UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Interactions between Black, Autistic Students and Law Enforcement Officers in Schools and Beyond: Experiences and Perceptions

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/86q1328x

Author
Harlow Melmed, Hetty Renee

Publication Date
2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Interactions between Black, Autistic Students and Law Enforcement Officers in Schools and Beyond: Experiences and Perceptions

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Special Education

by

Hetty Harlow Melmed

2022

© Copyright by

Hetty Harlow Melmed

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Interactions between Black, Autistic Students and Law Enforcement Officers

in Schools and Beyond: Experiences and Perceptions

by

Hetty Harlow Melmed

Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Jeffrey J. Wood, Co-Chair

Professor Lois Weinberg, Co-Chair

The overall prevalence of autism is increasing in the Black community. Few studies examine the perspectives of Black, autistic individuals regarding interactions with law enforcement officers – both in school and beyond. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences and perspectives of Black, autistic individuals and law enforcement officers regarding their mutual interactions. Four Black, autistic individuals and four law enforcement officers were recruited for this study. There was an overall discrepancy between the satisfaction of interactions between these two groups. The interviews with autistic participants revealed that while some of them had positive

interactions with law enforcement officers in schools, all of those who had interactions with law enforcement in their years beyond school were dissatisfied with those interactions. The interviews with law enforcement officers revealed overall satisfaction with interactions both in school and beyond.

The dissertation of Hetty Harlow Melmed is approved.

Robert Cooper

Marjorie Orellana

Anna Osipova

Lois A. Weinberg, Committee Co-Chair

Jeffrey J. Wood, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Michele Harlow, an extraordinary educator who inspired me to venture into the field of education; to my father, Yale Harlow, of blessed memory, who dedicated his life to pursuing justice; to my children, Eliana, Zev, and Rami, who have cheered me on and engaged deeply with me on this journey; and to my husband, Gil, whose lifetime of love, friendship, and unwavering support I cherish deeply.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION II

DEDICATION V

CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND 5

HISTORICAL CONTEXT 5

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 11

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW 13

PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS 14

PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF AUTISTIC INDIVIDUALS 18

EDUCATION AND TRAINING 23

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY 29

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS 74

APPENDIX 80

REFERENCES 84

VITA

EDUCATION

1996	Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy Barnard College, Columbia University New York, New York
1997	Master of Arts, Blindness and Visual Impairment Teacher College, Columbia University New York, New York

SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2019-2021	Graduate Teaching Associate University of California, Los Angeles Los Angeles, California
2011-2013	Psychoeducational Evaluator The Kelter Center Los Angeles, California

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 2020, the murder of George Floyd by law enforcement officers in Minneapolis led to worldwide protests against anti-Black racism. Floyd pleaded for his life while an officer pressed a knee on his neck as Floyd cried, “I can’t breathe,” until he could breathe no longer and died ("How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next," 2020). Although viewing this despicable, callous treatment of a Black man shocked much of the world and led to positive change in types of force used by law enforcement, excessive force by law enforcement towards the Black community has long been a problem. For example, on March 25, 2015, five years earlier, a Black, autistic 10 year old child was handcuffed by officers in her school after running out of her classroom and held down with a knee on her back until she had a violent seizure (Merkwae, 2015). The police grabbed her by the ankles and forced her to “lie face down on the ground, handcuffed with her face pressed so closely to the ground that she was having difficulty breathing…An officer was kneeling on top of her, pinning her down with a knee squarely in (her) back… (She) was crying and yelling, ‘Help, I’m hurting’”(Merkwae, 2015).

Approximately one of 44 children in the United States is diagnosed as autistic by eight years of age (Maenner et al., 2021). Autism, labeled “autism spectrum disorder” (autism) in the DSM -5, is a developmental disability characterized by core traits such as social communicative challenges and intense, focused interests. The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for autism include “persistent deficits in social communication…for example from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation…to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions” (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders : DSM-5*, 2013). Other criteria for autism in the DSM-5 include stereo-typed or repetitive movements, inflexible

adherence to routines, and hyper-or hypo reactivity to sensory input or sensory aspects of the environment.

People with developmental disabilities are at an increased risk of interactions with the criminal justice system compared to their typically developing peers (Salerno & Schuller, 2019) and seven times more likely to come in contact with police when compared to people without disabilities (Railey, Love, et al., 2020). Autism, a common developmental disability, has received increased attention in recent years due to several incidents of highly publicized interactions with law enforcement with negative outcomes. During these interactions, law enforcement officers may think of the behavior of autistic individuals as suspicious. Challenges in social communication, impulsivity, and misinterpretation of social cues, may increase their vulnerability by affecting their ability to respond to the officers as the officers expect. Many of these negative interactions stem from the fact that their behaviors are seen as “aggressive” by law enforcement (Anthony, 2021; Diamond & Hogue, 2021). Additionally, the increased risk of developing mental health conditions for autistic individuals increases their likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system (Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

For those living at the intersection of being both Black and autistic, interaction with the criminal justice system can be especially daunting. Although Black Americans make up less than 13% of the United States population, they are more than twice as likely to be killed by police than White Americans (*Fatal Force*, 2021). Black and disabled individuals are especially at risk in the United States, where they are almost three times as likely as White individuals to be killed by police (Abram, 2020). The combination of systemic societal inequalities experienced by Black individuals and the behavioral and social challenges experienced by autistic individuals creates the potential for increased risk for law enforcement interactions (Anthony, 2021).

Although for a host of reasons there has been a disparity in diagnosis of autism between Black, Hispanic and White children for more than 10 years with far more White children receiving the diagnosis, the CDC (2020) currently reports similar prevalence in autism diagnosis for Black, Hispanic and White children (Maenner et al., 2021).

