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AN INVESTIGATION OF OFFENDING AMONG ADULTS WITH HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM OR ASPERGER SYNDROME

Summary

Whilst a number of published case studies have identified that some people with higher functioning autistic spectrum disorders are vulnerable to engaging in antisocial and violent behaviours, including behaviour that leads to contact with the criminal justice system, no systematic attempt has been made to investigate the factors that might increase vulnerability.

In order to investigate the factors which might be associated with an increased vulnerability, two groups of adults with higher functioning autistic spectrum disorders, i.e. high functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome, defined as 'ASD offenders' and 'ASD non-offenders' according to whether there was a history of offending, were recruited, and comparisons made on a number of factors related to the core clinical and cognitive characteristics of autistic spectrum disorders and associated mental health problems. Compared with their non-offending counterparts, the ASD offenders were more likely to show: (i) interests that were violent, with some exhibiting behaviours that were illegal in nature in order to fulfil their interests, (ii) a cognitive profile that included intellectual impairment, normal EF ability, normal theory of mind ability, and a selective impairment in the recognition of fear, and (iii) behavioural traits of ASPD.

At the end of this thesis it is argued that the results of this study favour the interpretation that, whilst a number of different factors are likely to contribute to offending among people with higher functioning ASDs, for some (i) characteristics of the circumscribed interests, and (ii) co-morbidity with traits of psychopathy, are associated with vulnerability to offending. The practice and policy implications are discussed.