
Yelina Fernandez, M.S., Joy Quiles Tajes, M.A., & Kristine M. Jacquin, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Training law enforcement on persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may avoid possible negative situations between law enforcement and a person with ASD. In this poster we discuss the benefits of law enforcement training on ASD. There is limited empirical research regarding legal processes and persons with ASD. This area merits further research as law enforcement officers may benefit from knowing how to interact with a person with ASD.

INTRODUCTION

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that typically appears early in a child’s developmental period.
- ASD is five times more likely to occur in boys than girls (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).
- One in 68 children are diagnosed with ASD, which is a striking increase since the year 2000 when 1 in 150 were diagnosed (CDC).
- A person with autism may have a verbal expression deficit and struggle to communicate their feelings (Stewart, Barnard, Pearson, Hasan, & O’Brien, 2006).
- Prior research shows that individuals with developmental disorders, including ASD, are at higher risk of victimization (Petersilia, 2001).
- With the increase of ASD diagnosis and the social-communication deficits in ASD, an officer may have difficulty responding to a person with ASD who is a suspect or witness of a crime (Teagardin, Dixon, Smith, & Granpeeshe, 2012).

RELEVANT ASD CHARACTERISTICS

Individuals with ASD may:

(Kroncke, Willar, & Huckabee (2016)

- Interpret statements literally
- Think in a linear manner, processing one piece of information at a time
- Show selective attention and become fixated
- Have significant mental processing speed weaknesses
- Become anxious and panic (meltdown) in response to perceived yelling or loud sounds
- Engage in repetitive thinking and behavior
- Show difficulty recalling events in a sequential manner
- Have deficits in social skills and may misinterpret nonverbal communication
- Show difficulty with perspective taking
- Exhibit sensory responses such as “stimming” (flapping hands, banging head, no eye contact)

ASD AND VIOLENCE

- Persons with ASD are at higher risk of violent victimization (Petersilia, 2001).
- Persons with ASD are not more likely to commit a crime (Langstrom, Gramm, Ruchkin, Sjostedt, & Fazel, 2009).
- Young adults with autism have been found to have a low rate of criminal charges (Cheety, Carepenter, Letourneau, Nicholas, Charles, & King, 2012).
- Aggression or violence resulting from rigidity can lead to legal problems (Kroncke, Willar, & Huckabee, 2016).
- Prior research also showed that if people with ASD have an encounter with the police, it is more likely to involve person offenses as opposed to property offenses (Cheety et al., 2012).
- One study found 4 risk factors for violent offending among people with ASD: 1) male 2) older age, 3) ASD without an intellectual disability, and 4) individuals with high functioning autism (Langstrom et al., 2009).

WHY LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING

- ASD is increasing in criminal law cases, thus increasing law enforcement encounters (Kroncke, Willar, & Huckabee, 2016).
- An adolescent with ASD may fail to raise his hands after instructed by an officer and run out of mere panic and anxiety (Cheety et al., 2012).
- Someone with ASD may not be as responsive to police as others. Simple commands that a police officer may tell a person such as, “Let me see your hands” or “Get down on the floor” may not be interpreted the same way because people with ASD have difficulty seeing others’ perspectives and they interpret directions literally (Kroncke, Willar, & Huckabee, 2016).
- Police officers who encounter ASD individuals may resort to using a stun gun, a device that uses electric current to temporarily impair one’s ability to control muscles. It does control ASD individuals but can also be dangerous as they are prone to epilepsy (Loefgren, 2011).
- For example, a boy with ASD with a heart condition who was waiting for his brother outside a restaurant in Tybee Island, Georgia, encountered a police officer who assumed he was intoxicated and used a stun gun on him.
- Authorities also stopped a father in Alabama while his child was having a meltdown because a police officer assumed that he was abducting the child. Meltdowns are common with autistic children, and they may react negatively to a typical authoritative response.

TRAINING LIMITATIONS

- A study surveyed 84 law enforcement agencies in the U.S. to inquire about the amount of time spent training on interacting with individuals with mental illnesses and results showed an average of eight hours per agency (Hails & Borum, 2013).
- Even though almost all of the agencies reported some type of training program, only 21% had specialized teams to provide support with mental health (Hails & Borum, 2013). Only 8% had access to a mobile crisis team (Hails & Borum).
- In other research, 55% of 194 police departments stated that they did not receive any specialized health training or tools to deal with emergency calls concerning mental health disorders (Loucks, 2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- One training for law enforcement officers uses the acronym AUTISM for responding to ASD individuals (Debbaudt & Rothman, 2001):
  - APPROACH in a non-threatening manner
  - UNDERSTAND that touching may induce a reaction or frighten the person
  - TALKING in a calm voice
  - INSTRUCT in a straightforward and direct manner
  - SEEK indications for evaluation of the situation
  - MAINTAIN a safe distance until inappropriate behaviors subside but remain alert to problems that may occur.
- If officers need to take ASD individuals into custody, they also must separate them from the general population. With more practical training for law enforcement officers on how to handle people with autism, we should see a decrease in situations that become deadly or dangerous (Debbaudt & Rothman, 2001).