Recently publicized interactions between law enforcement and Black and disabled individuals (and those living at the intersection of both identities) have increased the public's scrutiny of the role of police, including their roles in schools (Petrosino, 2020). School-based policing is a rapidly growing area of law enforcement and school resource officers (SROs) are increasingly relied upon by school staff members to keep students and staff safe as well as to address challenging behaviors of disabled and nondisabled students in schools (Railey, Love, et al., 2020). Having SROs in schools has increased suspension, discipline, and arrest rates, especially among Black students, possibly playing a role in exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline (Homer & Fisher, 2020; Petrosino, 2020). Further, SROs have been shown to use excessive force when students' behavioral issues were related to their disability with 84.8% reporting that they "somewhat agreed" that students with disabilities used their special education status as an excuse for their behavioral difficulties and to avoid taking responsibility for their actions (May et al., 2012). Schools are also disproportionately arresting students with disabilities at a rate of 29 per 10,000 students, which is approximately three times higher than the rate of arrests for nondisabled students (Railey, Love, et al., 2020) and at even disproportionally higher rates than for Black students (Zirkel, 2019). A comprehensive analysis of the Westlaw case database for court decisions that contained federal civil rights claims in response to SROs' conduct with students with disabilities from the years 2008 to 2018 found a notable number of cases where SROs actions were questionable in terms of using disproportionately excessive force

in response to conduct that was often disability related and not substantially dangerous to self or others. Although SROs are intended as a resource for safer schools, data show that they may instead be contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and may have the opposite results of their intended placement in schools (Zirkel, 2019).

CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND

Historical Context

SROs in the United States are sworn law enforcement officers who work in collaboration with schools and are one of the fastest growing areas of law enforcement. SROs became prominent in the 1990s in response to school shootings. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 42% of public schools in the U.S. reported having at least one SRO present at least once per week during the 2015-2016 academic year (Snow et al., 2021). Aside from prisons, schools are one of the only places that individuals may experience police supervision every day, putting students in the unique situation of having their behavior closely monitored with potential legal repercussions (Snow et al., 2021).

History and Purpose

Originally placed in schools in the 1950s to help decrease school violence - particularly gun-related violence - the role of SROs has expanded over the years (Ryan et al., 2017). In 1948, the Los Angeles School Police Department formed as a security unit to patrol and protect schools in newly desegregated neighborhoods. The first officially designated school resource officers were assigned to schools in Flint, Michigan as part of a community policing strategy in the 1950s, and the Chicago Police Department established the first “Officer Friendly” program to reduce crime among children. The changing mission of SRO’s has often been in response to a perceived threat to our youth. Thus, while in the 1960s and 1970s, many Southern states hired SROs to help address issues related to racial tensions, the focus shifted to drug-related problems in the 1980s, and then to control/prevent school shootings in the wake of mass school shooting tragedies such as Columbine, Sandy Hook and most recently, the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas.

School to Prison Pipeline

The School to Prison Pipeline is a phenomenon where students are arrested at school for behavior that would not normally be considered dangerous (Pigott et al., 2018). This, along with time away from schools with suspensions or expulsions, can lead to further interactions with the criminal justice system. There is conflicting research about whether the presence of SROs in schools increases involvement in the School to Prison Pipeline in those schools. While some research shows that the presence of SROs in schools does not increase likelihood of criminal justice processing or removal from schools (Na & Gottfredson, 2013; Pigott et al., 2018), other studies identify the role of SROs in the disproportionate criminalization of disabled students along with students of color (Zirkel, 2019).

Despite their intentions of ensuring safer school environments, SRO programs reproduce and exacerbate racial inequities in the school system (Javdani, 2019). In an empirical review of the challenges that face SROs, Javdani (2019) found that the growth of SROs has coincided with a growth in criminalizing student behavior and that SROs are more likely to be present in schools that enroll larger bodies of students of color and underserved youth. These students are disproportionately targeted by exclusionary disciplinary practices, particularly with a rise in suspensions for Black and Latinx girls. In 2016, Black students were 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than White students and represented the largest percentage of suspensions for subjective offenses according to the U.S. Department of Education Biennial Civil Rights Data Collection Survey (Javdani, 2019).

The combination of increased levels of challenging behavior and lack of professional training in positive behavioral interventions has led to many schools becoming overly reliant on harsh and often aversive behavioral interventions for dealing with challenging behavior. When

SROs are asked to deal with these behaviors, the behaviors are often criminalized and this exacerbates the school to prison pipeline, disproportionally impacting minoritized students with low socioeconomic status (Ryan et al., 2017).

Impact on Disabled Students

In a comprehensive search of the Westlaw case database, there were 22 court decisions that contained federal civil rights claims specific to the actions of SROs in response to conduct of disabled students (Zirkel, 2019). Findings revealed a wide variety of predominantly behavior-related disabilities such as autism and several cases where the SROs actions were questioned in terms of disproportionally excessive force in relation to conduct that was often related to the students' disabilities and not substantially dangerous to themselves or others. Students with disabilities are referred to law enforcement agencies by SROs at an even disproportionately higher rate than are Black students (Zirkel, 2019). Zero tolerance policies have also been shown to lead to the exclusion of students, disproportionately affecting students of color, disabled students, and students living in poverty. Recommendations from this comprehensive search of case studies included lobbying for federal and state laws for improved selection, training, accountability of SROs, specifically in relation to students with disabilities.

Training

Even though SROs are the fastest growing area of law enforcement, there are currently no national standards of outlining training requirements for SROs. There are limited published studies about disability awareness training for SROs and, in their systematic review, Railey et al., (2020) found no published evaluations of autism training for SROs. Without appropriate training, SROs may not be well equipped to best support autistic students. The American Civil Liberties Union

recommended that SROs receive training with strategies to support social communication and behavioral differences since the training they do receive is often centered around juvenile justice codes and legal issues. This lack of disability-specific training – including autism training – is especially concerning since many students in special education have specific behavioral intervention plans that schools are required to follow in order to optimize the students' success (Railey, Love, et al., 2020).

