



# The Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism's (SASLA) response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

## 5. What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

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### **The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)**

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum.

**[autismcrc.com.au](http://autismcrc.com.au)**

## The Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) established the Longitudinal Study of Australian School Leavers with Autism (SASLA) in 2014. The aim of this project is to provide a comprehensive profile of young Australian adults on the autism spectrum. The young people participating in SASLA span the breadth of the target age range (15 to 25 years,  $n = 142$  autistic individuals and  $n = 222$  non-autistic participants) and represent a wide range of locations across Australia. To see a full cross-sectional profile of the Australian sample (without intellectual disability) please see the snapshot [here](#).

The SASLA study is an online survey-based project, which follows young people over a 2-year period. Data collection for the baseline survey commenced in 2015, recruiting across three populations:



### The Victorian sample

The transition between adolescence and adulthood is an important and difficult milestone for all young people. We have isolated the Victorian sample from our wider study. Participants included 38 young autistic adults (mean age = 19.18 years; average age of autism diagnosis 9.62 years), 36 parents/carers of young autistic adults (mean age = 50.69 years,) and a comparative group of 153 non-autistic young adults (mean age = 17.91 years). Among the young autistic adults, 91.2% had received interventions or support for their social and communication difficulties or autism spectrum disorder including: early intervention, ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), an integration aid in primary or high school and other supports.

### Prevalence

To understand the drivers behind the Victorian autistic community's experience of poor mental health outcomes it is necessary to see the extent to which poor mental health affects these young people and their families and where better supports may be required. Participants (young people/ parents) were asked "What conditions do you (or your child) currently have? Please select all

which are applicable for you, you can choose more than one". The percentage of participants currently experiencing Anxiety, Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)/Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) are in Table 1.

**Table 1: Prevalence of mental health conditions reported.**

Condition	Autistic report	Parent/carer report	Non-autistic report
Anxiety	91.2%	33.3%	23.6%
Depression	23.7%	8.3%	11.2%
Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	11.1%	8.3%	4.2%
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)	8.3%	11.1%	1.4%

While high levels of anxiety and depression were reported by the non-autistic participants, the autistic sample far eclipsed them. Anxiety was the most prevalent mental health condition experienced by both groups, with almost all autistic participants self-reporting anxiety. The autistic sample also reported high levels of depression, OCD and ADHD/ADD. While there is family membership overlap between autistic young people and parents/carers they are not matched. Parents/carers and young people reported similarly high rates of OCD and ADHD/ADD. However there was a considerable disparity between self-reported anxiety and depression and parent-reported rates of these.

Poor sleep is associated with poor mental health and can be a predictor of its onset. With regard to reported sleep difficulties, 63.3% of Victorian young autistic adults and 58.8% of non-autistic participants reported poor sleep quality.

Thus, the young adults in our study had worrying levels of mental health concerns, but the autistic young people were of particular concern across all conditions, especially self-reported anxiety.

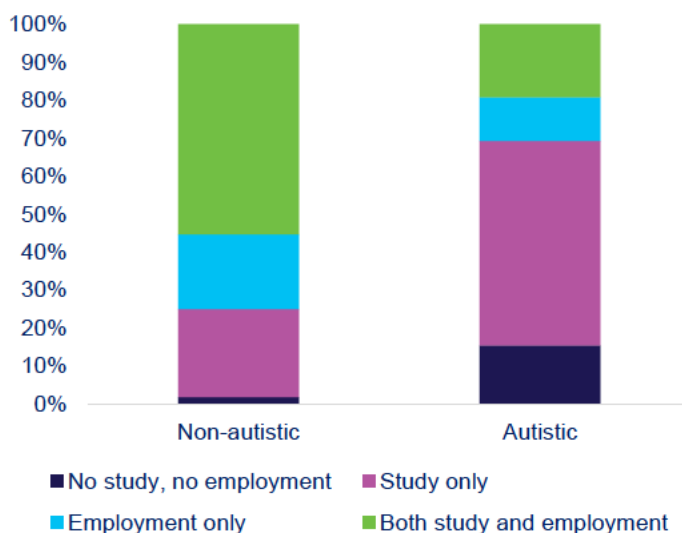
Poor mental health negatively impacts community participation, social inclusion, education and employment.

### Post School Activities

There were 82 participants in the Victorian sample who reported that they had already left high school (autistic n = 26, non-autistic n = 56). Of this number only 32.0% of autistic young adults reported being employed in comparison to 75.0% of non-autistic participants. This is lower than the national average for employment for autistic individuals, which is 40.8% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). We know that unemployment can have multidimensional impacts on autistic individuals, including financial hardship, social exclusion and isolation, increased mental health problems and reduced quality of life and well-being (Howlin, 2013; Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004).

In the Victorian SASLA sample, we also found that autistic participants were less likely to be engaged in study, be employed, or to be juggling both study and employment at the same time (Figure 1). This aligns with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2015), which indicates that autistic individuals are less likely than non-autistic individuals to complete a university course or be employed. Barriers to participation in both of these activities may be worsening mental health outcomes among this population, or mental health may be a barrier to participation.

Figure 1: Post High School Activity Participation



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## References

Howlin, P. (2013). Social disadvantage and exclusion: Adults with autism lag far behind in employment prospects. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 52*, 897-899.

Howlin, P., Goode, S., Hutton, J., & Rutter, M. (2004). Adult outcome for children with autism. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines, 45*, 212229.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). 4430.0: *Autism in Australia*, 205 [Press release].

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The Autism CRC would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Royal Commissioners this or other research related to the mental health of the autistic population in Australia.





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