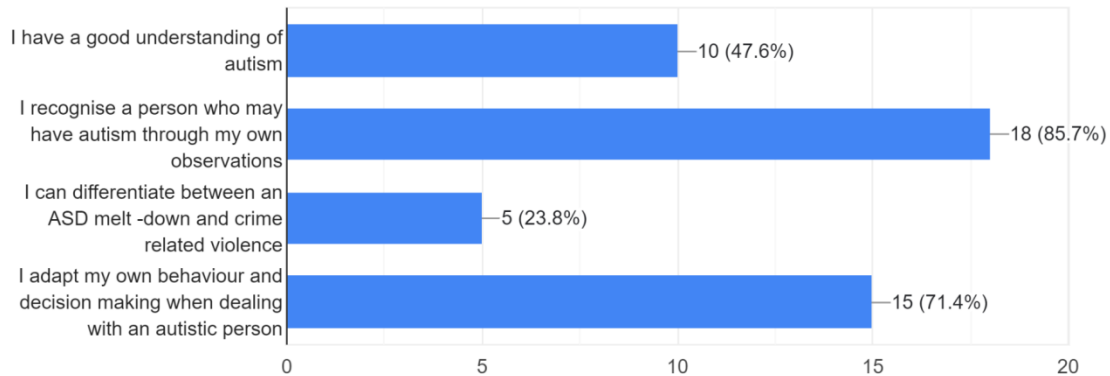


Recognition of ASD traits were one of the common themes that emerged between the studies of Crane 2016 and Christiansen 2019. Archer, Chown and Salerno also believed that the unawareness and lack of knowledge of Autistic traits by the police could escalate a situation and affect a person with Autism's ability to communicate clearly with officers. Consequently, this question, aimed at gauging the respondent's knowledge of common Autistic traits was an important question in this study. Interestingly 18/ 21 (85. 7%) of the respondents recognised, 'has a rigid routine and exhibits explosive behaviour when routine is disrupted,' 14/21 (66.7%) recognised, 'difficulty maintaining eye contact,' 11/21 (52.4%) recognised, 'displays repetitive movements and 6/21 (28. 6%) of officers recognised, 'difficulty understanding open-ended questions.' However, 1/5 of the respondents wrongly identified the traits of 'maintaining good eye contact' and 'understanding open ended questions,' as a common trait for Autistic people. It would have been useful to have included an option in this question regarding the 'sensitivity to touch' trait. It has often been reported in the media that handcuffing an Autistic person causes them anxiety as discussed in this study's Review of Literature.

Question 8

Which of these statements do you agree with? mark one or more

21 responses

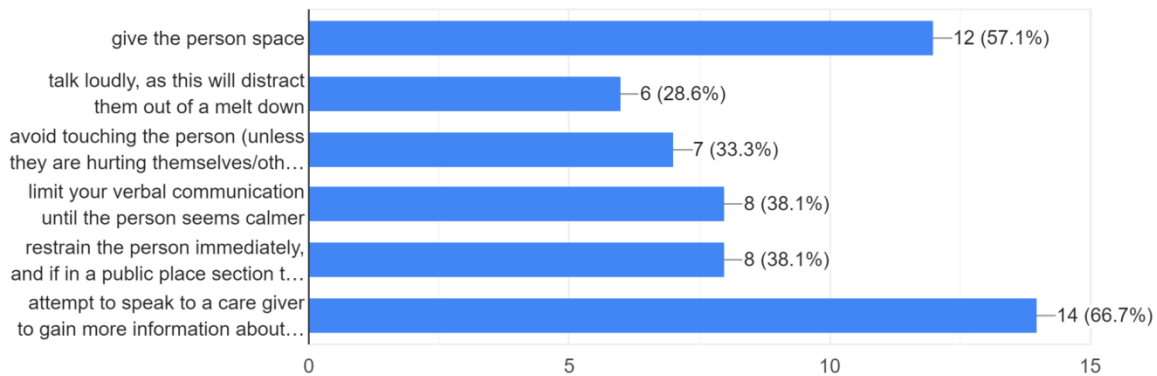


This question gauges the respondent's own perception of their understanding of Autism. Interestingly, a high number of officers, 18/21 (85.7 %,) stated that they could recognise a person who may have Autism through their own observations and 15/21 (71.4%) of respondents stated that they could adapt their behaviour and decision making when dealing with an Autistic person. However, only 10/21 (47.6%) of the respondents stated that they had a good understanding of Autism and only 5/21 (23.8 %,) considered that they could differentiate between an ASD melt-down and crime related violence. Interestingly, this implies that many officers believe that they can recognise some traits but do not believe that they have a good understanding of Autism.

