

Supporting incarcerated autistic individuals: evaluation of an autism awareness training for prison staff

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Abstract

Purpose – Prison environments are particularly challenging for autistic people experiencing incarceration due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of autism among prison staff. The study aimed to evaluate the level of satisfaction and perceived effectiveness of an autism awareness training for prison staff and to assess whether this training improves autism knowledge and reduces stigma towards autistic individuals in a prison setting.

Design/methodology/approach – The Autism Experience Circuit (AEC), an interactive autism awareness training, has been offered to prison staff. The training was evaluated through an online survey among 31 prison employees who participated in the AEC compared to a control group of 51 other staff members.

Findings – Results showed high satisfaction among AEC participants. They especially appreciated the interactive method. For most participants, the AEC led to increased knowledge and understanding of autism, as indicated by their assessment of goal achievement. A significant improvement in autism knowledge, but not in stigma towards autistic people, was found in the AEC group compared to the control group.

Originality/value – These findings suggest that an autism awareness training can be a valuable first step in making prisons more accommodating for autistic individuals, but additional strategies are necessary to address stigma effectively.

Keywords Autism, Prison, Autism knowledge, Autism awareness, Stigma

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Interest in the intersection of autism and the prison system has grown in recent years; however, research of good quality in this area remains limited (Collins *et al.*, 2023; Cooper *et al.*, 2022). Autism can be conceptualized from multiple perspectives. From a biomedical viewpoint, it is typically classified as a developmental disorder characterized by impairments in social communication and interaction, alongside restricted and repetitive behaviours and focused interests (APA, 2022). More recently, autism has been framed through the lens of neurodiversity, which views autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other conditions as natural variations of human cognition and behaviour rather than disorders. The neurodiversity movement advocates accepting diversity as the norm and creating an inclusive society for all neurotypes (Kapp, 2020). Within this framework, the term autism is preferred over autism spectrum disorder. Within the autistic community, the majority of autistic individuals in Anglophone contexts prefer identity-first language (e.g. “autistic people”) rather than person-first language (e.g. “people with autism”) (Keates *et al.*, 2024).

Estimates of autism prevalence within prison populations vary considerably. Studies generally indicate that autistic people appear to be overrepresented in prison populations (Chester *et al.*, 2025), relative to general population prevalence estimates (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022). In two

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international studies, the prevalence of autism in prison is estimated at 5%–10% (Billstedt *et al.*, 2017; McCarthy *et al.*, 2015), with even higher rates observed in more specialized settings, such as forensic psychiatric centres (Chester *et al.*, 2025). In addition, a substantial proportion of autistic persons who are incarcerated are likely undiagnosed (Ashworth, 2016; King and Murphy, 2014). Many autistic persons also have additional conditions or mental health issues, such as ADHD, depression, anxiety or trauma-related problems (Lai *et al.*, 2019). Although case reports sometimes suggest otherwise (e.g. Kohn *et al.*, 1998; Schwartz-Watts, 2005), it is a misconception that there is a direct causal link between autism and criminal behaviour (Blackmore *et al.*, 2022; Dell'Osso *et al.*, 2024; Newman and Ghaziuddin, 2008). When autistic individuals do engage in criminal behaviour, additional mental health problems and other vulnerability factors, such as personality traits, traumatic experiences, social exclusion and stigma, play an important role. Notably, autistic people do have a higher chance of becoming victims of crime or violence (Del Pozzo *et al.*, 2018; Gibbs *et al.*, 2023). Several hypotheses may explain the relatively high prevalence of autism within prison populations. These include increased vulnerability during police interrogations, difficulties in asserting legal rights, the possibility of harsher sentencing, or the absence of autism-specific forensic rehabilitation programs (Chester *et al.*, 2025). Together, these elements highlight the systemic barriers that autistic individuals may encounter throughout the criminal justice process.