Special Education Law

Educating SROs of the laws created to protect students with disabilities is especially important. Students with disabilities are protected under federal disability law related to special education services (Merkwae, 2015). The Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) mandates a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Providing FAPE and LRE may require providing supplementary aids and services, modifications, or accommodations. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) prohibits disability-based discrimination in programs that receive federal funding. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) further extends this prohibition to all public entities (Merkwae, 2015). Both Section 504 and ADA require reasonable accommodations as well. It is imperative that SROs understand the rights afforded to students with education-related disabilities under IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA to appropriately address their needs upon interaction.

The Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA)

All students, including those with disabilities, are entitled to a "free and appropriate public education" (FAPE) under IDEA which was first passed in Congress in 1975 under the title

"Education of All Handicapped Children Act." To help establish what environment is considered the LRE for each student, every child with disabilities is required to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which outlines their individual needs and goals. Under IDEA, disabled students are entitled to procedures outlined in IDEA if they face disciplinary action and to several stages of behavioral assessments and interventions if they are suspended for a total of 10 days in one school year. If the school wants to suspend the student for more than 10 days, a special meeting called a "manifestation determination review" (MDR) must be held to review all relevant information to determine if the student's behavior in question was caused by their disability or was a result of the school's failing to implement their IEP appropriately. The student can only be suspended if their behavior was not a manifestation of their disability or failure of proper IEP implementation. Unfortunately, many schools do not abide by the mandates of IDEA. Students with IEPs, particularly students of color and students with disabilities, are often not given the legal rights they have before their behavior is criminalized and they are ushered into the criminal justice system from school instead of being given the tools they are legally mandated to receive to help them better navigate their behavior challenges (Merkwae, 2015).

SRO Obligations under the Law

Even though school officials are permitted to refer students with disabilities to law enforcement for crimes they have committed, the students are still entitled to due process under IDEA if their consequence might be suspension or expulsion. When carrying out law enforcement duties at school, SRO must comply with IDEA, Section 504 and the ADA, paying particular intention to whether the students understand Miranda warnings during interrogations, waive their rights knowingly, or are susceptible to defer to authority to consent to a search. If the SRO is aware of the students' propensity to react violently because of their disability, for

example, they should implement strategies that are likely to de-escalate their behavior as may be outlined in their IEP.

Key Terminology

Law Enforcement Officer (LEO):

LEO refers to a government employee of the United States who is appointed to uphold the law. They are permitted to carry firearms and have arrest power. For this study, LEO refers to an officer who may not primarily work in schools but is called in to work in schools as needed.

School Resource Officer (SRO):

SRO refers to a law enforcement officer (LEO) in the United States who works in collaboration with schools. Like all LEOs, SROs are permitted to carry firearms and have arrest power.

Autistic/Disabled:

Throughout this study, I use identity-first language (i.e., autistic individual) following recommendations by disability activists led by the autistic-led neurodiversity movement and scholarly work that includes perspectives of autistic researchers to avoid ableist language and challenge the exclusive use of person-first language (i.e., individual with autism) in order to increase acceptance and positive emotion towards autism (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). Similarly, I use both “disabled’ and “people with disabilities,” in line with the current disability justice perspective which supports the de-pathologizing of disabilities and using identity-first language as well.

Autism:

I use the term “autism,” in lieu of “autism spectrum disorder” or “ASD,” to minimize use of the term ‘disorder’ which can be interpreted as medicalizing autism as something to be cured or fixed, and runs counter to the current perspectives of many individuals in the autistic and disability justice communities (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021) .

Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical frameworks that inform this study are the social psychological concept of procedural justice (Lind & Tyler, 1992) and Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013). Police work involves a great deal of discretion, and most of the officers’ time is spent on order maintenance activities rather than responding to violent crimes. There are a range of formal and informal options with which officers can respond to less serious crime and in these instances, officers have subjective authority to decide how to react and whether to pursue arrest with much flexibility and power in their decision making (Watson et al., 2010).

The social psychological concept of procedural justice provides a framework for considering subjective experiences of a process that may be as important as the actual outcome of an interaction (Watson et al., 2010). For example, a person who feels upset about being arrested may evaluate the incident positively if they perceive the outcome was reached through a fair process. The three main components of the concept of procedural justice are voice, dignity, and trust. “Voice” refers to the opportunity to tell one’s side of the story and be heard by the authority, “dignity” refers to being treated with respect by the authority, and “trust” refers to perceiving that the authority is genuinely concerned about one’s welfare (Lind & Tyler, 1992). When people perceive that they are being treated fairly in terms of “voice,” “dignity,” and “trust,” they are more likely to cooperate with police, and when they do not feel that they have been treated fairly, they are less likely to cooperate and more likely to rely on their own means of

social control. Perceived fairness is especially important in low-resourced neighborhoods where people may already have a difficult relationship with law enforcement and there is a higher incidence of mental illness (Watson et al., 2010). The procedural justice model has been used to support past research with people with mental illnesses (Cascardi et al., 2000) and is an appropriate framework to better understand the subjective experiences and perceived justice of autistic students regarding their interaction with school resource officers.

DisCrit is also used as a theoretical approach to this study as it explores the way both race and ability are socially constructed and interdependent. DisCrit combines elements of Critical Race Theory (CRT) with Disability Studies in a unifying model and addresses the interdependent constructions of race and disability in education and society in the United States (Annamma et al., 2013). While CRT examines concepts of racism, power, and policy, and Disability Studies aims to understand the social roots and causes of disability, DisCrit aims to bridge commonalities between these two theories to better understand how concepts of race and ability are intertwined. DisCrit theorizes about the ways "in which race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into interactions, procedures, discourses and institutions of education which affects students of color with dis/ability qualitatively differently than white students with dis/abilities" (Annamma et al., 2013). Some of the tenets of DisCrit include focusing on the way racism and ableism circulate interdependently to uphold notions of normalcy, valuing multidimensional identities, emphasizing the social construction of race and ability while recognizing the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or disabled, and privileging marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research. Racism and ableism validate and reinforce each other and unmasking the ways they work together in society is an important step in dismantling both. In this study, both theories are utilized in analyzing the perceptions

participants have of their interactions; for example, whether autistic participants felt they were treated with procedural justice by having opportunities to tell their stories, being treated with respect, and perceiving that law enforcement was genuinely concerned about them during their interactions.