Question 9

Which strategies to you recognise as being effective when dealing with an autistic person experiencing a melt down? mark one or more

21 responses



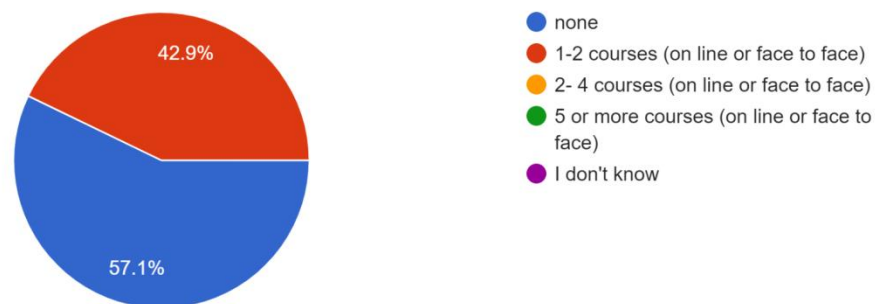
This question considers the respondents use of appropriate strategies when dealing with Autistic people. 12/21 (57.1%) of the respondents correctly stated that to give an Autistic person space is a positive strategy. 14/21 (66.7%) stated that another positive strategy is to speak to a care giver to gain more information about the person. Surprisingly only 7/21 respondents recognised that is important to avoid touching the person (unless they are hurting themselves/others/damaging property)) and less than half of the respondents, 8/21 38.1% recognised that limiting verbal communication until the person seems calmer as a positive strategy. Some misconceptions were highlighted - 8/21 (38.1%) respondents stated that, 'you should restrain the person immediately, and if in a public place section them under136 MH act,' and this is not a recognised strategy. 6/21 (28.6%) stated that talking loudly would distract an Autistic person out of a meltdown which is completely opposite to the strategy that is effective.

4.6 Training

Question 10

How much autism awareness training have you received since qualifying as a police officer?

21 responses



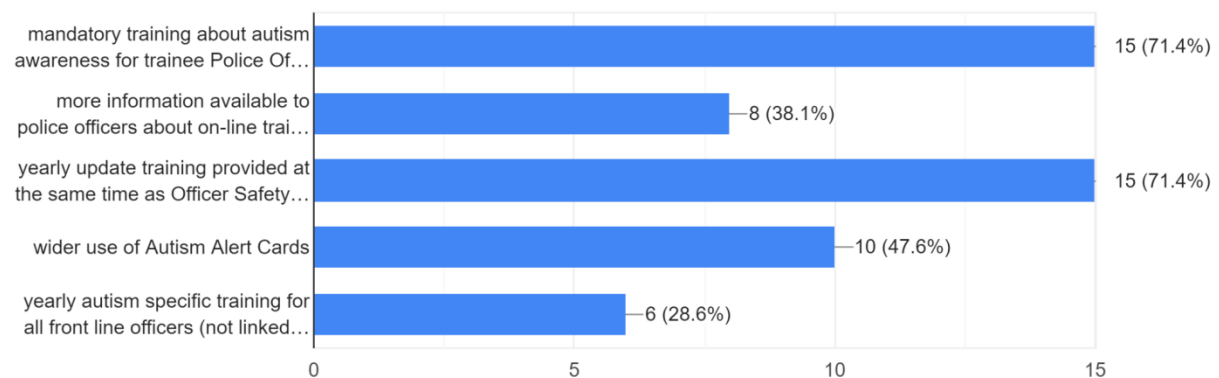
This question was posed to discover how much Autism training the sample group had received after qualifying as a police officer. More than half of the respondents (57.1 %) had not undertaken any further training and 42 % had completed 1-2 courses. It would have been useful to have included further questions to explore the reasons for the officers who had not completed any training and to learn what type of courses the other participants had attended. Were the courses provided internally or by external agencies? What was the quality of the course? Did the officers gain knowledge or was the course just a tick box exercise?

4.7 Communication

Question 11

Do you think that any of the options listed below would help to improve police communication with Autistic persons? mark one or more

