

OPINION

Down by law

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Every now and then, a news report pops up about a **crime** committed by a person with autism.

Most are similar to that of the New York City man with **Asperger syndrome** whose obsession with trains led to him being arrested 23 times for **impersonating mass transit workers**. Or the 8-year-old girl with autism who was led away from her school **in handcuffs** when she refused to take off a favorite cow hoodie and got into a scuffle with teachers.

Is that child a potential juvenile delinquent? I think not, but a provocative new study, published 2 September in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, suggests that traits of autism may be **more common in so-called juvenile delinquents** than one might suspect.

The Dutch researchers administered the Children's Social Behavior Questionnaire to 308 children stopped by the police for minor offenses. The 49-item screening tool assesses communication and social deficits, stereotypical behaviors, resistance to change and other features associated with the disorder.

The children who participated in the study were 10 years old at the time of their arrest for a minor offense. The researchers assessed them soon after the police picked them up, and twice more over the following two years.

They found that the children's overall scores on the questionnaire, as well as scores on the parts of the test assessing core symptoms of autism, are substantially higher than those of controls in the general population. But their scores are significantly lower than those of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most impaired children were also more likely to report continued delinquent behavior in the follow-up period. The researchers suggest that they may have a limited understanding of social situations and of the consequences of their actions.

Some of the traits measured by the questionnaire, such as problems with empathy and emotion recognition, and pragmatic language deficits, are not necessarily specific to autism. They are associated with antisocial behavior in general, the researchers note. Still, the high scores the children garnered on the parts of the test measuring core symptoms of autism suggest that they might meet clinical criteria for the **broad autism phenotype**.

The only section of the test in which the arrested children do not differ from controls is the one measuring resistance to and fear of change. The researchers say this may reflect less anxiety in these children than in most children with symptoms of autism. Because they are less anxious and more daring, they may be more likely to get into trouble.

A study published earlier this year by Norwegian researchers found that arrest rates are also higher in **people with pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified** than in those with more severe forms of autism. This may be because those who are less impaired are also less likely to be homebound, increasing the possibility of public meltdowns.

But the new study also offers some hope that intervention might prevent children like these from ending up in juvenile detention centers. Like the estimated **14-30 percent** of adult prisoners in the U.S. with serious mental illness, they need treatment, not **incarceration**.