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of relevant academic literature on the interactions between law enforcement and autistic individuals is presented below on the following topics: 1) LEOs' perspectives of and experiences with autism and autistic individuals, 2) autistic individuals' perspectives of and experiences with LEOs 3) Educational tools that exist for each group to best prepare for interactions with each other and 4) the role of SROs in schools and their impact on autistic and disabled students.

Inclusion Criteria

To be included in this review, articles had to be peer-reviewed, published between 2005 and 2021, mention the words *autism*, *law enforcement officers*, *school resource officers*, and/or *training* and focus on their interactions or perspectives on their interactions.

Exclusion Criteria

Duplicate articles and articles that were not peer reviewed, such as letters to the editors, were excluded from this study. Articles that were about the criminal justice system but did not focus on autism or disabilities were excluded from his study.

Perspectives and Experiences of Law Enforcement Officers

LEOs' perspectives on autism and their experiences with autistic individuals give us insight into the common perceptions they take onto the field with them. In a scoping review of autism and the criminal justice system, multiple studies are reported that demonstrate LEOs' desires to improve their understanding of autism and their interactions with autistic individuals (Railey et al., 2021). Forty percent of LEOs did not recognize the term "developmental disability" and only fifty percent of LEOs recognized the key features of autism. Additionally, the LEOs rated their self-competence in supporting autistic individuals as only 2.63 on a scale from 1 – 5 (Chown, 2010). LEOs frequently report limited professional training when responding to calls involving autistic individuals and limited knowledge of autism; they demonstrated that they maintained misperceptions about autism such as associating autism with the movie, "Rain Man" (Railey et al., 2021).

LEOs express the desire for better knowledge of autism and for training about how to better interact with autistic individuals (Chown, 2010). In a descriptive analysis of LEOs experiences with and knowledge of autism, the majority of the LEOs (72.2%) reported no formal training for interacting with individuals with autism. In this study, the authors designed a survey to document LEOs' knowledge of autism to gauge the impact of Florida state legislation which took effect October 1, 2017, requiring the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to create continued employment training for LEOs specific to autism (Gardner et al., 2019). Out of the seventy-two LEOs who completed the survey, most reported some type of prior relationship with an individual with autism (61.1%) and approximately half had responded to a call involving an individual with autism in the past 12 months. Even though most of the participants had not completed training related to autism (72.2%), those with training were more likely to report

feeling adequately prepared to respond to the call. However, compared to the LEOs without training, those with training were equally likely to use physical force during the call, use handcuffs and have the call end in evaluation for involuntary hospitalization. There was also no relationship between LEOs feeling prepared for the call and their likelihood to employ the abovementioned three responses. These findings echo findings of prior research concluding that although LEOs might feel prepared responding to calls involving autistic individuals, they still need further training for more positive outcomes (Modell & Mak, 2008).

Law officers in England and Whales also expressed dissatisfaction with their interaction with individuals with autism (Crane et al., 2016). Although the Autism Act 2009 legislates autism-specific mandatory requirements on public health, social care and education services in England and Whales, the criminal justice system is exempt from these requirements. In a survey of 394 police officers, only 42% were satisfied with how they had worked with autistic individuals. When asked about various aspects of policing in relation to autism, they found obtaining written statements and conducting interviews with someone with autism to be the most difficult (Crane et al., 2016). Although 79% of respondents who had training about autism felt positive about their overall knowledge about autism, police officers felt unprepared in three specific areas: they felt their training lacked sufficient focus on autism in the criminal justice context (47%), they thought their training was overly simplistic (45%), and they felt their training lacked practical application for their roles as police officers (34%). Although most participants felt positive about their overall knowledge of autism, sample bias may have contributed to these participants' responses as it was an online survey and participants who may have felt positive about their training may have been more likely to volunteer their participation in the study.

In a small qualitative study examining the perspectives of LEOs, autistic individuals, and their caretakers, LEOs expressed the importance of autism-specific training and thought it should be mandatory (Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020). All six of the LEO participants thought that there is a need for LEOs to possess knowledge of the core characteristics of autism, especially related to social-communication impairments, sensory sensitivities, and restricted, repetitive interests. Many of the LEOs suggested training should attempt to address potential misinterpretations of the behaviors of autistic individuals, referencing the fact that some characteristics associated with autism such as odd gait and repetitive behaviors may resemble excessive drug or alcohol abuse. Exposure to autistic members and real-life practice with scenarios or role playing was also recommended by LEOs in several studies (Railey, Love, et al., 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). More research is warranted that investigates how autism specific training can increase LEO's knowledge of autism and improve their attitudes towards the Autism community.

When presented with vignettes to assess LEOs ability to identify autism when presented to them, officers were not consistently able to identify autism and expressed that they felt autism-targeted training would be helpful (Christiansen et al., 2021). In this pilot survey of 51 officers aimed to assess prior experience, comfort, knowledge, and ability to identify autistic individuals, those with previous training or with personal experience were more likely to recognize autism in clinical vignettes. Officers reported neutral comfort (mean 3.24/5) and moderate practical knowledge (mean 3.74/5) of autism, with those with personal experience being more likely to recognize features of autism in clinical vignettes. However, despite 52.9% reporting previous autism training, 56.9% of participants endorsed low overall knowledge of autism. The authors concluded that further study is needed to understand what additional training about autism may

be helpful to LEOs. Like Crane et al. (2016), most officers were not satisfied with their training related to autism and, as in the Gardner et al. (2019) study, officers' practical knowledge of what to do when encountering someone autistic was not impacted by either previous training or personal experience. An important finding from this pilot study was the importance of including a wide range of autism characteristics in training. Autism is classified as 'spectrum' condition and the variance in behavior patterns of autistic individuals can make it more difficult to quickly identity someone as autistic. Verbal ability, in particular ranges widely in autistic people, and all officers had a greater difficulty in identifying someone as autistic with stronger verbal abilities. Autistic individuals with verbal abilities may be at even greater risk for negative interaction with LEOs because LEOs might not recognize their autism related characteristics.

