

Institution: University of Bath		
Unit of Assessment: A4 Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
Title of case study: Shaping autism policy and practice in the criminal justice system		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Katie Maras	Senior Lecturer, previously Lecturer and Prize Fellow	April 2013 - present
Professor Mark Brosnan	Professor, previously Reader, Senior Lecturer and Lecturer	September 2002 - present
Dr Ailsa Russell	Reader, previously Senior Lecturer	June 2011 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Based on University of Bath research, Criminal Justice System policy and practice have improved to better support autistic people through:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Shaping the National Autistic Society (NAS) Best Practice Guidance 2017 and 2020; 2. Role-specific autism training for police officers, mandatory for 2,000 frontline staff since 2018; 3. Recommended national roll-out of role-specific police training by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism in 2019; 4. Informing custody suite design plans for a 24-cell trial at Keynsham Police Station in 2019, reducing adverse incidents during custody; 5. Developing alternative police interview models, now used by legal professionals to improve the reliability of evidence provided by autistic witnesses, victims and defendants; 6. Routine screening of autistic traits in suspected cyber-criminals by all Regional Offices of the National Crime Agency since 2019. 		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Autistic people are substantially overrepresented in all Criminal Justice System (CJS) populations, as witnesses, victims and defendants. For example, the National Autistic Society Careless Report (2014) identified that 49% of the 1,344 autistic individuals surveyed had been victims or perpetrators of crime. University of Bath research with autistic witnesses, victims and suspects, as well as police officers, has identified positive and negative aspects of lived experience within the CJS (including perceptions of any adjustments made) and how differences in autistic communication and cognition impact upon their testimony and the efficacy of questioning strategies. Large scale surveys of these groups, led by Maras between 2014 and 2016, identified the negative experiences of autistic people within the CJS emanating from difficulties in social communication, and the associated challenges faced by police officers carrying out their duties when this involved autistic people [1]. In particular, the autism community felt that police and other legal professionals often lack understanding about autism and fail to make appropriate adaptations to support their needs; at the same time, Maras showed that many police officers felt poorly equipped to work with autistic people. Indeed, just 37% of the 394 officers who took part in the research had received prior training on autism, despite 92%</p>		

feeling *role-specific* training was needed [1].

Issues identified as important by the autistic community largely related to a need for adjustments, especially in custody, and sensitivities around disclosure. For example, only one-third of autistic individuals disclosed their diagnosis to police/CJS professionals, due to fears that it would not make any difference to the support or adaptations that they received and might even result in negative perceptions and stigmatisation by police. Critically, however, Maras' subsequent experimental work conducted between 2018 and 2019 showed that, contrary to these concerns, knowledge of an individual's autism diagnosis actually results in more positive perceptions and judgements about autistic individuals – both as witnesses and defendants – thus highlighting the benefits of disclosure for the autism community, a process which is now supported through the role-specific training [2]. In contrast to beliefs widely-held by many, Bath research has also identified that while autistic traits are associated with a greater risk of committing cybercrime due to superior IT skills, a diagnosis of autism itself is associated with a *decreased* risk of committing cybercrime [3].

A related line of research between 2013 and 2014 has shown how current police interviewing techniques fail to support differences in the way that autistic people remember and recall events, therefore hindering their ability to provide reliable evidence [4]. This research demonstrated that the use of the 'gold standard' free recall and open questions in police interviews is particularly difficult for autistic individuals due to difficulties in social communication coupled with specific episodic memory difficulties. To address this, between 2015 and 2019, Maras and colleagues developed and empirically tested new witness-driven police interviewing techniques to enable autistic witnesses and victims to provide their best evidence within a legally appropriate framework. These include a novel *Witness-Aimed First Account* (WAFAs) interview model, whereby the witness self-segments the event at the outset into more manageable 'chunks' of information, which they then recall in detail piece-by-piece [5]. Maras has also developed techniques for probing for further information from witnesses, such as instructional support to optimise accuracy as well as specific frameworks for providing prompts to overcome difficulties with open questions and diagram-assisted questioning [6].

3. References to the research

1. Crane, L, Maras, KL, Hawken, T, Mulcahy, S & Memon, A 2016, 'Experiences of autism spectrum disorder and policing in England and Wales: surveying police and the autism community', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 46, pp. 2028-2041. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2729-1>
2. Maras, K, Marshall, I & Sands, C 2019, 'Mock juror perceptions of credibility and culpability in an autistic defendant', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 49, pp. 996-1010. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3803-7>
3. Payne, K-L, Russell, A, Mills, R, Maras, K, Rai, D & Brosnan, M 2019, 'Is there a relationship between cyber-dependent crime, autistic-like traits and autism?', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 49, pp. 4159-4169. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04119-5>
4. Maras, KL, Mulcahy, S, Memon, A, Picariello, F & Bowler, D 2014, 'Evaluating the effectiveness of the Self-Administered Interview© for witnesses with autism spectrum disorder', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 693-701. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.3055>
5. Maras, K, Dando, C, Stephenson, H, Lambrechts, A, Anns, S & Gaigg, S 2020, 'The Witness-Aimed First Account (WAFAs): A new technique for interviewing autistic witnesses and victims', *Autism*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 1449-1467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908986>

