

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON AUTISTIC ADULTS: A SCOPING REVIEW

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Objective

Synthesise evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Autistic adults using a systematic scoping review

Research questions

1. What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Autistic adults?
2. Which individual and/or contextual factors during the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with a more positive outcome for Autistic adults?

Method

- Literature search in PubMed, EMBASE, CINAHL, Psycinfo and Science Citation Index, and all major autism-related journals (e.g., Autism)
- Search terms: [1] COVID-19 OR coronavirus OR SARSCoV-2 OR pandemic AND [2] autism* OR developmental disorder AND [3] adult

Selection of eligible reports

Identification

Records identified in May 2022 from databases (n = 2370) and autism-related journals (n = 137)

Abstract screening

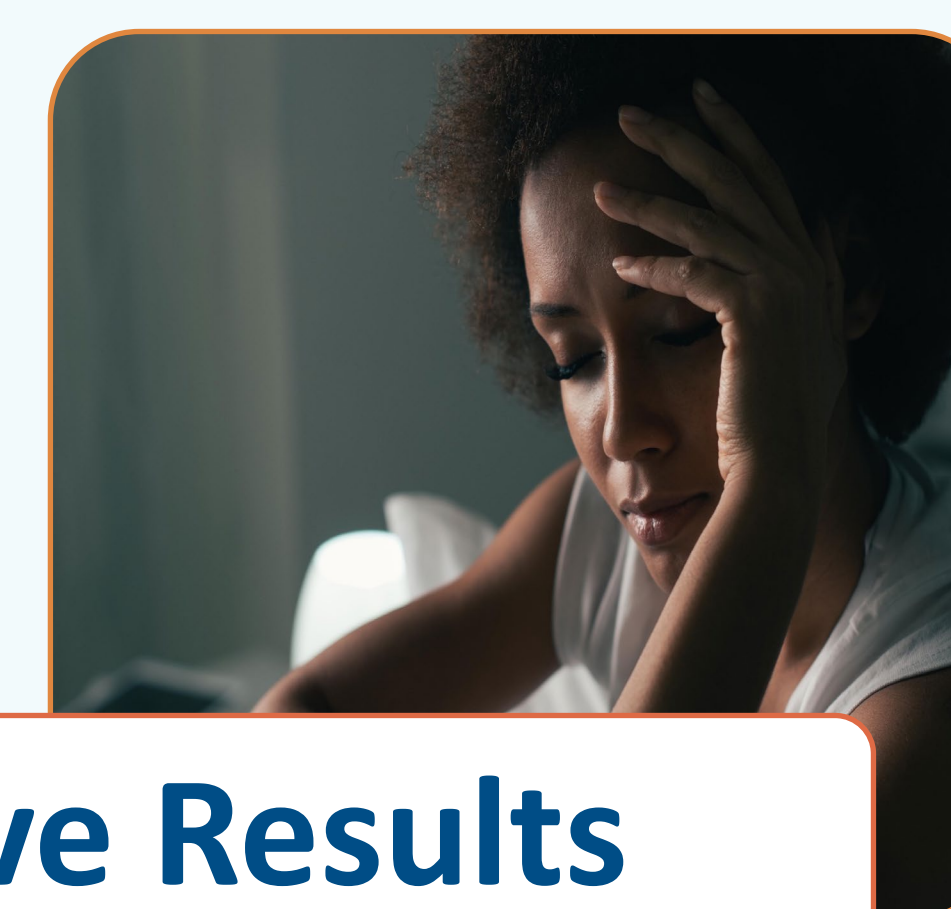
Titles and abstracts screened (n = 747)

Paper screening

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 105)

Selection

Reports included in review (n = 47 in May) + (n = 8 in August): n = 55



Descriptive Results

Direct effects COVID-19

- Increased COVID-19 infection risk and poorer health prognosis for Autistic adults
- COVID-19 testing not consistently prioritized
- Prioritizing COVID-19 vaccinations unclear

Effects on services and supports

- Major disruption of services
- Barriers to accessing healthcare
- Mixed findings regarding acceptability of telehealth services

Effects on wellbeing

- Large inter- and intra-individual differences in wellbeing changes
- Both negative and positive effects
- Retrospective studies indicate overall decrease in wellbeing
- Prospective studies show mixed findings

Positive contextual & personal factors

- (Continued) Access to formal support
- Reduced sensory overload
- Reduced pressure to conform to societal roles
- High perceived social support
- (New) Routines
- Good mental health prior to pandemic