LEOs also expressed their frustration with some of the immutable requirements of their interaction with individuals on the job and felt like these requirements may have a particularly negative impact on autistic individuals (Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020) In a novel method for exploring experiences of autistic individuals and officers during the custody process, a participative walkthrough method was developed to provide both of these groups an interactive opportunity to identify areas where further support in the custody process was needed (Holloway et al., 2020). This walkthrough method, which used a combination of direct observation and interviews, has advantages over interviews and surveys after time has passed because participants may forget some details if reflecting on their experiences in hindsight; this study also focused specifically on the custody process which was not a specific focus in other studies. In this study, one custody sergeant and two detention officers led two autistic participants on separate walkthroughs of the custody process focusing on booking-in, processing and cell detention. The officers described the demands of the custody environment and felt that their roles

made it difficult to respond to the autistic detainees in a flexible way and restricted their ability to better support them in custody. They specifically mentioned time constraints and lack of available alternatives to detention as deterrents. These sentiments are consistent with Crane et al.'s study (2016) in which many police officers thought that time pressure and other restrictions placed upon them made it difficult for them to be more flexible. These findings suggest that there may be a need for structural or policy changes that enable LEOs to adapt their procedures when interacting with autistic people.

Perspectives and Experiences of Autistic Individuals

Although there are only a few studies that focus on the lived experiences of autistic individuals regarding their experiences and perceptions of law enforcement, there has been an uptick in publications in this area in the past couple of years. Of the six that were reviewed, three of them were published in the year 2020 (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Holloway et al., 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020), one in the year 2019 (Salerno & Schuller, 2019), and the oldest one was published in 2016 (Crane et al., 2016). The majority of participants from all studies that have interacted with LEOs report negative experiences. Respondents offered perspectives on what challenges LEOs faced in their experiences with them, what challenges they anticipate police would face them in theoretical interactions, and also on ways that they feel their interactions could be improved.

Perceived Challenges

Of particular concern to autistic participants was that LEOs might misinterpret their typical autistic behaviors (Holloway et al., 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). In semi-structured interviews of six autistic particpants aimed to better

understand LEO's needs and their interactions with autistic individuals, all autistic particpants identified behaviors that they thought might be misinterpreted or stand out (Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020). All of them described difficulties with social interactions and all idenitifed their restricted, repetitive behaviors and interests. Several of them also described their sensory sensitivities to lights, sounds and physical touch. When describing real or hypothetical interactions with LEOs, five out of six participants believed they would feel anxious and overhewlemed while interacting with LEOs. In particular, they said they would experience difficulty in conversation with them, maintaining eye contact, controlling their repetetive behaviors such as motor movements or vocalizations and regulating their facial expressions. Similarly, out of 35 participants from Canada, 80% of whom had at least one interaction with LEOs, the most significant theorized challenge described by participants was being misinterpreted by LEOs (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). They were concerned that LEOs would misinterpret their typical autistic characteristics, expressions and behaviors, such as aversion to eye contact and touch, fidgeting/stimming, and communication challenges as resistance, deceit, guilt or aggression. Communication differences and sensory sensitivities were also recurring sentiments from participants. When they are feeling overwhelmed, they expressed being unable to communicate, referring to this as "shutting down" or "selective mutism." Literal langauge was also a reported barrier to communication with LEOs. They reported taking things literally and not responding well to open-ended questions.

Sensory sensivity is thought by autistic individuals to be another problematic area in police interactions, namely issues with lights, sound and touch. Flashing lights and loud sirens led many to feel "sensory overload" (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). An aversion to loud noises was another recurring theme, particulary being yelled at by a LEO. Being touched by a police officer

was also commonly mentioned as a potential problem (Crane et al., 2016; Holloway et al., 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Communication barriers, exposure to sensory demands, and the emotional impact of the physical setting and custody process were reported as negative experiences throughout the custody process itself (Holloway et al., 2020). In the participatory walk through of the custody process, the autistic participants actively engaged with LEOs while researchers were able to asssess their behavioral and emotional responses. Both participants were concerned about the physical surroundings and the emotional impact the custody process would have on autistic people. Concerns about the physical surroundings included the unfamiliarity of the custody environment, the small spaces of the holding cells and the interview rooms, the bright lights preventing sleep, and the lack of privacy including the open toilet. The participants also felt they would have a need for greater emotional support, highlighting the emotional impact detention would have had on them if this were actually happening, concerns about long-term emotional impacts from the experience, and the recognition of the potential of custody staff to minimize negative emotional impact with understanding of how to talk to autistic people. Communication difficulites were seen as having the potential to contribute to overall anxiety and particpants were less anxious when they were given helpful explanations as to what was happening. They felt a need for more information about police procedures, a need for clear, unambigous communication, and a desire for less technical language. For example, when asked where she lived, one participant only gave the name of the city and only when prompted, realized the officer wanted a specific address. She thought if questions were phrased more specifically, it would help autistic individuals understand what information was being requested. Autistic participants expressed similar dissatisfaction with interviews that were conducted at police

stations. Although LEOs were study were largely satisfied with their dealings with the autsitic community (42%), 69% of autistic adults were dissatisfied with their experiences (Crane et al., 2016). A lack of clarity and explanation, inappropriate physical environment, such as the interview rooms, and the lack of appropriate support and explanation were complaints of the 31 autistic partipants.

