



Statement by CASDA: Social acceptance and mental health at play in Minassian case

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The Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance (CASDA) urges caution in the interpretation of autism characteristics and making generalisations about Autistic people based on the single case of Alek Minassian for the murder charges of 10 individuals and the attempted murder of 16 others currently before the court.

According to the Toronto Sun's article "MANDEL: Alek Minassian's autism left him unable to know 'wrongfulness' of van attack, lawyer says" published on November 17thⁱ, Mr Minassian's defense lawyer, Mr. Bytensky will argue Minassian "only understood wrongfulness at the intellectual level" and lacked the capacity to rationally decide whether it was right or wrong.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disability, as such, the presentation of the disability varies greatly from one individual to another. Autism is characterised by challenges in social communication and restrictive and repetitive behavior, however, it is not characterised (or diagnosed) by the lack of understanding right or wrong or difficulties with morality, or violent behavior. Autistic people are more vulnerable (at risk) for mental health issues - due, in part, to lack of access to services as well as negative lived-experiences while navigating the social world. Additionally, Autistic people are at greater risk for bullying, intimidation and victimization, and thus struggle with the stigma of not being fully accepted by and included in society. Hence, people on the autism spectrum are much more likely to be victims of crime, rather than the perpetrators.

The public perception of autism due to this case poses evident risks: 1) creating a false association between autism and violent crime and 2) setting back the progress that has been made to reduce this stigma and other misperceptions about autism, and 3) given the Public Health Agency of Canada's most recent prevalence estimate of 1 in 66 people with autismⁱⁱ, there is great danger in associating autism with violent behaviors. Importantly, studies have demonstrated that there is no significant link between autism and violent crime. Studies have reported elevated rates of criminality only among those with concurrent disorders such as conduct disorder and substance misuseⁱⁱⁱ. Nonetheless, lack of access to proper services and the high level of concurrent conditions can increase the risk of maladaptive behaviors. Certain traits of autism, such as difficulties in perspective-taking and inferring the thoughts and feelings of others, may place them at greater risk for manipulation and radicalization. Due to barriers in social communication, social outlets can be restricted for some Autistics, and when exposed to anonymous online forums, individuals can fall prey to toxic exposure to hateful views. People on the spectrum are not unlike any other population that has experienced chronic invalidation and injustice when it comes to crime. We must move away from a system which uses any disability as a scapegoat for violent crime.

Through this tragedy, we would like to stress the need for greater access to mental health services, and acknowledge the request that Autistic Canadians have made in calling for greater access to mental health supports^{iv}. Autistic Canadians struggle with social stigma which creates barriers for them to participate in society in meaningful ways. Let's reduce this stigma by resisting the urge to make generalisations about this particular case. That is why CASDA is committed to [advocating](#) for a comprehensive National Autism Strategy that includes mental health supports, and prioritizes equity and accessibility for all Autistic Canadians.

<https://torontosun.com/news/local-news/mandel-alek-minassians-autism-left-him-unable-to-know-the-wrongfulness-of-his-van-attack-lawyer-says>

ⁱⁱ<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder-children-youth-canada-2018.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Heeramun R, Magnusson C, Gumpert C, Granath S, Lundberg M, Dalman C et al. Autism and convictions for violent crimes: population-based cohort study in Sweden. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2017 Jun;56(6):491-497.e2.

^{iv} For instance, as part of our [policy brief compendium](#), CASDA recommends the federal government champion a comprehensive training program for professionals to expand their capacity to work with Autistic people. These briefs also recommend the prioritization of mental health initiatives for Autistic people within existing federal funding initiatives. To date, the Public Health Agency's Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Strategic Fund has funded community-based programs in several provinces, some of which provide mental health support for Autistic people. CASDA recommends continuing to fund community-based autism programs that include mental health support to increase access to and affordability of mental health services. Further, CASDA also recommends greater transparency regarding how funding provided for mental health initiatives under health agreements with provinces and territories will include support for Autistic people specifically. The federal government can further increase access to mental health services for Autistic people by reforming the Disability Tax Credit application forms that better reflect the challenges faced by this group, particularly as it relates to the definition of "mental function impairment". And, finally, investing in a learning health system framework would allow for easier cross-provincial-territorial analyses of relevant programs and services, including mental health support.