Autism manifests itself in different ways, complicating recognition by prison staff. In addition, misconceptions and prejudices about autism are prevalent within the prison context. However, identifying individuals with specific needs is important to provide appropriate support when necessary (Ashworth, 2016; Slavny-Cross *et al.*, 2022). The limited research on incarcerated, autistic individuals indicates that their experiences with confinement vary, although experiences are predominantly negative. Challenges are particularly evident in sensory processing, adherence to routines, communication and social interaction (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2022; Holloway *et al.*, 2020; Newman *et al.*, 2015; Vinter *et al.*, 2020). Many autistic individuals are hypersensitive to certain sensory stimuli (Crane *et al.*, 2009; Taels *et al.*, 2023). The sensory environment of prison, characterized by loud, unpredictable noises, bright artificial lighting and invasive tactile procedures such as pat-down searches, can be highly distressing (Holloway *et al.*, 2020). Some autistic individuals appreciate the structured routines of prison life (Helverschou *et al.*, 2018), but disruptions of institutional routines or difficulties in maintaining personal routines often generate significant stress (Cooper *et al.*, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2015). Communication difficulties further exacerbate these challenges. Incarcerated autistic individuals frequently report unclear instructions, limited information about changes, and a lack of written or visual schedules for daily activities or rules. Ambiguous language, open-ended questioning and prison-specific jargon can result in confusion and anxiety (Holloway *et al.*, 2020). These communication barriers can make it difficult for incarcerated autistic individuals to express their needs and concerns. The social environment of prisons poses additional challenges. The absence of privacy – a common issue for all people experiencing incarceration – is particularly challenging for autistic individuals, who often need solitary time for regulation (Holloway *et al.*, 2020). Misunderstandings of autistic behaviours can lead to conflict, social isolation or abuse (Newman *et al.*, 2015; Paterson, 2008). These vulnerabilities are closely linked to insufficient autism knowledge and awareness among prison staff (Allely, 2015; Allen *et al.*, 2008; Slokan and Ioannou, 2021). It is important to note that prison environments vary considerably across countries and even across institutions, both in how autism is understood and in the degree to which autism specific supports are implemented. The challenges described here, therefore, do not apply uniformly to all prison systems.

Autistic people are often unidentified, unsupported and disadvantaged by standard processes and procedures in prison. Policy frameworks, therefore, emphasize better screening and identification, reasonable adjustments and staff training (Chadwick, 2025). Reasonable accommodations refer to context-specific modifications that enable persons

with disabilities, including autistic individuals, to exercise their rights on an equal basis with others, provided these adjustments do not create a disproportionate burden for the responsible party (United Nations, 2006). In correctional settings, reasonable accommodations refer to legally required modifications or supports that ensure prisoners with disabilities have equal access to prison programs, services, communication and living conditions. Based on evidence of challenges autistic people in prison face (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2022; Holloway *et al.*, 2020; Newman *et al.*, 2015; Vinter *et al.*, 2020), reasonable accommodations may include, for example, sensory and environmental adjustments, communication supports, and adaptations in programs and services. Research highlights a low baseline autism knowledge among prison staff, and calls for more structured training to raise awareness and foster understanding of autism (Slokan and Ioannou, 2021). Awareness and knowledge of autism among staff are important to enable understanding and implementation of reasonable adjustments. Two previous studies (Ashworth and Tully, 2017; Murphy and Broyd, 2019) evaluated an autism awareness training in forensic settings, showing an improvement in staff knowledge and confidence, but they also highlight structural limitations: training is often too short, insufficiently attended and lacking in depth (e.g. case discussion, practical application).

Both within the prison system and in broader society, autistic individuals and their families often experience stigma, encompassing ignorance, negative attitudes, prejudices and discrimination (Thorncroft *et al.*, 2007). Stigma can lead autistic individuals to camouflage their autism characteristics, which in turn negatively impacts their well-being (Han *et al.*, 2021; Turnock *et al.*, 2022). Studies in the general population have consistently shown that a lack of knowledge and familiarity with autism is associated with higher levels of stigma. Stereotypical and negative perceptions of autistic people often stem from misinformation or ignorance (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2015; Han *et al.*, 2021). Conversely, increasing accurate knowledge about autism improves understanding and fosters more positive attitudes (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2015; Ha *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, enhancing autism knowledge among prison staff could be a crucial step towards reducing stigma and fostering a more supportive environment for autistic individuals. An initial step in this process is implementing an autism awareness training, which has the potential to shift attitudes and promote more inclusive practices.