In the participatory walkthough, sensory difficulties were also experienced such as different noises, visual sensory stress from artificial lighting, and tactile demands, such a fingerprinting and wearing uncomfortable clothing (Holloway et al., 2020). The themes that came out of the autistic individuals' experiences partially overlapped with those from the officers in the same study, but the reasons underlying some of the themes were different. While the physical layout of the spaces and the emotional impact of the custody process caused anxiety to the autistic participants, the officers highlighted the issues that restricted their ability to best support the autistic individuals in custody such as time contraints and lack of available alternatives.

Suggestions for Improvement

Overall feelings of autistic individuals about LEOs were that LEOs lacked appropriate awareness of autism and typical autistic behavior (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020). Recommendations, therefore, included training to educate LEOs about autism, more community interaction with Autistic people, use of specific support strategies by LEOs to help lessen anxiety, ways to facilitate recognition that the person is autistic and allowing autistic people to display autistic behaviors that reduce their anxiety. They also suggested including autistic people in the training process of LEOs (Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Autistic individuals across studies felt that if LEOs used specific support strategies upon their interactions, the outcomes would be more positive (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). For example, LEOs should allow autistic people to engage in typical autistic behaviors such as self-stimulation (Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020). If autistic people are allowed to engage in self-soothing behaviors, such as repetitive movements ("stimming") and fidgeting upon interaction with LEOs, their anxiety could be lessened. Participants also thought that not forcing eye contact would also help alleviate anxiety (Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Autistic participants also suggested that LEOs create a calmer, less stimulatory environment to facilitate more positive interactions with autistic individuals. (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Reducing loud noises and lights from sirens and using a calm voice were some of the suggested ways of doing this. In a mixed-methods design using a questionnaire and interviews, autistic participants in Australia talked in general about the need for better understanding of autism by Australian police, especially when they are having meltdowns, which they fear could be mistaken as violence or aggression (Gibbs & Haas, 2020). Participants reported that officers could be deterred from using force if they realized the difference between meltdowns and genuine threats. Participants also recommended training so that LEOs could learn to recognize autistic behaviors, accommodate their communications such as using non-threatening tone and slowing down verbal communications to allow for processing time, and using simple, direct language.

Other recommendations from autistic perspectives included training for LEOs to quickly recognize that the individuals with whom they are interacting are autistic, and training for facilitating disclosure of a disability. Recommendations included a database or registry that

would have this information and special cards or tags labeling them as autistic for an easy mode of identification. Specific types of questions were also suggested to facilitate disclosure such as asking them if they have a developmental disability, informing them they have a right to disclose disabilities, or asking if there are any accommodations that individual needs (Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020; Salerno & Schuller, 2019).

Education and Training

Given the reports of negative interactions between LEOs and the autistic community, there is a demonstrated need for autism-specific training for LEOs to cultivate positive interactions (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019; Salerno & Schuller, 2019). With the establishment of the Community Oriented Policing Service (COPS) model in within the United States Department of Justice in 1994, LEOs are encouraged to build relationships with all people in their communities – especially those with disabilities or mental health concerns (Railey, Love, et al., 2020). Without training geared towards autism awareness, however, autistic people are likely to feel inadequately supported from LEOs. Despite the recognition by LEOs that training may help them better handle encounters with autistic people, Crane et al. (2016) reports that only 37% of LEOs had received training on autism specifically. Even though New Jersey mandated that officers hired before the year 2008 be trained in autism awareness by 2011, many of those officers have not yet undergone that training (Kelly & Hassett-Walker, 2016).

There is a paucity of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of training. In a systematic review of law enforcement training related to autism, only two studies satisfied inclusion criteria (Railey, Love, et al., 2020). Both studies evaluated the effect of autism specific trainings on knowledge of autism and confidence in identifying and supporting individuals with autism. The studies reported statistically significant improvements in LEOs self-reported awareness of

autism, their confidence in supporting them, and their confidence in identifying and interacting with people with autism (Murphy et al., 2017; Teagardin et al., 2012). However, both studies had limitations that make it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. Only Teagardin et al. (2012) used a randomized control design and included a control group, but randomization occurred at a cohort level and all officers that appeared on one day were treated as a cohort. Murphy et al. (2017) utilized a cross-sectional, pre-test/post-test design, but had a very small sample of only 11 LEOs. Additionally, selection bias may have been present in both studies because little information is given about who may have chosen to participate in the studies. Outcome measures in both studies relied on self-reported measures and actual behavioral measures were not reported in either study. While improving confidence in - and knowledge about - autism is important, there is also no empirical evidence connecting possession of knowledge about autism with improvements in behavior during interactions with autistic people; behavioral outcome measures would strengthen both studies.

LEOs knowledge of autism, self-confidence in responding to calls involving autistic individuals, and self-monitoring of performance increased after four training sessions in Florida (Gardner & Campbell, 2020). In a study that was not included in the above-mentioned systematic review (likely because it was not published in time), 157 LEOs completed pre-test and post-test surveys related to autism-specific training, completing a 16-item-measure of autism knowledge before and after the training. Additionally, they completed a six-item measure in confidence in response to a call involving an autistic individual and a five-item measure of confidence in ability to self-monitor their response to a call involving an autistic individual. Although LEOs who participated in the training demonstrated significant improvements in assessed knowledge of autism, as well as significant improvements in self-confidence in responding and self-

monitoring, there was no relationship between prior autism-specific training and the use of force, handcuffs, or the call resulting in evaluation for involuntary hospitalization. This again underscores the fact that improvement in knowledge of autism does not necessarily mean improved behavioral outcomes when interacting with autistic individuals.