6. Norris, J, Crane, L & Maras, K 2020, 'Interviewing autistic adults: Adaptations to support recall in police, employment, and healthcare interviews', *Autism*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp. 1506-1520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320909174>

R1, R2, R3, R5 and R6 represent leading peer-reviewed autism journals detailing novel research paradigms for hard-to-reach populations within the criminal justice system for the first time.

Funding:

Maras, K. *Reporting by people with autism: A new evidence-based supportive model for information gathering in applied interview contexts*. ESRC Future Research Leaders award. 31 August 2017 – 29 February 2020. GBP223,644.

Brosnan, M., Russell, A. and Maras, K. *Cybercrime, autistic-like traits and autism*. Barclays Bank/ National Crime Agency. 1 September 2016 - 31 August, 2018. GBP109,000.

Maras, K. *The effect of working memory load on effective information filtering in autism spectrum disorder*. BA/Leverhulme small grant. 1 May 2015 – 30 April 2018. GBP9,262

4. Details of the impact

Maras' research has shaped local and national changes in training, policy and practice which has improved the experiences and outcomes of autistic people in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in the UK.

Informing best practice guidance and shaping strategy at the National Autistic Society

The National Autistic Society commented that "*Dr Maras' research has provided a crucial evidence-base for best practice by criminal justice system professionals when working with autistic people*" [A].

Maras' findings regarding interactions between autistic people and police [1], diagnosis disclosure [2], and effective interviewing techniques for autistic individuals [4-6] are directly translated into comprehensive best practice guidance in the National Autistic Society (NAS) Guidance for Criminal Justice Professionals, revised in 2017 [Ci] and 2020 [Cii]. The Guidance describes in detail how evidence-based techniques developed by Maras (including WAFA, sketching and diagram-assisted questioning [Cii, pp. 39-43]) can be applied for autistic interviewees [C]. As a result, Maras' interview techniques are being effectively utilised in the field, with CJS professionals finding them to be effective even when the interviewee has a learning disability and is very limited in free recall [I]. Every local UK police force has received a copy of the NAS Guidance and the online version has been downloaded over 4,000 times [A]; it is also currently being translated into different languages. The NAS Guide is referenced in the Independent Office for Police Conduct's July 2019 Learning the Lessons magazine [D, p.5] and the College of Policing's Authorised Professional Practice on mental health (revised in 2019) [E].

Maras' research regarding the experiences, treatment and outcomes of autistic people in the CJS has also provided an evidence base to inform NAS strategy more broadly. Indeed, over both policy and practice, the combined impact of Maras' work "*has been of enormous value politically*" enabling the National Autistic Society to "*focus our support, lobbying and influence where it is most needed*" [A].

Improving treatment of autistic individuals by Avon and Somerset Police

Avon and Somerset police stated that "*Findings from Dr Maras' research*" have been "*invaluable in providing evidence for best practice for our officers and have had an impact*

on the Criminal Justice system in improving the treatment of autistic people and the reliability and credibility of their evidence” [G].

Maras’ research led to *role-specific* online autism training for Avon and Somerset Police, comprising modules on first response, custody and interviewing. The training was co-produced in 2018 through active collaboration between Maras and Avon and Somerset Police, and is now mandatory for all of their frontline police staff (approximately 2,000 officers) [G]. The package is currently being reviewed by the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs Council. The content of the training is driven by Maras’ findings that have identified police training needs [1], the importance of diagnosis disclosure [2], and her research developing new interviewing techniques for autistic individuals [5, 6]. Evaluation data indicates that the 648 police officers who have completed the training demonstrated improvements in autism knowledge and awareness [G]. Consequent changes to practice as a result have been universally beneficial; for example, the Avon and Somerset Force Lead for Autism and Head of Policy for the National Police Autism Association highlighted the positive feedback they have received, for example that *“the insight it provides aids our necessary learning that approaches that are helpful for the neurodiverse are helpful for everyone”*. The training has also proven beneficial for supporting officers at an organisational level within the police service, such as in recruitment or promotion interviews, and has informed policy regarding autism-friendly policing [G]. Dorset Police, Devon and Cornwall Police, Essex Police and the Metropolitan Police Service are actively seeking to adopt the training for their forces [G].