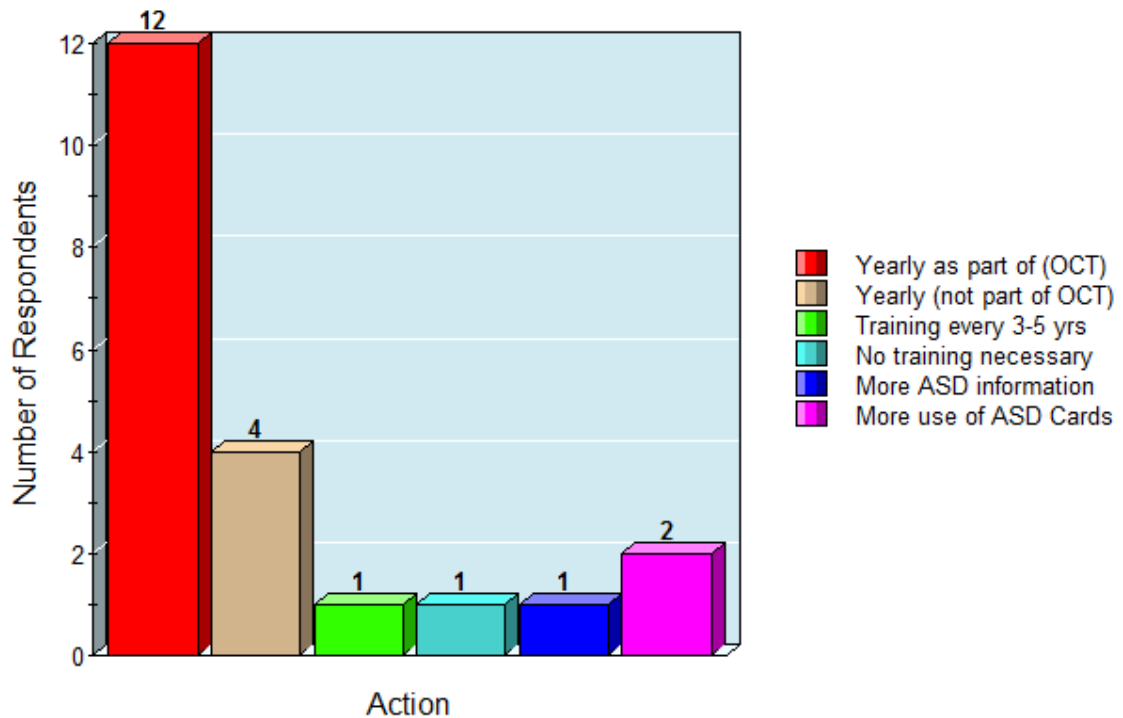
21 responses



This question was included to learn the views of respondents regarding the type of training that they considered would be useful to improve police communications with Autistic persons. 71.4 % of the officers agreed with mandatory training about Autism awareness for trainee Police Officers, 71.4 % of respondents agreed with yearly update training provided at the same time as Officer Safety Training and 28.6% chose yearly training (not linked to Officer Training Safety) as a good option. Surprisingly, less than half (47%) agreed that wider use of Autism Alert Cards would be a useful tool and only 8 % agreed that there should be more information available to police officers about on-line training courses. This could imply that there is already plenty of information online, a question linked to workload and time to access online training would have provided data to make this clearer.

Question 12

Which option from the previous question do you think would have most impact? Briefly explain why you have chosen this option.



Interestingly, 12 of the respondents (57.1%) chose, 'yearly as part of OST,' as the action they thought would have most impact. 4 officers (19%) stated that they thought, 'yearly training, not part of OST.' was the best option. 1 person (4.8%) suggested that 'training every 3-5 years would be a good option. It is surprising that only 2 respondents (9.5%) chose the, 'more use of Autism cards' option, this could imply that more officers had the same view as the officer who responded, 'I have ticked, 'wider use of Autism cards' as this might help us realise they have Autism, but they could use it to their advantage.' 1 participant, (4.8%) thought that no further training was necessary, this officer commented, 'I don't think any further training is needed as police officers should be applying the National Decision Making model regardless of whether they have Autism or not.

It is interesting to note that 76% of the participants stated that they thought that yearly training on Autism, in some form, would improve communication between the police and people with Autism and 80.8% of the respondents agreed that there should be Autism training at least every 5 years.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows –

- research the law relating to the police and Autism.
- research and explore interactions between frontline police-officers and persons with Autism.
- research and explore officers' knowledge and understanding about Autism.
- research and explore the need for an increase in police training.

This study considered the viewpoints of frontline officers in the South Wales Police. An online questionnaire was used to collect the data and 21 responses were analysed.

5.2 The law

The Equality Act (2010) identified the need for frontline police officers to have a proper understanding of ASD and the Autism Act (2009) required the government to introduce and keep under review an Adult Autism Strategy. The Welsh Government's Autism Code of Practice (2021) pledged to work together with public services, including the police to raise awareness of Autism. However, research from Christiansen et al's 2021 study stated that over half of the respondents (56%) stated that they had a low overall knowledge of ASD. It could be argued that had Susan Elan Jones and Ann Clwyd's Police Officer Training Bill been passed in 2019 making police training on Autism mandatory, police officer awareness of Autism traits would have improved more in recent years.

5.3 Interactions between frontline police - officers and persons with Autism with a focus on the difficulties that police officers and Autistic persons face.

The research of literature included reviewing studies between the police and persons with ASD and drew conclusions from both points of view. Research revealed that there is a strong likelihood of an Autistic person coming into contact with the police Young et al 2019 suggested that people with Autism are between 4 and 10 times more likely to become victims of crime than their neurotypical peers. Data from Crane et al 2016's study revealed that 69% of people with Autism were unsatisfied with their experience with the police and data from Christiansen et al's 2021 study stated that before the age of 21 approximately 20% of young adults with ASD had been involved with dealings with the police. Chown's 2021 study referred to 'a triad of impairments,' that could disadvantage those with Autism when they come into contact with the police, lack of the officers' knowledge and understanding of ASD; misinterpretation of ASD characteristics and traits and the person with ASD'S lack of ability to communicate clearly with officers.