Police Awareness Education for Autistic Individuals

Effective transition education is an important part of secondary special education services for autistic students (Test et al., 2014). Police awareness training for autistic students could give students skills to interact positively with LEOs while they are in school and after they are finished. Recently published studies are exploring ways to teach successful police interaction skills to autistic individuals as was suggested by some autistic participants in studies about their perspectives (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). Although there is not a universally adopted curriculum to teach disabled students the skills they need to interact successfully with SROs and other LEOs, some private and non-profit organizations have designed such programs. BE SAFE The Movie (Iland, 2014) is a program that uses video modeling to teach police interaction skills to teens and young adults. The movie is paired with a companion curriculum to provide lesson plans for teachers that use role playing to practice interacting with LEOs. Diamond & Hogue (2021) suggest a two-pronged approach for awareness training to provide students with disabilities and LEOs a structured and systematic approach to prepare for interaction (Diamond & Hogue, 2021). The first prong focuses on teaching students with disabilities knowledge and awareness of LEOs and the second prong focuses on providing the necessary training and skills to police officers to engage and interact appropriately with students with disabilities. Their hope is that by implementing this approach, the burden is shared by school-based practitioners in implementing training to support the successful interaction of students with disabilities and

LEOs. Another avenue that is being explored to teach police interaction skills to adolescents is virtual reality (VR) (McCleery et al., 2020). Although they have only published a safety and feasibility study of using VR for this purpose to date, the authors concluded that VR is safe and can be used for this purpose. Students enter the VR world and interact with a live professional that is simulating police interactions with them in VR. This is a unique and novel approach to teaching police awareness to adolescents. Despite these few developed or suggested curricula for teaching autistic students about Law Enforcement, there is no current mandated education about this for them.

Research Significance and Questions

Given the fast-growing number of SROs on school campuses, the increasing prevalence of autism in Black children, and the disproportional number of Black and disabled students disciplined in schools and funneled into the criminal justice system, (Merkwae, 2015), it is important to include the perspectives of SROs and Black autistic students in research studies. Current research on interactions between SROs and autistic individuals is limited; research between SROs and Black, autistic students is even more limited. Although there are a few studies that focus on interactions between LEOs and autistic individuals, none of them focus on the interactions between SROs, specifically, and autistic students in school. There are also no published studies asking autistic individuals about their perspectives of their experiences with SROs, specifically, or asking SROs, specifically, about their perspectives on and experiences with autistic individuals. Further, for the six studies reviewed for this paper that analyze autistic individuals' perspectives of their interactions with LEOs, racial diversity was not apparent in any of them. Four studies did not mention information on race (Crane et al., 2016; Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Helverschou et al., 2018; Holloway et al., 2020), one of them reported participants were

64.7% White, with no other data given for the remaining participants (Salerno & Schuller, 2019), and one reported five out of six participants were White and the other one was “two or more races”(Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020). Additionally, only four of the studies focusing on experiences of autistic people and LEOs were conducted in the United States. Each country has its own policies in place in terms of training and protocol with interactions with civilians, and it is important to evaluate diverse perspectives in this country to understand how to best address improving these interactions, especially in our schools. If we want to change the trajectory of the school to prison pipeline in the United States for Black, disabled, and autistic students and students experiencing the intersectionality of these identities, we must examine the perspectives and experiences of LEOs and Black autistic individuals to prepare both groups for better interactions.

The specific goals of this study are to

1) Examine the perceptions of interactions between Black, autistic students and LEOs in school and beyond.
2) Analyze the satisfaction of Black, autistic individuals and LEOs with their interactions.
3) Identify autism training for LEOs and police-awareness education for autistic students and related recommendations from each group.

The aim of this research is to better understand the perceptions of interactions between SROs and Black, autistic students to ultimately construct methods of interaction for better outcomes. The school to prison pipeline was created through imposing suspensions, expulsions, and juvenile justice referrals on children in schools, decreasing their school engagement, and increasing their risk of interaction with the criminal justice system. With the disproportionately

high number of minoritized and disabled students who ultimately interact with the criminal justice system, incorporating a theory that addresses issues of race and disability concurrently is appropriate. A qualitative methodology was be used to generate meaningful, descriptive data.

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using criterion sampling, in which participants met predefined criteria, and through snowball sampling, where participants were selected through referrals by previously selected participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Recruitment information included my email. I then provided an explanation of study, consent form, and demographic questionnaire that were completed prior to the interviews followed with a link to a sign up for Zoom interviews using Calendly, an online scheduling site. At the start of the Zoom meeting, I reviewed the study and obtained verbal consent to proceed with the study and to record the interviews.

Autistic Individuals

Black, autistic participants were recruited through social networking sights that focus on autism and diversity, and listserves such as the College Autism Network. Inclusion criteria included adults who identified as African American or Black, were ages 18 or over, self-reported being autistic, went to at least one school with law enforcement on campus, and who understood English. Adults 18 years or older who were no longer in high school were invited to reflect upon their past school experiences with LEOs for this study. Several modes of communication, such as typing/texting/ "chat" feature on Zoom, were offered to accommodate the communication preferences of participants, although no participants requested accommodations.

Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs)

LEOs were recruited through emails to organizations involved with SROs, snowball sampling, and word of mouth. Inclusion criteria were law enforcement officers who work or have worked with one or more U.S. elementary or high schools and who understand English.

Participants

A total of four Black, autistic male individuals filled out the screening form and were interviewed for this study. A total of four male law enforcement officers who had experience working in schools filled out the screening form and were interviewed for this study. Three of the officers identified as White and one as Hispanic. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, it was difficult to find participants who agreed to be interviewed for this study; however, a rich narrative emerged as a result of these in-depth interviews. Pseudonyms were used in this study in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Table 1 presents the basic demographics of the autistic participants and Table 2 presents the basic demographic information of the LEOs.

