

Disability Royal Commission  
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By email: [DRCEnquiries@royalcommission.gov.au](mailto:DRCEnquiries@royalcommission.gov.au)

26 November 2021

Dear Commissioners,

**Ideas to improve interactions between autistic people and the criminal justice system.**

Amaze works to build community understanding of autism, influence policy change for autistic people and provide independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, government and the wider community. We are closely connected with the autistic community through our national help line Autism Connect, our peer support networks and community capacity building initiatives.

We congratulate the Royal Commission on its hearings and research to build an understanding of, and improve interactions between, people with disability and the criminal justice system. As you are aware, autistic people are over-represented in the criminal justice system and continue to experience a lack of understanding and support when engaging with police, courts and the prison system.

In 2020, the Australian Autism Alliance conducted the largest and most comprehensive consultation survey of autistic people and their carers to date, with almost 4000 responses received. Over one-third (33.4%) of autistic adult respondents reported that they had been involved in the criminal justice system (as a victim, witness or accused). Knowledge and understanding of autism across police, courts and prisons about autism was rated as 'poor' by most autistic respondents (65.4%). It was rated as 'good' or 'ok' by 12.4% of respondents, with 22.2% responding that they were 'unsure'.

**Amaze recently provided the attached submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System*.** We are pleased to share it with you to help build your understanding of the experiences of autistic people in the justice system and how they may be improved. It highlights the vulnerabilities and intersecting disadvantages experienced by autistic people, the lack of autism understanding and co-ordinated supports across the justice system, poor screening and data collection, inaccessible environments (including courtroom and prison environments) and the absence of autism friendly pathways and therapeutic facilities.

Our submission also highlights a recent **major international global initiative** led by the Global Autism and Criminal Justice System Consortium (GACJSC), funded by the International Society of Autism Research, **to develop a best practice framework** for states to divert autistic people from involvement in the criminal justice system and appropriately support autistic people who are accused and/or found guilty of a crime. The GACJSC is an international consortium comprising researchers, criminal justice professionals, autistic people and their families. Their study has been informed a systematic review of international evidence and a survey of over 3000 key stakeholders from 10 nations. Survey results and the systematic review will form the basis of a policy brief which is expected to be published by the end of this year. Once available, we would encourage you to invite a representative from the Consortium to share its findings and recommendations with the Commission.

**Amaze calls for the following key measures to be developed and implemented in co-design with autistic people, their families and carers:**

1. **An overarching autism and justice strategy to support autistic people who encounter the criminal justice system.** The strategy should be informed by the GACJSC and cover: autistic victims, witnesses and alleged offenders; diversions from involvement in the criminal justice system; and accessibility, supports and support systems across the entire justice system (including police, courts and corrections).
2. **Systematic screening and data collection for autism/cognitive disability.** This should apply to each stage of the criminal justice system (including police, courts and prison).

3. **Autism accessible courts.** This should include staff training, a Code of Practice for supporting autistic people attending court, accessible information and resources, and a guideline for creating autism accessible court rooms.
4. **Autism accessible prisons and therapeutic pathways.** This should include an autism accreditation program to support a consistent, comprehensive and transparent approach to supporting autistic people in prison.

We trust this submission will be helpful in building your understanding of the systemic changes needed to improve the lives of autistic people that interact with the criminal justice system.

We would also take this opportunity to note that the National Autistic Society (UK) recently held a '**Conference on autism, learning disabilities and the criminal justice system**'. Detailed, evidence based presentations informed by lived experience are now publicly available (at <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/professional-development/past-conferences/criminal-justice-conference>). Topics include women with autism in forensic settings, preventing autistic teens and young adults from returning to the criminal justice system, tools for supporting communication with young autistic offenders and developing best practice to support autistic people in secure psychiatric care.

Please contact me by email at [Nicole.rees@amaze.org.au](mailto:Nicole.rees@amaze.org.au) if you have any questions or would like further information. We would also be pleased to attend any future public hearings on these matters.

Yours sincerely,



Nicole Rees  
Deputy CEO | Executive Manager, Policy & Advocacy.