5.4 Research and explore officers' knowledge and understanding about Autism

College of Policing 2021 stated that officer's early detection of neuro-diverse differences amongst members of the public would result in more successful interactions and responses from all parties. Young et al noted in their 2019 study that persons with ASD often find it difficult to co-operate or are unable to communicate with police officers when involved in an incident or event. The study also found that police officers had a lack of understanding of ASD traits and recommended the need for improved police officer training.

Lack of understanding of the traits and behaviours of people with Autism by the police was a familiar theme throughout the literature research. Archer, Chown and Salerno all believed that the unawareness and lack of knowledge by the police could escalate a situation and affect a person with Autism's ability to communicate clearly with officers.

The responses to Questions 7, 8 and 9 of this study gave an insight into the knowledge and understanding of Autism within the sample group of officers.

In question 7 several participants recognised rigid movements, repetitive traits and difficulty maintaining eye contact as common Autistic traits but less respondents recognised 'difficulty understanding open ended questions.' Some misconceptions were highlighted; a small number of respondents wrongly identified the traits of 'maintaining good eye contact' and 'understanding open ended questions,' as common traits for Autistic people.

The data gathered from question 8 revealed that 71.4% of the respondents believed that they could adapt their behaviour and decision making when dealing with an Autistic person. However, less than half (47.6%) of the respondents stated that they had a good understanding of Autism and only 23.8 % considered that they could differentiate between an ASD melt-down and crime related violence. It could be argued that this implies that many officers believe that they are able to recognise some traits but do not believe that they have a good understanding of Autism and validates the need for improved police officer training. The results of this study align with those of Christiansen et al's 2021 study which found that although there was an increase in officers who had received training, more than half of the respondents stated that they had low knowledge of ASD, likewise suggesting that the training that the officers had received was not adequate.

Question 9 considered the officers use of appropriate strategies when dealing with Autistic people. More than half of the respondents correctly stated that to give an Autistic person space and to gain information from a care giver as positive strategies. However, fewer respondents recognised that is important to avoid touching the person and limiting verbal communication as a positive strategy. Some misconceptions were also highlighted - 38.1% respondents stated that, 'you should restrain the person immediately, and if in a public place section them under 136 MH act,' and this is not a recognised strategy and 28.6% stated that talking loudly would distract an Autistic person out of a meltdown which is completely opposite to the strategy that is effective.

The themes of this study align with the common themes that emerged between the studies of Crane 2016 and Christiansen 2021 which were, 'recognition of ASD traits and

'communication'. In all studies many of the respondents considered that they were not satisfied with their knowledge of ASD.

5.5 Research and explore the need for an increase in police training.

When comparing Crane and Christiansen's studies it was disappointing to note that in five years little had changed regarding Autism training. Less than half (42%) of the officers in the Crane et al 2016 survey, stated that they had received ASD training and identified a need for bespoke training. Respondents in Christiansen's 2021 study reported a low or moderate overall knowledge of ASD and 52.9% acknowledged previous ASD training. In 2021 The Welsh Government Autism Code of Practice 2021 set out a framework of what parents and carers could expect regarding Autism awareness from public services, including the police in Wales. A module that includes Autism awareness is now on the agenda for officers training in the South Wales Police.

This study was interested to discover how much Autism training the sample group had received after qualifying as a police officer. **Question 10** revealed that more than half of the respondents (57.1 %) had not undertaken any further training since their initial training and 42 % had completed 1-2 courses.

The review of literature identified a need for an improvement in police training on Autism. Crane et al's 2016 study identified a need for bespoke training, tailored to policing roles and following a review of police policy for ASD in 2017, Hepworth found that police policy and staff training was insufficient during all initial stages of the criminal justice process. More recently in 2021 Christiansen et al's study over half of the officers reported that they had low knowledge of ASD. These statistics suggested that the training that the officers had received was not adequate.

Questions 11 and 12 sought the participants own views about the type of training that they considered would be useful to improve police communications with Autistic persons and provided the study with quantitative data. 76% of the participants stated that they thought that yearly training on Autism, in some form, would improve communication between the police and people with Autism and the majority (80.8%) of the respondents agreed that there should be Autism training at least every 5 years. 9.5%, participants chose the, 'more use of Autism cards' option and (4.8%) of the officers thought that no further training was necessary.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

6.1 Questionnaire

The analysis of the findings from the questionnaire provided an insight into the thoughts, views and opinions about the respondent's knowledge and understanding of Autism. Due to a short time scale the questionnaire was only circulated to frontline officers in the South Wales Police Force. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the participants and although only 21 responses were received valuable data and opinions were gathered. If the study were to be carried out again the questionnaire would be distributed to a wider demographic of officers in neighbouring forces, with the amendments suggested in the conclusion. The findings could be compared, and the results analysed, noting similarities and differences. This would improve the quality of data and provide recommendations for developing Autism training which could be incorporated into police training in Wales.

