Background

- Support for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within the community is improving as a consequence of policy and legislative changes.
- Specialist services are not currently provided in prisons.
- ASD and associated vulnerabilities including depression, anxiety and suicidality often go unrecognised & unsupported.

Objectives

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

Participants

- A total of 240 prisoners were screened.
- Sample was representative of the wider prison population:
  - 45% were from a Black or Minority Ethnic background
  - Mean age was 34 (ranging from 21 to 72).
- Selection: Opportunistic (availability) with 54 self- or staff-referrals.

Method

Participants were screened for ASD using the 20-item Autism Quotient (AQ-20).
- Mental health was assessed using the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) – including anxiety, depression and suicidality
- Participants who screened positive for ASD received further assessment using standardised diagnostic tools.

Results

ASD traits

- Appeared to be distributed continuously.

  Distribution of AQ-20 scores
  Range: 1 to 15.
  Mean: 6.74 (SD: 3)

- There were 39 participants (16%) with an AQ-20 score ≥10; indicating significant autistic traits.
  - 21% were from a Black or Minority Ethnic background
  - Mean age was 32.4 (ranging from 21 to 49).
  - 39% were on the Vulnerable Persons wing.

Diagnostic assessment

30 prisoners with ASD traits were assessed using the ADOS.
- Nine exceeded the diagnostic threshold for ASD.
- Another 3 prisoners who scored <10 on the AQ-20 but reported an existing diagnosis also met the criteria for ASD on the ADOS.
- Only four of these 12 prisoners had been previously identified as having ASD.

ASD & Suicidality

- Participants with ASD traits were significantly more likely to have a high suicidality rating than those without ASD traits (27% vs. 6%, p=0.003).

Conclusions

- We identified high levels of ASD traits.
- This suggests the presence of unrecognised behavioural and developmental difficulties in this prison setting which holds wider implications for forensic services.
- Our data suggests that having high levels of ASD traits is a risk factor for suicidality and common mental health problems among prisoners.
- Improvements in prison health care should include improved recognition of ASD, and the detection (and appropriate treatment) of commonly occurring mental health symptoms.

Future research

- Explore the impact of screening further back in the pathway that people take through the criminal justice system – recognition and diversion.
- Develop ways of improving the recognition and assessment of ASD and other comorbidities among offenders – develop adaptive management skills among staff.

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