The present study aimed to evaluate whether an autism awareness training for prison staff improves autism knowledge and reduces stigma towards autistic individuals in a prison setting. Prison employees participated in a single-session workshop called the Autism Experience Circuit (AEC), which consists of several activities designed to simulate aspects of autistic experiences (www.autisme.be). The AEC differs substantially from previous autism awareness trainings in forensic settings (Ashworth and Tully, 2017; Murphy and Broyd, 2019). AEC mainly differs pedagogically by offering multisensory and emotionally immersive learning and embodied perspective taking, which prioritizes empathy and reflective insight, whereas other trainings often rely on more cognitive learning focused on the transfer of knowledge. There is a broader movement towards using lived experience and experiential activities (e.g. virtual reality simulations, testimonies, role play) to inform autism training, including in prisons. Vinter (2025) describes recommendations for staff training in prisons that explicitly incorporate the voices and experiences of autistic people, arguing that this approach can deepen understanding of distress, sensory overload and institutional barriers.

The study addressed three research questions:

- RQ1. Participant satisfaction: How satisfied (i.e. participants' subjective evaluation of the overall experience of the training) were participants with the AEC in the prison context?
- RQ2. Perceived effectiveness: To what extent did participants consider the AEC to have achieved the intended objectives regarding autism knowledge, understanding of, and views on autism?

RQ3. Measured outcomes: Did participation in the AEC lead to measurable improvements in autism knowledge and reductions in stigma towards autistic people?

Method

Participants

Of the 58 prison employees who participated in the AEC, 32 employees (55%) agreed to take part in the research study. An online questionnaire study was conducted among the employees who participated in the AEC (AEC group; $n=32$) and employees from other prisons in Belgium who did not participate in the AEC (control group; $n=51$). One of the participants in the AEC group only filled out the survey of the pre-test and not the post-test and was therefore excluded from the analyses. The distribution of job functions differed slightly between the AEC and control group ($X^2=8.31$, $p=0.04$). Otherwise, they were comparable in terms of years of work experience in prison, and the nature and frequency of contact with autistic people. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of both groups.

Autism experience circuit

AEC was offered five times voluntarily to the staff of a prison in Belgium. Each time, a maximum of 12 participants took part in the AEC. The AEC was delivered in person at the participating prison. This one-time workshop of 3 h comprised 10 experiential activities designed to simulate how autistic people may experience certain situations (see Supplementary Materials for more information on the activities). The activities relate to, for example, experiencing sensory overstimulation, dealing with uncertainty or dealing with unclear communication. After each activity, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and discuss the potential implications for interacting with autistic people.

Table 1 Composition of the samples in the survey study

	AEC group (n = 31)		Control group (n = 51)		X ²	p
Characteristics	n	%	n	%		
<i>Function in prison</i>						
Guard	2	6	0	0	8.31	0.04
Employee care team / psychosocial or medical services	13	42	16	31		
Employee external services ^a	13	42	34	67		
Other	3	10	1	2		
<i>Years of work experience in prison</i>						
< 1 year	5	16	3	6	6.09	0.19
1–2 years	4	13	9	18		
3–5 years	2	7	12	23		
6–10 years	6	19	8	16		
> 10 years	14	45	19	37		
<i>Contact with autistic people</i>						
None	0	0	0	0	0.30	0.86
Only in private context	3	10	7	14		
Only in professional context	13	42	20	39		
In private + professional contexts	15	48	24	47		
<i>Frequency of contact with autistic people</i>						
Daily	7	23	9	18	3.18	0.53
Weekly	11	35	13	26		
Monthly	8	26	15	29		
Less than monthly	5	16	14	27		
Note(s): ^a Services regarding e.g. education, employment, health, culture, sport						

Theoretical explanations based on theories about different information processing, including predictive coding accounts (Van de Cruys *et al.*, 2014; Vermeulen, 2022), accompanied the exercises, along with practical tips to create autism-friendly environments. The AEC was given by one of the developers of the program. The aim of using AEC in prison is to increase knowledge about autism, to create more understanding for autistic people, and to gain a broader and more positive view of autism. At the end of the AEC, participants received a pocket booklet containing autism-friendly tips and key takeaways.