6.2 Training

This study has reviewed research by others and gathered data via an online questionnaire from frontline officers in the South Wales Police and the consensus from all studies is that there is a need for improvements regarding the interactions of frontline police officers and persons on the Autistic spectrum. Crane et al's (2016) study documented negative responses from the Autistic community and instances of poor communication between the police and Autistic persons have been well documented in the media, some of these incidents were noted in this study's review of literature. The misinterpretation of the characteristics of people with Autism by the police was a familiar theme throughout the research, Archer, Chown and Salerno all believed that lack of knowledge and unawareness of traits by the police could escalate a situation and affect a person with Autism's ability to communicate clearly with officers. Crane et al 2016 suggested that views about the police were not formed by the outcome of an encounter (e.g., whether or not the person was eventually found guilty,) it was based on whether the person believed that they had been treated fairly, with dignity and respect. Christiansen et al's 2021 study noted that police officers with previous training or with personal knowledge were more likely to recognise features of ASD.

Through conducting the review of literature and carrying out this study the researcher has improved her knowledge and understanding of the issues relating to the communication of the police with the Autistic community. The views in the literature review are mirrored in the results of this research paper where it was evident that a high percentage of officers believed that they were able to recognise some Autistic traits, but less than half of the respondents stated that they had a good understanding of Autism.

The researcher's choice of topic was motivated by a desire to highlight the importance of Autism awareness for all frontline workers. The researcher hopes that further awareness and understanding of the traits and behaviours of those on the Autistic spectrum, will result in officers being adequately equipped with the sufficient knowledge required to assist them at calls involving those with Autism. It will allow them to recognise when there is a need to make significant adaptations to their own communication style and behaviours. Successful engagement with an individual on the Autistic spectrum may allow a victim to feel comfortable to disclose an incident/ crime and assist officers to safeguard the individual, or assist in de-escalating any behaviour, avoiding any arrests being made or use of force being used. Over time if officers continue to experience regular positive engagements/ experiences with individuals on the Autistic spectrum, this will have a positive impact on community relations and in due course may improve public perception of the police.

Based on the research from this project this study recommends that the South Wales Police should consider implementing time-tabled Autism specific training for police officers, ideally provided by trained professionals. This could be included as part of the annual Officer Safety Training or bespoke training which could be delivered annually or bi-annually. The implementation of this recommendation could increase the knowledge and understanding of officers and have a positive effect on the communication between the police and ASD communities.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Awareness

I would be very grateful if you could spare 5 minutes to complete and return this questionnaire about Autism awareness to provide data for my PCDA university degree course. Any information provided will remain anonymous. Thank you!

1.

Please state your age group

Mark only one oval.

18-26

27-36

37- 49

50-55

Over 55

2.

Please indicate your gender

Mark only one oval.

Female

Male

Trans or Transgender

Option 6

Non-binary

Any other gender

Prefer not to say

3.

Please indicate your length of service

Mark only one oval.

1 year or below

2-5 years

6-10 years

11-16 years

16 years

16 years plus

4.

Do you have any family members or friends who are on the Autistic spectrum? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

I don't know

5.

Whilst on duty have you had any interactions with a person who is on the Autistic spectrum ?

*

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

I don't know

6.

Only answer this question if you answered yes
to question 5

Who was the interaction or interactions with?

(tick more than one box if required)

*

Tick all that apply.

Subject

Victim

Witness

Other

—

7.

Which of these traits do you **commonly** associate with persons on the Autistic spectrum?

mark one or more

Tick all that apply.

maintains good eye contact

has a rigid routine and exhibits explosive behaviour when routine is disrupted

understands open ended questions

displays repetitive movements e.g. hand flapping, rocking

difficulty understanding open-ended questions

difficulty maintaining eye contact

8.

Which of these statements do you agree with?

mark one or more

*

Tick all that apply.

I have a good understanding of Autism

I recognise a person who may have Autism through my own observations

I can differentiate between an ASD melt -down and crime related violence

I adapt my own behaviour and decision making when dealing with an Autistic person

—

9.

Which strategies to you recognise as being effective when dealing with an Autistic person experiencing a melt down?

mark one or more

Tick all that apply.

give the person space

talk loudly, as this will distract them out of a melt down

avoid touching the person (unless they are hurting themselves/others/damaging property))

limit your verbal communication until the person seems calmer

restrain the person immediately, and if in a public place section them under 136 MH act

attempt to speak to a care giver to gain more information about the person

10.

How much Autism awareness training have you received since qualifying as a police officer?

Mark only one oval.

none

1-2 courses (on line or face to face)

2- 4 courses (on line or face to face)

5 or more courses (on line or face to face)

I don't know

11.

Do you think that any of the options listed below would help to improve police communication with Autistic persons?

mark one or more

Tick all that apply.

mandatory training about Autism awareness for trainee Police Officers

more information available to police officers about on-line training courses

yearly update training provided at the same time as Officer Safety Training

wider use of Autism Alert Cards

yearly Autism specific training for all front line officers (not linked to Officer Training Safety)

-

12.

