



# Involvement in the Criminal Justice System Among Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum

## Findings about Safety and Risk from the Life Course Outcomes Research Program



Previous research suggests individuals with developmental disabilities are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than persons without disabilities.<sup>1</sup> For individuals on the autism spectrum, differences in social communication skills and behavioral characteristics may place them at risk for criminal justice involvement; a situation that is

complicated by a lack of training of first responders to understand and deal with these differences.<sup>2</sup> However, there is limited research concerning what characteristics among youth on the autism spectrum increase risk for involvement in the criminal justice system.

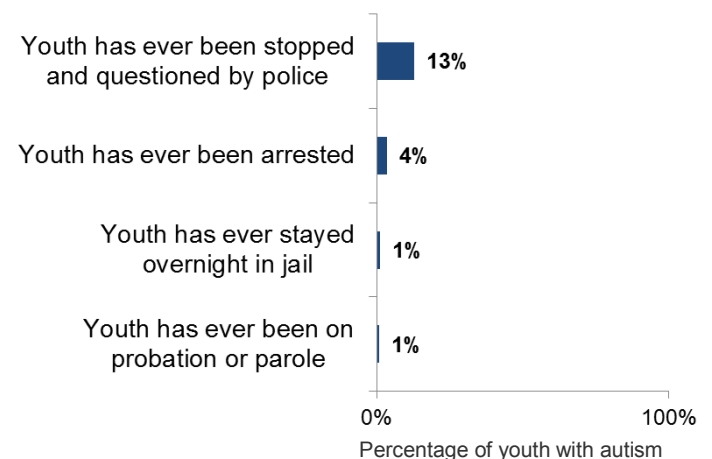
This study used data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2

(NLTS2) which was conducted from 2001-2009. Our analysis included data from Wave 2 of the study, which included youth ages 15-19 years old, and also questions in Wave 5 when they were young adults in their early 20s. We were interested in how often youth and young adults on the autism spectrum were involved with the criminal justice system.

### Youth with autism had low levels of involvement in the criminal justice system

Nearly 13% of all youth with autism had ever been stopped and questioned by police. Almost 4% of youth had ever been arrested, and approximately 1% had ever stayed overnight in jail or ever been on probation or parole.

### Involvement in the criminal justice system among youth on the autism spectrum, ages 15-19.



\*Individuals may occur in more than one category  
Source: National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, Wave 2, 2002

## Few young adults with autism had interaction with police

**1 in 5 young adults with autism ages 21-25 had ever been stopped and questioned by police**



According to data from wave 5 of the NLTS2, 20% of young adults with autism had ever been stopped and questioned by police, excluding traffic violations. However, most young adults with autism who had ever been stopped and questioned by police had been stopped by age 17. While the number for individuals

entering the criminal justice system is low, the question as to why they are being stopped and questioned needs to be addressed.

As the prevalence of autism rises, so does the number of young adults transitioning into adulthood. More research is needed to identify what

puts these individuals at risk of police contact so we can reduce these tendencies. Additionally, we need to implement training and strategies that help police better recognize the characteristics of ASD.

### Sources:

1. Lindsay, W. R. , Sturmey, P., & Taylor, J. L. (2004). Natural history and theories of offending in people with developmental disabilities. In W. R. Lindsay, J. L. Taylor, & P. Sturmey (Eds.), *Offenders with developmental disabilities* (pp. 3— 21). West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley.
2. Woodbury-Smith, M., & Dein, K. (2014). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Unlawful Behaviour: Where Do We Go from Here? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1–8. doi:10.1007/s10803-014-2216-5



### Life Course Outcomes Research Program

The Life Course Outcomes Research Program is building a base of knowledge about the things other than clinical interventions that promote positive outcomes for people on the autism spectrum and their families and communities.

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