

Autism and Policing Research Brief

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to analyze the relationship between individuals with autism and policing in Arizona in hopes to uncover policy inconsistency, disjunctions, and areas of improvement to be implemented in translational criminology surrounding the subject.

Introduction

In recent years, Arizona has been noted as one of the most autism-friendly states in America. And yet, police knowledge and training about autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Arizona - as it is across the US - is limited. When autism training does exist, it often falls under the rubric of “mental health training” (Herbert et al., 2021) rather than be autism-specific. Given the state of training, it is no wonder why many parents of autistic children have fears about police contact (Wallace et al., 2020). In this study, I examine data from parents and caregivers on their satisfaction with police contact and interview police officers on their experience with and de-escalation practices surrounding encounters with autistic persons to help understand if community and law enforcement beliefs regarding autism align.

Literature Review

Law enforcement training encourages LEOs to connect with individuals in their community, paying special attention to those who differ physically, mentally, and socially. The amount of police interactions that involve people with mental health needs has increased rapidly, reaching 7-10% in some cities. A study on LEO experiences with and knowledge of autism recorded 72.2% of officers without specific training on ASD, and those with training reported higher confidence in responding to calls involving individuals with ASD (Railey et al., 2020). Further, despite this confidence in understanding ASD, caregivers reported only 13% satisfactory experiences, while LEOs reported 42% satisfaction (Railey et al., 2020). Increased community engagement and situational training seem to indicate poor translation from training to application and action. In a pilot study on police understanding of ASD, officers were shown vignettes of

individuals with ASD with possible indicators of the disorder. Though many officers reported confidence with identification, the majority of officers incorrectly identified characteristics incorrectly. Officers who had prior knowledge and personal experiences with autism performed better (Christiansen, et al., 2021). Training and general media is not adequate knowledge to prepare a LEO to interact with an individual with autism, especially given the multitude of ways the disorder may present (i.e. hand flapping, non-verbal, nervousness/ anxiety, repetition, high focus and particularity, etc.).

Research Questions

Is the relationship between caregivers of autistic individuals, autistic individuals and police positive? Is Arizona’s police response to autism satisfactory? Do community and law enforcement beliefs regarding autism align?

Methodology

The data collected from the surveys were given to parents and caregivers of individuals with autism. These surveys were completed online or paper-pencil, depending on event and individual preference. Surveys were administered in the Spring of 2017 at the Arizona autism Coalition’s autism Resource Fair in Phoenix and the autism Walk event in Tucson. In the Fall of 2022 and Spring of 2023, surveys were administered at various autism events. Analyses were focused around respondents who reported police contact (approximately 131 participants - 35%). The variables examined include: where the police contact occurred, the age of the individual with autism, and satisfaction with police contact (using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied). Frequency distributions, cross-tabulations, and bar charts were used for analysis.

The interview was conducted in a semi-scheduled format, and the material was shared with interviewee prior to meeting. These meetings occurred virtually and over the phone in the Spring of 2023. Possible interviewees were contacts from mentors via email, and those who responded with interest to completing the interview were selected. Questions centered around personal experiences as a first responder,

de-escalation with vulnerable communities, and training for said communities.

Results

Survey results indicated police encounters that took place in school are less satisfactory than in community areas. Approximately 32% of caregivers report dissatisfaction with school encounters compared to community reports of 17% dissatisfaction. Across age groups, the overall satisfaction of interactions decreased as the age of the individual with autism increased. Parents of teens and young adults, ages 13 to 24, report greater dissatisfaction and neutral responses than total satisfaction.

Of the first responders interviewed, CIT training and the Return Me safe program were attributed to the majority of successful responses to individuals with autism. However, more in depth training is often avoided due to time commitments and constraints within departments. Interviewees described themselves as confident and able to identify individuals with autism while on the job and in community interactions. High perceived and reported community satisfaction was mentioned by interviewees.

Conclusion

While Arizona, Phoenix specifically, is ahead of the game in autism awareness and accommodation when compared to many other areas of the country, there still appears to be a clear disjunction between community satisfaction with police interactions and law enforcement perception. Articulated concerns of caregivers and fears of police misinterpretation remain a present and prominent issue according to survey data. Yet, there appeared to be a lack of urgency in both identifying police training and response as an issue to first responders.

References

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