Which option from the previous question do you think would have most impact? Briefly explain why you have chosen this option.

Appendix B

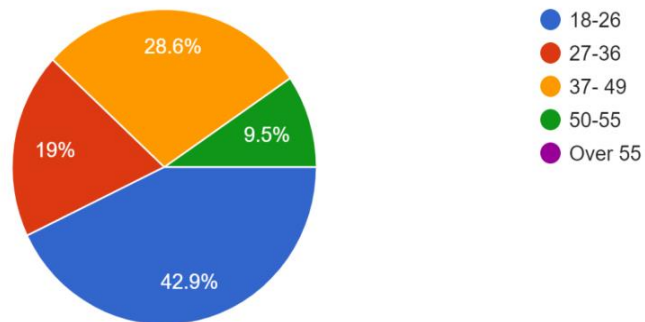
Questionnaire Results

Information about the sample group

Question 1.

Please state your age group

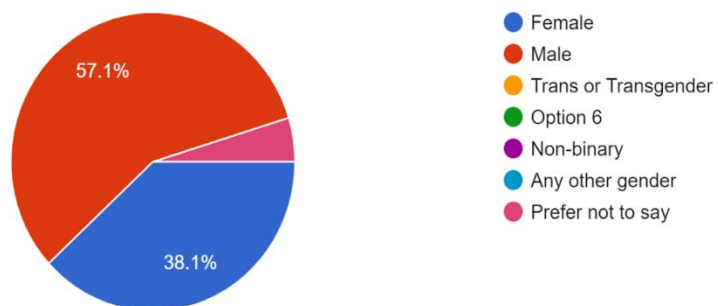
21 responses



Question 2

Please indicate your gender

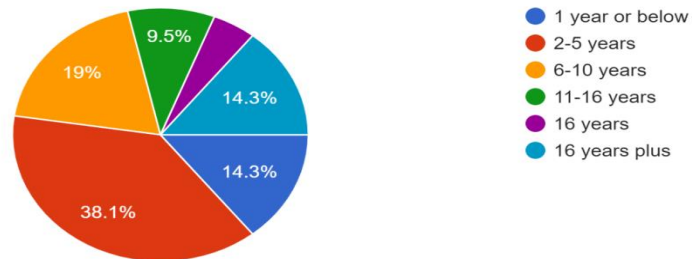
21 responses



Question 3

Please indicate your length of service

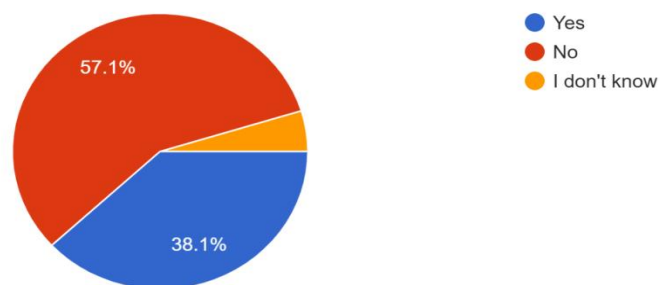
21 responses



Question 4

Do you have any family members or friends who are on the autistic spectrum?

21 responses

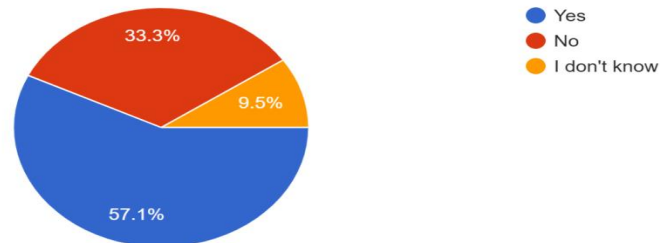


Interactions

Question 5

Whilst on duty have you had any interactions with a person who is on the autistic spectrum ?

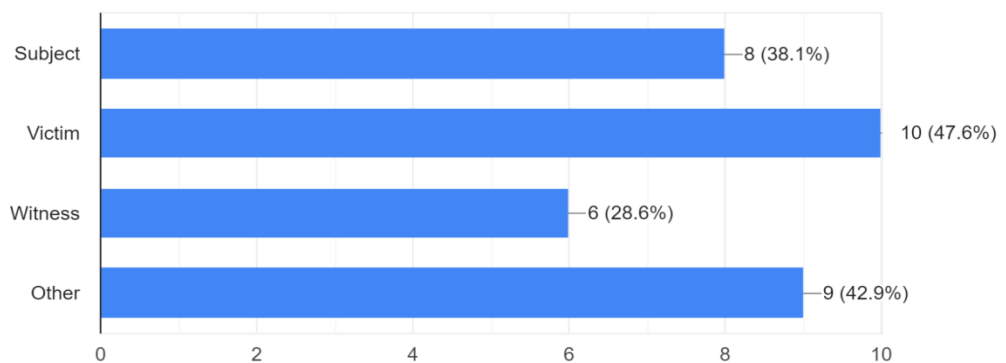
21 responses



Question 6

Only answer this question if you answered yes to question 5 Who was the interaction or interactions with? (tick more than one box if required)