Survey

The online survey consisted of the following components: (1) background information (11 items, pre-test only): this section gathered demographic and professional details, including years of experience, job function and contact with autistic individuals; (2) knowledge about autism (19 items, pre- and post-test): a translated and adapted version of the Participatory Autism Knowledge – Measure (PAK-M; Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2022). The PAK-M was developed and translated in collaboration with autistic individuals. In the PAK-M, 19 statements about autism are presented to the participants, and they have to indicate on a five-point scale whether they agree with the statement (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree). Examples of statements are: “Autistic people are generally disinterested in making friends” or “Many autistic people have trouble tolerating loud noises or certain types of touch”. The higher the total score, the greater their knowledge about autism. The internal consistency of the PAK-M in this sample is reasonable (pre-test: $\alpha = 0.68$; post-test: $\alpha = 0.70$); (3) stigma towards autistic individuals (9 items, pre- and post-test): a translated and adapted version of the Autism Acceptance Scale (AAS; Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2022). The AAS was also developed and translated in collaboration with autistic people. The AAS consists of 9 statements that require the person to indicate to what extent they agree on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. Examples of statements are: “I would be willing to make friends with an autistic person” or “I would be willing to have an autistic boss”. All items were recoded; in this way, a higher score indicates more stigma towards autistic people. The AAS assesses general attitudes towards autistic individuals and does not contain items tailored to the prison environment or to staff–prisoner dynamics. The internal consistency of the AAS in this sample is good (pre- and post-test: $\alpha = 0.90$); (4) satisfaction with the AEC and achieved goals (7 items, post-test for AEC group only): this section included questions about the participants’ subjective evaluation regarding the experiential activities, the theoretical explanation and group discussions (on a 10-point scale) and the extent to which the AEC met its objectives in improving autism knowledge, understanding and attitudes (on a 3-point scale).

Procedure

The study was approved by the Social and Societal Ethics Committee of KU Leuven (GDPR and ethical review; G-2022–544). After registration for the AEC, the employees received an e-mail with a brief explanation of the study and a request to participate. Around the same period, an e-mail was sent to employees of other prisons in Flanders asking them to participate in the study (without following the AEC). The e-mail for both groups contained a link to a page with the information letter and the informed consent form. Upon providing online consent, participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics at two time points (pre- and post-test) with an interval of approximately 3 weeks. The control group did not follow the AEC or an alternative intervention in the meantime. For the participants in the AEC group, the survey was administered two weeks before the AEC and one week after the AEC. A two-way mixed ANOVA was used to compare pre-test and post-test scores between the AEC and control groups, examining changes in knowledge and stigma. In addition, satisfaction and perceived effectiveness were analysed descriptively.

Data-analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of the quantitative questions regarding satisfaction and perceived effectiveness. The open questions were analysed thematically. To compare the scores on the questionnaires (PAK-M and AAS) of the pre- and post-measurement between the AEC group and the control group, two-way mixed ANOVAs were used with time as within-subjects factor and group as between-subjects factor. The assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variances and covariances were met.

Results

Autism experience circuit: participant satisfaction

The participants in the AEC group expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program. They rated the experience activities, the explanation and the opportunities to ask questions an average of 9 out of 10. In response to an open-ended question about their positive experiences, participants highlighted the interesting and interactive experience activities, the clarity of the explanations, and the valuable exchange of experiences with colleagues:

Participant A: "I will remember AEC better than other courses".

Participant B: "Doing things yourself is a very good method to experience important aspects of autism in a short time".

While most participants did not suggest any improvements, some mentioned the need for more attention to the translation of tips to the prison context, as a possible point for enhancement:

Participant C: "More room can be created within the AEC for the exchange of experiences in prison".

Autism experience circuit: perceived effectiveness

Participants were asked to what extent they estimated that the AEC had contributed to their knowledge of autism, their understanding of autistic people, and their views on autistic people.

