Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Criminal Behavior

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a pervasive developmental disorder that is characterized by deficits in communication and social skills, cognitive rigidity, as well as a wide range of emotional and behavioral symptoms. The cognitive, social, and behavioral impairments of autism may make it difficult for some individuals with ASD to recognize the consequences of criminal behavior, which could increase the likelihood of committing a crime. The need for more research on the links between Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and criminal behavior has only grown in recent years. The limited empirical evidence that exists does not suggest a higher likelihood of violence or other criminal behavior in ASD than the general population.

Fast Facts

- Questions about the role of Asperger Syndrome (AS) in antisocial and criminal behavior go as far back as Asperger’s (1944) early observations on the likelihood of violence in a subset of children with AS.
- Although current evidence is inconclusive due to methodological limitations, individuals with AS and/or ASD diagnoses could be disproportionately represented in criminal justice settings.
- Individuals with ASD commit crimes for many different reasons with no single explanation fitting every situation.
- Links between ASD and criminal behavior are usually found in case studies, very small samples, or within specific subsamples of offenders (e.g., high-security psychiatric hospital).
- Individuals with ASD may be at an elevated risk for criminal behavior for several reasons including low levels of intelligence, poor school performance and attendance, ADHD symptoms, and a history of aggression.
- Limitations of previous research make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the link between ASD, specific diagnostic aspects of the spectrum, and different types of criminal offenses.
- A contributing factor to criminal behavior in individuals with ASD is cognitive difficulties, which includes restricted empathy, cognitive rigidity, and limited ability to contextualize social situations.
- Although there is no firm evidence that individuals with ASD are at an elevated risk for criminal behavior, the idea that ASD is disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system persists.
- Unfamiliarity with autism could result in certain behaviors being misinterpreted as criminal. This is complicated by the fact that individuals with autism have difficulty understanding how their actions impact others.

References