



Half of London Police Detainees

Screen Positive for ADHD

(December 2025)

Neurohaven Summary
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In a study published in December 2025 in the journal *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12757763/> , Brown, Procyshyn and colleagues reported that approximately half of adults arrested and detained in London police custody screened positive for ADHD traits at a level warranting further clinical assessment. This was not a marginal increase or a methodological curiosity but a finding of exceptional scale, particularly given that most of those who screened positive had no prior diagnosis of ADHD.

The screening was conducted across several Metropolitan Police custody suites shortly after arrest, using validated instruments intended to identify clinically significant neurodevelopmental risk rather than to confirm diagnosis. While screening tools are deliberately sensitive and do not equate to a formal clinical diagnosis, the magnitude of the result is striking when set against general adult ADHD prevalence estimates of approximately two to four percent. Even allowing for false positives, the level of over representation is far beyond what could reasonably be dismissed as artefact.

What makes the London custody data especially important is timing. Unlike prison studies, which capture people after prolonged exposure to institutional environments, this study assessed individuals at the point of arrest. That strongly suggests ADHD is being missed across childhood, education, primary care and community mental health services, only becoming visible once people enter the criminal justice system.

What the study actually found

Measure	Result
Setting	Multiple London Metropolitan Police custody suites
Publication date	December 2025
Screening tools	Modified ASRS for ADHD, AQ 10 for autistic traits
Proportion screening positive for ADHD traits	Approximately 50 percent
Prior ADHD diagnosis among those screening positive	Minority
Highest rates	Individuals arrested for drug related offences

The authors were explicit that the findings reflect unmet need rather than over diagnosis. Screening positive indicates that a full assessment would be clinically appropriate, not that ADHD can be assumed.

Why ADHD appears so often in custody

ADHD does not cause criminal behaviour. However, untreated ADHD is associated with impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, executive dysfunction and difficulty navigating authority driven systems. These traits increase vulnerability to arrest, particularly in high stress encounters, without implying intent or criminality as a direct consequence of the condition.

Over time, untreated ADHD is also associated with educational exclusion, substance misuse, unstable employment, housing insecurity and repeated mental health crises. These factors cluster, compounding disadvantage and increasing contact with police and emergency services.

The cost dimension that is often ignored

The significance of the custody findings is not only clinical but economic. The NHS England commissioned Independent ADHD Taskforce concluded that failure to identify and support ADHD carries a very large annual cost to the UK economy when health, welfare, employment and criminal justice impacts are considered together. Estimates commonly cited place this cost in the region of tens of billions of pounds per year.

From an NHS perspective alone, untreated ADHD is associated with increased use of emergency departments, crisis mental health services, addiction services and long term management of secondary anxiety and depression. Planned outpatient ADHD care is relatively modest in cost by comparison, yet long waiting lists mean many individuals never reach it.

Late diagnosis is a false economy

Stage where ADHD is missed	Downstream consequence	System bearing the cost
School years	Exclusion, underachievement	Education and local authorities
Early adulthood	NEET status, substance misuse	Welfare and NHS
Crisis point	A and E attendance, crisis teams	NHS
Arrest and custody	Police time, custody healthcare	Police and NHS
Courts and probation	Repeat contact, breach	Criminal justice system

By the time someone is screened in custody, the state has usually already paid repeatedly for the consequences of untreated ADHD. Custody is not the start of the problem. It is where accumulated system failures finally become visible.

Why the 50 percent figure matters

The finding that half of London police detainees screen positive for ADHD traits reframes ADHD as a public policy issue rather than a niche diagnostic debate. It suggests that neurodevelopmental conditions are being detected far too late, in environments designed for control rather than care, with significant human and financial cost.

Police custody should not function as a de facto diagnostic gateway for ADHD. Yet for many adults it appears to be one of the first points at which their lifelong difficulties are even recognised. The London study therefore highlights a failure of early identification and access to treatment, not an excess of diagnosis.

Addressing ADHD earlier and more consistently would not eliminate crime or social adversity. However, the evidence suggests it could reduce repeated crisis contact, improve life outcomes and lessen long term pressure on both the NHS and the criminal justice system. In that sense, the London custody findings are not a curiosity but a warning about the cost of continuing to ignore ADHD until the moment of arrest.

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