The majority of participants reported improvements in their autism knowledge (77%) and their understanding of autistic individuals (84%). In addition, about half of the participants (52%) indicated that the AEC contributed to a more positive perception of autism (see [Figure 1](#)):

Participant D: "I can now imagine how frustrating some aspects of prison life can be for autistic people".

Participant E: "I now notice that there is a lot of noise in prison. Because of all these stimuli, it is possible that people do not understand my message properly".

Participant F: "If something deviates from a routine, it can be very confusing".

Participant G: "I will now take more things into account when I work with autistic people".

Autism experience circuit: effect on knowledge and stigma

Furthermore, we compared the results of the questionnaires on knowledge about autism (Participatory Autism Knowledge – Measure; PAK-M) and stigma towards autistic people (Autism Acceptance Scale; AAS) between the AEC group and the control group to measure the program's impact objectively. A two-way mixed ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect with a medium effect size between group and time on the PAK-M [$F_{(1,80)} = 5.36$, $p = 0.02$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$; 95% confidence interval: 0.00–0.18; Cohen's $f = 0.23$] (see

Figure 1 Assessment of goal achievement by the participants of the AEC ($n = 31$)

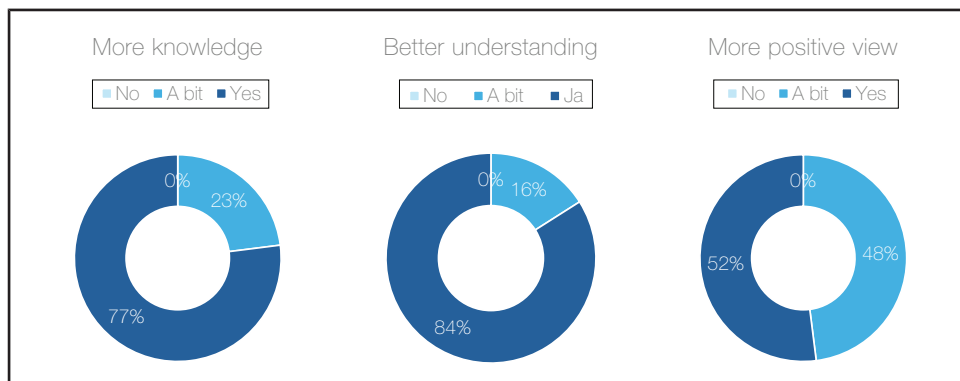
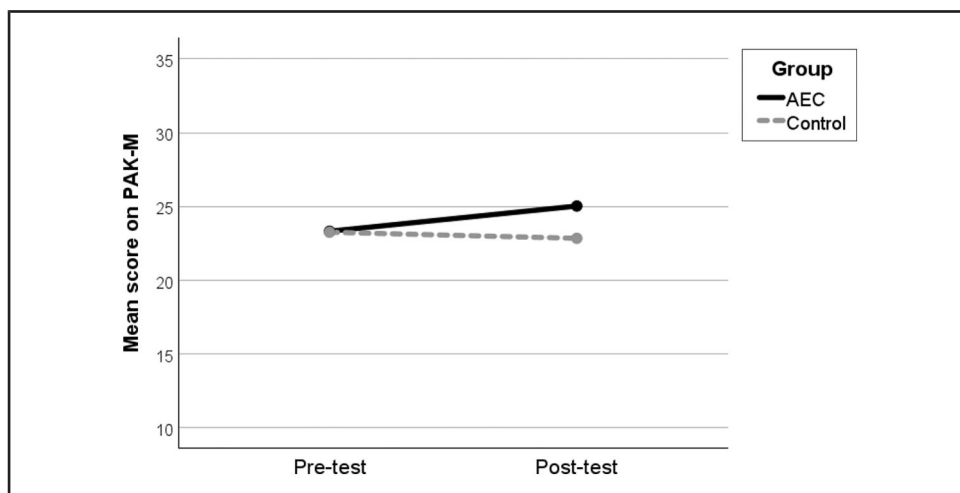


