

Examining the Circumstances of Interactions Between Law Enforcement and Adults with Autism in Ventura County

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Abstract

Within the realm of police interactions with the general public as a whole, there are a variety of factors that impact the public's opinion of police procedures and conduct. Currently, assurance of fair treatment and procedural justice are major influences on residents' comfortability with the protection and service provided by law enforcement (LE) across California, and the United States. Individuals with disabilities constitute one third to one half of police killings, and those with developmental disabilities are seven times more likely to come into contact with police. As supported by numerous anecdotal cases of police violence and negative police encounter outcomes, an individual with autism may exhibit behaviors perceived as suspicious or unsafe by bystanders and officers, increasing an encounter's potential for miscommunication or misinterpretation. This study aims to identify and characterize the perceptions derived from experiences within the context of interactions between law enforcement and individuals with autism in Ventura County. Three online surveys were distributed to Ventura County Sheriff's Office patrol officers, adults with autism, and parents/caregivers of individuals with autism, and the results offer a basic qualitative depiction of the relationship between Ventura County's LE and ASD communities.

Introduction

Between 2004 and 2014, the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network had found that the prevalence of individuals with autism in the United States had progressed from 1 in 125 to 1 in 59. As the number of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses has grown, so too has the degree of community integration. The now prevailing policy of deinstitutionalization of those with mental illness and developmental disabilities, such as autism, has facilitated the involvement of individuals with autism in more community settings. The combination of both these factors has necessitated the need for law enforcement officers to understanding the populations of individuals with autism they are patrolling. Case studies and media coverage of ineffective police and autism encounter outcomes demonstrate relatively low police awareness and understanding of the complications of having an autism diagnosis in these settings (Ruderman Foundation, 2016).

Facets of autism that may complicate interactions with law enforcement include, but are not limited to, sensory and processing differences, and trouble with verbal commands, reading body language, and understanding social implications. The manifestation of these differences within the context of interactions with law enforcement can provoke officer responses from places of uncertainty or apprehension. In the interest of the officer's safety and wellbeing, as well as that of the individual with autism, frontline officers must have basic knowledge of behavior symptoms and contact approaches (Dennis Debbaudt, 2012).

Ventura County, as a fairly well-resourced, mid-sized community, still has relatively few training options.- limited to Crisis Intervention Team Training (for law enforcement), Autism Society (for law enforcement, individuals with autism, parents), and Be Safe the Movie (for law enforcement and individuals with autism). Even with adequate levels of training, however, the application of the knowledge obtained from these trainings is rendered ineffective without improving the officers' ability to properly and confidently administer the learned tactics and act on their newfound knowledge.

How and what are the perceptions of interactions between law enforcement and adults with autism?

Methods and Materials

This project identified and targeted: patrol officers, individuals with autism, and their parents. 133 VCSO patrol officers were reached for distribution of a 10-15 minute online survey. The Assistant Chief of Police for the Department shared the survey link to applicable officers within the patrol division. Adults with autism and their parents and caregivers were utilized as representation for Ventura County's ASD Community. Parents and caregivers self-identified their roles and indicated their child's diagnosis and age. Self-identified individuals with autism who took the survey were above age 18. These three surveys altogether collected local data for contexts of contact experiences, preemptive attitudes towards the other involved parties, and perceptions resulting from experience (or lack thereof). The surveys elicited three categories for data analysis: experiences (frequency & contexts for encounters, engagement in training), perceptions (confidence levels, quality of/difficulties with experience), and opinions on future developments (recommendations, free-response commentary).

Results

Findings will be expressed by survey population size from greatest to smallest- law enforcement (n=133), parents and caregivers (n=71), and adults with autism (n=2). LE: 77.4% (n=103) of law enforcement had had interactions with someone with autism as a patrol officer. Reported sources for awareness of diagnosis occurred under the following circumstances: own suspicion/intuition (n=66), dispatch (n=43), the individual with ASD (n=17), family member or friend (n=94), school staff (n=2), and fellow officers (n=1). Out of 5, the average self-rated confidence in ability to identify persons with ASD for those who had prior experience was 3.67. For those describing a "maybe" or "no" for encounters with individuals with autism, ratings were found to be lower for perceived ability, specifically a 2.68 and 3.21. Self-rated confidence for ability to interact with persons with ASD was averaged at 3.76 for those who had prior experience with someone with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), 3.42 for those with potential interactions, and 3.14 for those with none.

ASD Community: It was similarly reported by parents and caregivers that majority of their children with autism (56.3%) had had contact with the police in some capacity, as opposed to 43.7% who had not. Respondents gave an average rating of 2.76 for their confidence in the police's ability to interact with your child in the community, and 2.45 for their confidence in your child's ability to positively respond in police interactions, out of 5. One of the two individuals with autism had negative experiences, while the other demonstrated an overall positive view of their interactions with patrol officers and police in general. Both participants similarly described having met with a police officer before, wanting to learn more about how to be safe around police, and thinking it would be helpful to meet local officers before you see them out in the community.

Discussion

The data highlights the disconnect between the local law enforcement and ASD communities. Without remedy, tensions and false preconceived notions about circumstances surrounding encounters between patrol officers and adults with autism can lessen the likelihood for positive and successful encounter outcomes.

Confidence

Overall, all three survey groups had low to moderate confidence in themselves and their counterparts. A concept called "learned evaluative response" allows individuals to revert to a secure knowledge base in their interactions (Henshaw & Thomas, 2011). If they do not feel confident in the accurate knowledge that they have, they may go back to an ineffective way of dealing with the situation.

Perceived Responsibility

With a lack of motivation and awareness of ways to participate in promoting positive encounter outcomes between their children and law enforcement, members of the VC ASD community perceived themselves as less responsible for actively preparing for encounters than the police. It should be duly noted that patrol officers felt their levels of training were sufficient, even with their low levels of confidence- indicating a lack of accountability on their part as well.

Facilitating Meets

Analysis of individual responses, both within survey groups and comparatively, conclusively demonstrates that all parties recognize the benefit of facilitated meets between the two communities, so that an open discussion and exchange of information can follow, and the dynamic for these encounters can be changed.

Future Efforts

Future Efforts

The results of this research will specifically benefit local entities, such as the Ventura County Sheriff's Office and varying subsets of that institution, collectives of autism advocacy groups, and independent training providers, but also on a broader scope, law enforcement agencies, and families of and individuals with ASD across the nation and within countries with similarly functioning law enforcement, and criminal justice system roles. Within these broader contexts, the prevalence of this kind of encounter holds the same level of significance, and studies documenting the specific qualities of local police and autism relations holds value for understanding the needs of these respective populations, so as for training and development of other resources to encourage the probability for success of encounter.

Literature

Trends revealed from this study that demonstrate the need to address perceptions might be further research. Specifically, literature to describe specifically perceived responsibility and how that actually correlates with action would be significant to determine its practical influence on interactions themselves. A gap revealed from this study's proceedings and supported by the review of accessible literature is the need for more perspective from the individual with autism, especially adults.

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Trainings