In 2019 Maras’ research [1] has also informed the design plans for adapting custody suites and related processes at Avon and Somerset Police, including 24 cells at Keynsham Police Station, and 36 cells across Avon and Somerset [G]. Plans include ensuring that cells are autism-friendly (including soft muted wall colour in cells, controllable LED lighting, TVs in cells, clearer and more detailed explanation of procedures) and autism training for custody staff [F]. Whilst COVID-19 has resulted in delays in physical changes to all cells, adaptations to custody processes are underway. Indeed, as a result of Maras’ research [1], Avon and Somerset is the first Force in the UK to change Force policy to mandate (since February 2018) that all detainees who are known or suspected to be autistic are provided with an Appropriate Adult (whose role it is to act as a safeguard and provide independent support to any suspect deemed to be vulnerable) in custody [G].

Avon and Somerset Police Force’s Lead for Autism states: *“Findings from Dr Maras’ research have been of direct relevance for the training and adjustments we have made within our force to optimise how we work with autistic people... The knowledge, training and guidance that we have produced as a result of the research has been invaluable in improving the ways that ... incidents are handled” [G].*

Guidance for advocates in The Advocate’s Gateway toolkits

Maras’ research regarding best practice interviewing of autistic individuals feeds into detailed guidance in Toolkits for The Advocate’s Gateway [Ji; Jii]. The toolkits are used by solicitors and barristers across the UK. Since June 2016, downloads of the ‘Planning to question someone with an autism spectrum disorder’ and the ‘Memory and sensory issues in autism’ toolkits have exceeded 6,422 and 1,988 respectively [Jiii].

Screening for autistic traits by the National Crime Agency

Bath research has also changed police approaches to cybercrime and interviewing. Specifically, as a direct consequence of the research [3], suspects for cybercrime are now routinely screened for “autistic traits” by the National Crime Agency. The Senior Officer at the National Crime Agency states: *“Research at Bath has been invaluable in updating our intelligence regarding the role of autistic traits (not autism) in cyber-dependent crime...Our*

Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) now routinely screen for autistic traits at first contact with suspects [H].

Shaping National Policy

Maras' research has had a beneficial impact on the policy conversation and evolving strategy concerning the treatment of autistic individuals in the CJS. Maras was a member of the cross-government working group for the refresh of the 2014 Adult Autism Strategy and a witness on the 2019 Access to Justice inquiry session for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA), having been invited due to her research on the experiences of autistic people in the CJS and the efficacy of current police practice. Maras' evidence-based recommendations form part of a wider portfolio of recommendations and evidence referenced in the resulting report. For example, the report states: *"In the new autism strategy, the Government should commit to making autism training mandatory for all police officers... to require all new police recruits to undergo autism-specific training, as well as creating a programme for all existing officers to receive this training"* [B, p.47, 50]. The report also cites examples of the good practice that have been developed via her local collaboration with Avon and Somerset Police, including the mandatory provision of Appropriate Adults in all cases where autism is known or suspected [B, p.48].

Maras' work locally with Avon and Somerset Police on the design of autism-friendly custody suites has also been incorporated at a national level into the Home Office's 2019 National Custody Design Board Model [K].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[A] Testimonial: Criminal Justice System Manager, National Autistic Society, 23 November 2020.

[B] The National Autistic Society and All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA): *The Autism Act, 10 Years On: A Report from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism on understanding, services and support for autistic people and their families in England* (2019).

[C] *Autism: A Guide for Police Officers and Staff* (National Autistic Society) i) 2017 ii) 2020.

[D] *Learning the Lessons* magazine, *Custody*, Issue 35, July 2019.

www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/Learningthelessons/35/LearningtheLessons_Issue35_July_2019.pdf

[E] Screenshot of police webpage. *Mental Health, Mental Vulnerability and Illness*, 1 August 2019. www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/mental-health/mental-vulnerability-and-illness/#further-information

[F] Testimonial: Head of Criminal Justice, Avon & Somerset police, 26 November 2020.

[G] Testimonial: Force Lead for Autism, Avon and Somerset Police, 7 December 2020.

[H] Testimonial: Senior Officer, National Crime Agency, 22 September 2020.

[I] Testimonial: Registered Intermediary, Department of Justice, Northern Ireland, 24 November 2020.

[J] The Advocate's Gateway toolkit.

i) The Advocate's Gateway. Toolkit 3: Planning to question someone with an autism spectrum disorder including Asperger syndrome. 1 December 2016.

ii) The Advocate's Gateway. Toolkit 15: Witnesses and defendants with autism: Memory and sensory issues. 27 February 2015.

iii) Google Analytics data for Toolkit 3 (1 June 2016 – 3 May 2020): Planning to question someone with an autism spectrum disorder including Asperger syndrome and Toolkit 15: Witnesses and defendants with autism: Memory and sensory issues.

[K] Factual statement: Commercial Manager, Police and Fire Team, The Home Office, 17 December 2019.