Figure 2). A higher score on the PAK-M indicates more knowledge about autism. Participants from the AEC group and control group achieved a comparable average score on the PAK-M during the pre-test [AEC group: $M = 23.32$, $SD = 5.35$; control group: $M = 23.25$, $SD = 5.10$; $F_{(1,80)} = 0.003$, $p = 0.96$]. At post-test, the AEC group showed a significant improvement in knowledge [$M = 25.03$, $SD = 5.45$; $F_{(1,80)} = 5.60$, $p = 0.02$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$; 95% confidence interval: 0.00–0.19; Cohen's $f = 0.23$], while the control group's scores remained stable [$M = 22.83$, $SD = 5.13$; $F_{(1,80)} = 0.53$, $p = 0.47$]. This indicates that participation in the AEC led to a significant increase in autism knowledge.

To control for the differences in functional role between the groups, a co-variate adjusted model was run, showing comparable results, with a non-significant functional role and time interaction [$F_{(1,79)} = 1.16$, $p = 0.29$] and a significant group and time interaction on the PAK-M [$F_{(1,79)} = 6.30$, $p = 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.07$; 95% confidence interval: 0.00–0.18; Cohen's $f = 0.26$].

The same analysis was performed on the data from the questionnaire on stigma. In contrast, the interaction effect between time and group was not significant for the AAS [$F_{(1,80)} = 0.72$, $p = 0.40$]. A higher score on the AAS indicates more stigma towards autistic people. Although the mean score on AAS in the AEC group decreased slightly at post-test, this change was not statistically significant. A significant negative correlation was found between the two outcome measures, the PAK-M and the AAS, both at pre-test ($r = -0.32$,

Figure 2 Effect of the AEC on autism knowledge measured with the PAK-M in the AEC group ($n = 31$) and the control group ($n = 51$)



$p = 0.002$) and post-test ($r = -0.28$, $p = 0.008$). This suggests that higher levels of autism knowledge are associated with lower levels of stigma towards autistic individuals.

Discussion

This study evaluated the impact of the AEC, an autism awareness training, for prison staff. The training was designed to enhance autism knowledge, foster greater understanding, and promote more positive perceptions of autistic individuals. Our findings indicate that even a single training session can yield beneficial effects, as participants demonstrated increased knowledge about autism after the session. The observed gains in autism knowledge align closely with the session's proposed learning mechanisms and are confirmed by the testimonies of the participants. By engaging participants in embodied perspective-taking activities, the session translated abstract concepts about autistic experience into concrete, first-person insights, which likely enhanced comprehension. Such autism knowledge acquisition is crucial, as it has been linked to reductions in stigma and improvements in attitudes towards autistic individuals (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2015; Ha *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, we did not observe a significant effect of the training on stigma itself. However, consistent with previous research (Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2015; Ha *et al.*, 2021), we observed a significant association between greater autism knowledge and reduced stigma in our sample. To our knowledge, this is the first study to evaluate an intervention of this kind in a prison context. As this study was conducted in Belgium, the findings must be understood within this national context, where autism specific prison policies are still emerging, and relevant legislation primarily stems from broader disability frameworks, such as Belgium's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, rather than prison-specific autism statutes. Previously evaluated interventions outside the prison context designed to improve autism knowledge and/or reduce stigma have typically relied on online or in-person educational formats (Kim *et al.*, 2024), without incorporating a live simulation element, although some studies have used augmented or virtual reality to simulate autistic perception or social interactions (Sarge *et al.*, 2020; Tsujita *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies have consistently shown a positive effect of interventions on autism knowledge (e.g. Gillespie-Lynch *et al.*, 2022; Ha *et al.*, 2022), but interventions aimed at reducing stigma have yielded rather mixed results (Kim *et al.*, 2024).