Demographic Results

- Review includes 55 reports
- Most studies (45%) took place in either the USA or the UK (see Figure 1)
- Most (62%) collected data in March-May 2020
- Most (64%) included self-report data of Autistic adults (with a preponderance of females)
- Only 9 studies (16%) focussed (partly) on Autistic adults with intellectual disability

Discussion

Autistic adults were likely disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. They were at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and developing serious illness
2. They often struggled to access services and supports
3. Despite some positive uplift due to reduced external pressures, many experienced mental health problems

NB: This is likely an *underestimation* of the pandemic's negative effect given the selective study samples (see demographics)

Lessons

In times of crisis and beyond we need:

1. A distinct strategy to support Autistic adults, informed by the Autistic community
2. Greater investment in the development and rigorous testing of services and supports tailored to Autistic adults
3. More efforts to implement and maintain social support structures for the Autistic community
4. More participatory research to ensure that future research, clinical services and care are aligned with the needs and priorities of Autistic people

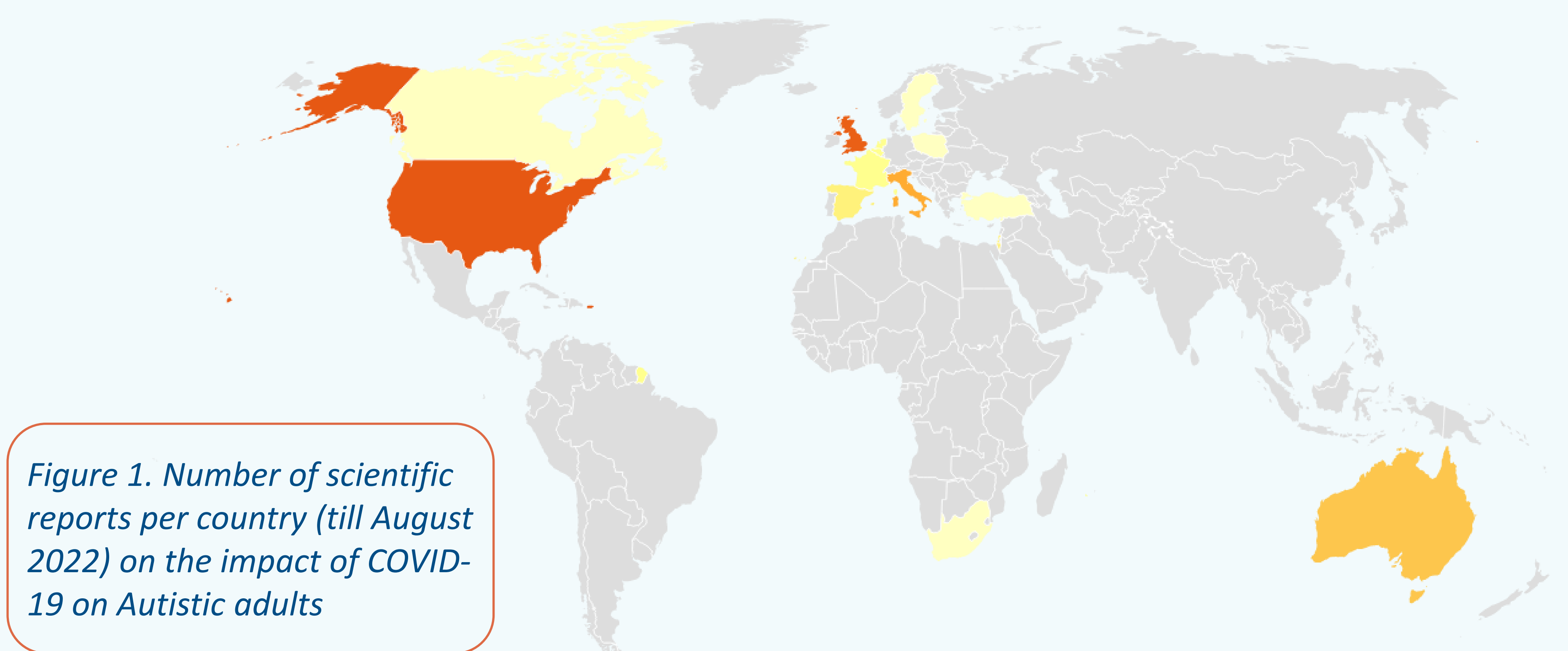


Figure 1. Number of scientific reports per country (till August 2022) on the impact of COVID-19 on Autistic adults