21 responses

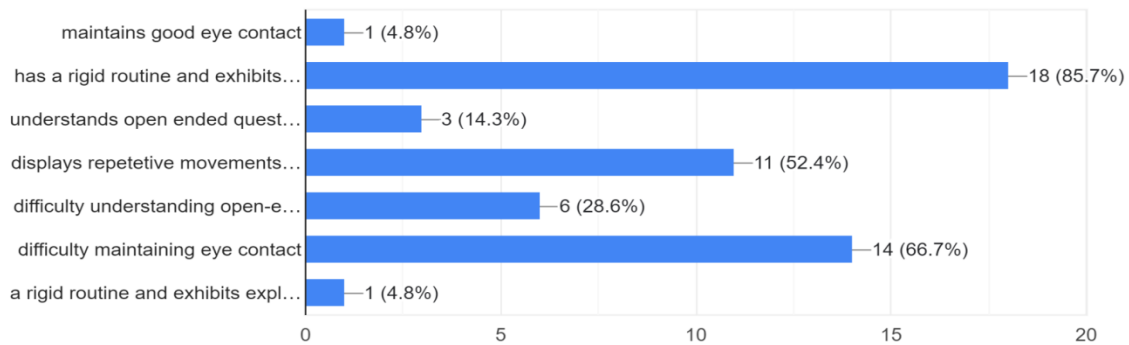


Knowledge

Question 7

Which of these traits do you commonly associate with persons on the autistic spectrum? mark one or more

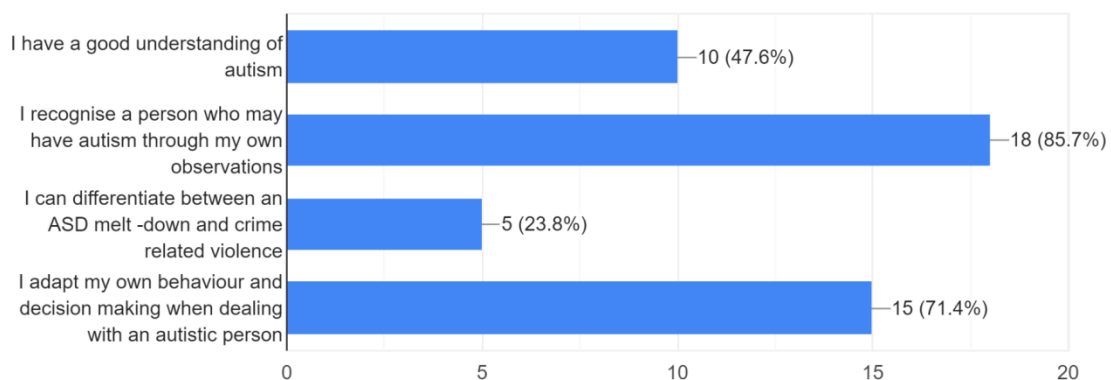
21 responses



Question 8

Which of these statements do you agreement with? mark one or more

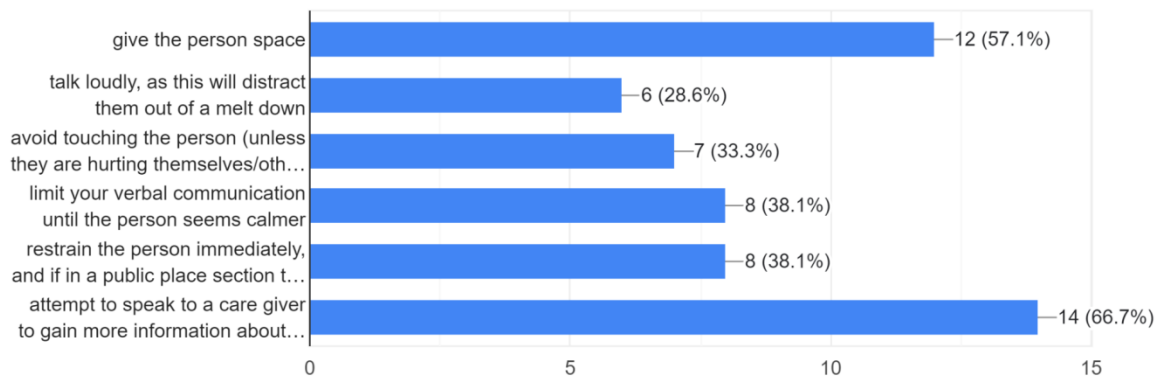
21 responses



Question 9

Which strategies to you recognise as being effective when dealing with an autistic person experiencing a melt down? mark one or more