The AEC immerses participants in various challenges commonly experienced by autistic individuals, such as difficulties with uncertainty and sensory processing. This experiential approach may facilitate a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of autistic individuals. However, the training's impact on stigma reduction was more evident in participants' subjective perceptions rather than in objective measures of attitudes towards autistic individuals. The limited effect on stigma may be explained by several factors. First, stigma was assessed through self-report questionnaires measuring explicit attitudes, which may have been susceptible to socially desirable responses (Michaels and Corrigan, 2013). Moreover, the AAS assesses general attitudes towards autistic individuals and does not capture prison-specific forms of stigma (e.g. perceptions related to compliance, institutional behaviour or security concerns), which may limit its sensitivity to context-dependent attitudes among prison staff. Second, a single session may be insufficient to shift stigma, as meaningful attitude change typically requires repeated contact, extended exposure or ongoing reflection, rather than a one-off experience. Moreover, stigma was measured in a short time window after the session. Third, the AEC primarily highlights the challenges faced by autistic individuals, with less emphasis on their strengths and positive attributes. In addition to an increase in awareness, feelings of understanding and empathy, this can also lead to discomfort and anxiety (Ma and Mak, 2022). Fourth, the training was facilitated by non-autistic professionals. Prior evidence suggests that direct involvement of autistic individuals, through personal narratives or co-facilitation, can be particularly effective in reducing stigma (Gardiner and Iarocci, 2014; Kim, 2022). Involving (former) incarcerated,

autistic individuals could enhance the effectiveness of such a training. Notably, the AEC program has recently been revised to include an autistic co-presenter, which may strengthen its capacity to influence attitudes.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. Participation was voluntary, raising the possibility of selection bias: those who attended may have had a pre-existing interest in autism, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results. Further studies using experimental designs with random assignment are needed to establish causal effects more robustly. While we observed differences in the functional roles of participants between the AEC and control groups, additional analyses revealed no significant differences in outcome measures across these function groups. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the observed short-term gains in autism knowledge persist over time or translate into meaningful changes in the interactions between staff and incarcerated autistic people. Longitudinal studies and studies with experiences of incarcerated autistic people as outcome measures are therefore warranted. It is also important to note that findings of the present study reflect the specific context of Belgian prisons, where autism related policy and support structures are still developing. For example, in the UK, several prisons have obtained National Autistic Society (NAS) accreditation, and neurodiversity support managers have recently been introduced, illustrating how approaches to supporting autistic prisoners can differ across jurisdictions.

Adapting the prison environment for autistic individuals

Consistent with recent work in high secure psychiatric care (Murphy *et al.*, 2026), which has shown that increased autism knowledge among staff does not necessarily translate into better lived experiences for autistic individuals, our findings highlight that staff training must be complemented by broader organizational and structural changes. Potential strategies include targeted staff training (i.e. contextualized to the prison setting and role-specific, tailored to the demands of particular prison functions), modifications to infrastructure, tailored activities and the use of adapted communication strategies. In addition, providing targeted, individualized support where needed is essential. Actively involving autistic individuals, including those with lived experience of incarceration, in the development of these materials and measures can ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Beyond the active involvement of autistic individuals, stigma reduction may be enhanced by adding strength-based training components, increasing meaningful contact-based interventions (e.g. facilitated dialogue with autistic advocates) (Thornicroft *et al.*, 2022), embedding reflection on institutional culture and integrating ongoing supervision that helps staff challenge assumptions (Byrd and Scott, 2024), and stimulating a positive diversity climate in general (Vogus and Taylor, 2018). Training alone is unlikely to shift stigma without broader organizational change, including structural adaptations, leadership commitment and reinforcement through policy. Organizational efforts are needed to embed neurodiversity inclusive values into daily practice. Moreover, reducing autism stigma requires broader societal shifts in how autism is perceived. Promoting inclusion and fostering meaningful interactions between autistic and non-autistic individuals can help dismantle barriers and reduce prejudice. By cultivating a more informed and accepting society, we can create a supportive and inclusive environment for autistic individuals, both within and beyond the prison system.

Conclusion

Offering an autism awareness training can be a valuable first step in adapting prison environments to better meet the needs of autistic people. The present study demonstrated a positive (perceived) effect of a single-session intervention on autism knowledge and understanding. However, reducing stigma towards autism will require complementary strategies, including the active involvement of autistic individuals and sustained organizational change.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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