21 responses

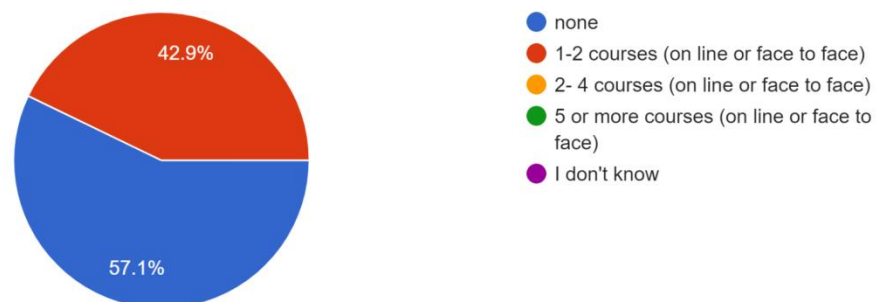


Training

Question 10

How much autism awareness training have you received since qualifying as a police officer?

21 responses

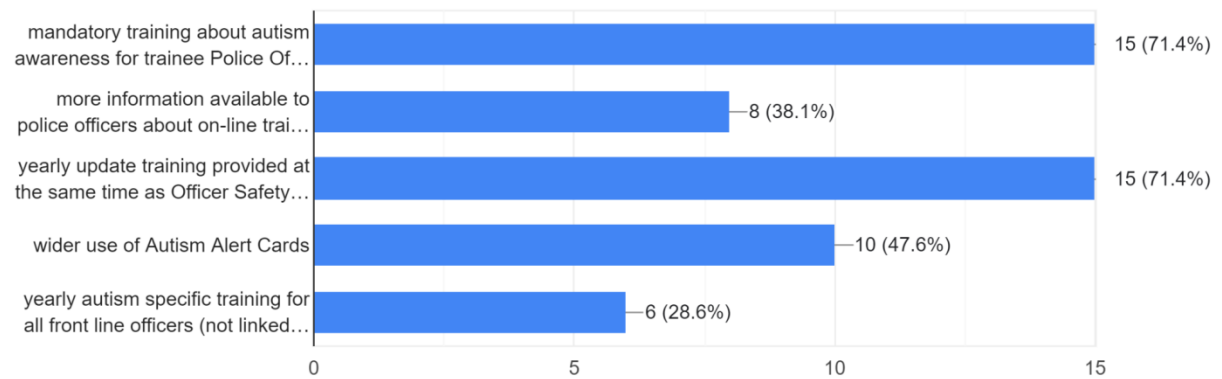


Communication

Question 11

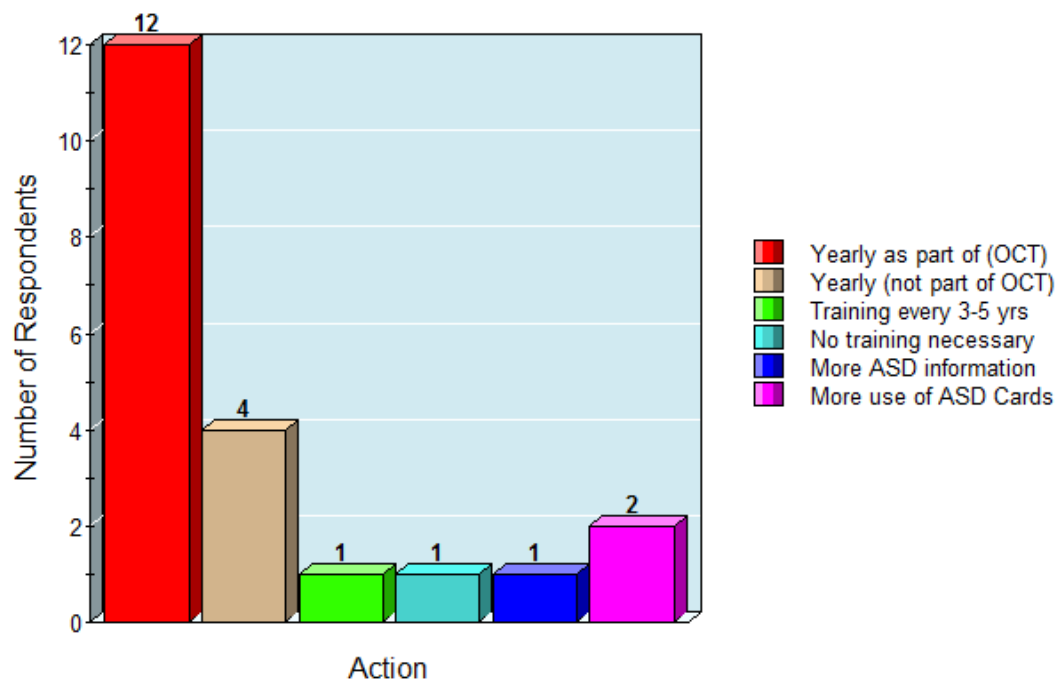
Do you think that any of the options listed below would help to improve police communication with Autistic persons? mark one or more

21 responses



Question 12

Which option from the previous question do you think would have most impact? Briefly explain why you have chosen this option.



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