Table 1. Demographics of Black, autistic participants

Name	Age	Race	Gender	State
Michael	24	African American	Male	Virginia
Anthony	34	African American	Male	Illinois
Martin	39	African American	Male	Arkansas
Alex	20	African American	Male	Missouri

Name	Race	Gender	State	Years in Law Enforcement
Officer Eric Ross	White	Male	Alabama	22 Years
Sergeant Adam Montoya	Hispanic	Male	California	18 Years
Sergeant James Stone	White	Male	California	18 Years
Officer Justin Cole	White	Male	California	23 Years

Table 2. Demographics of Law Enforcement Officers

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants with open-ended questions aimed at answering the three research questions. The questions were derived from a thorough review of the literature reviewed for this study. Questions included inquiries about the nature of their interactions and their perceptions and satisfaction with their interactions. For the autistic participants, questions were included about any police-awareness education they received in school and their thoughts about such a program; for LEOs, questions were included about autism training they might have received and their perspectives on it as well on their thoughts on police-awareness education for autistic students.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between mid-March and the end of May 2022. Participants chose a time that worked for them using the online website, Calendly, and were sent automatic reminders according to their inputted preferences. All participants completed the interviews which ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform and recorded with verbal permission from participants. Each interview was recorded with transcriptions via Otter.ai with consent. This study was self-funded. The participants were divided into groups (LEOs and autistic individuals), and they were each entered in a raffle for a $100 gift card to Amazon (for a total of two $100 gift cards). The website random.org was used to generate two random drawings, and participants were able to confirm that they were entered in the raffle and that it took place.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the responses. The phenomenological approach emphasizes understanding the individual's subjective experience and seeks the individual's meaning and perceptions of an experience (Mertens, 2019). A thematic analysis identified overarching themes from the individual responses - its flexible approach allowed for the emergence of new insights.

Coding

A two-phase coding strategy was used with initial coding and focused coding. In the initial phase, I coded individual words, lines, segments, and incidents. I started coding as I collected the data, preliminarily jotting down words or phrases for codes on the notes in a different text color than the transcripts. This "pre-coding" helped form the preliminary codes and helped me keep track of my initial impressions of the data (Saldaña, 2016). I read and re-read the

data and initial codes and then developed focused codes. The focused codes were categories that described segments of the data explicitly. I then grouped the focused codes into themes and continued to identify quotes that supported the themes. I shared the focused codes with a doctoral researcher from my study group and we worked together to group them into themes and discussed new and divergent themes until consensus was obtained. We examined the transcriptions together and used thematic analysis as we continued to identify themes and identify direct quotes that supported them. Themes were then transferred to a Google Document where they were color coded with digital highlighting and relevant quotes were excerpted from each interview. Figure 1 provides an example of an excerpt from the transcript with initial and focused codes. Figure 2 provides an example of how focused codes became themes. Additional examples of the process of theming the data are provided in Appendix C.

Figure 1.

Initial coding of a transcript excerpt

Coded Notes	**Transcription**
Recollection of night unclear In a serious accident Was in pain Unfamiliar with pain Unclear of exactly what he said Did not seem like LEOs cared about him	Well, that that night was hazy, because I just gotten out of a pretty serious accident. And I was in a lot of pain that I didn't really recognize. So my interactions like, like, like, my vocal interactions with these police officers are kind of hazy, but it didn't seem like they cared about me very much. Like it didn't seem like they really cared about the,

Didn’t seem like LEOS cared Didn’t seem like LEOs cared about other party LEOs behavior was stoic Confused about LEOs behavior Questioned why they didn’t care Questioned why not care about others Confusion over priorities of LEOs Thought they needed medical attention Thought the details were less important Getting medical care should be priority Confusion over focus on drinking Confusion over focus on smoking, drugs Confusion over focus on his meds Confusion with question Confusion over focus on suicide attempt Does not make sense to him	the, the physical state of the (name of other people in accident) and it wasn't even - it was stoic behavior because it didn't really it didn't make any sense -why why wouldn't you care about the state of of these people? Why Why wouldn't you want to take everyone to the hospital and then try to figure out what happened afterwards -after after one's been checked out? Why Why are you so worried about if I've been drinking or if I've been smoking whatever or doing drugs or taking any medication why or why are you so concerned with with the question of if I was actually trying to kill myself for now why-, like it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense.

Focused coding from transcripts

Coded Notes	**Transcription**
Serious pain after accident Confused that officers showed lack of care Confused by police reaction Confused by police priorities Confused by focus on being under the influence of something Confused by focus on suicide	Well, that that night was hazy, because I just gotten out of a pretty serious accident. And I was in a lot of pain that I didn't really recognize. So my interactions like, like, like, my vocal interactions with these police officers are kind of hazy, but it didn't seem like they cared about me very much. Like it didn't seem like they really cared about the, the, the physical state of the (name of other people in accident) and it wasn't even - it was stoic behavior because it didn't really it didn't make any sense -why why wouldn't you care about the state of of these people? Why Why wouldn't you want to take everyone to the hospital and then try to figure out what happened afterwards -after after one's been checked out? Why Why are you so worried about if I've been drinking or if I've been smoking whatever or doing drugs or taking any medication why or why are you so concerned with with the question of if I was actually trying to kill myself for now why-,

	like it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense.

Figure 2.

Constructing themes from focused codes

Focused Code	*Theme*	*Supporting Quotes*
Confused that officers showed lack of care Confused by police reaction Confused by police priorities Confused by focus on being under the influence of something Confused by focus on suicide	*Confusion*	"Why are you so worried about if I've been drinking or if I've been smoking whatever or doing drugs or taking any medication – or why are you so concerned with the question of if I was actually trying to kill myself for now - why? Like it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense…."

The following conventions were used in the findings: additional explanations were provided: (text), and word fillers such as "you know" and "um" were omitted.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Several methods of validation were employed to endure trustworthiness and credibility. To ensure maximum variation of participants, I included participants of various ages and who lived in several states and school districts. The autistic participants each went to school in a different state and went to schools that varied in size. The LEOs also were each from different school districts. Careful attention was given to accurately reflect all the participants' perspectives by reading over their statements many times and by using direct quotes. I also kept a research journal to keep track of my own thoughts throughout this entire process to check my own biases as I was interpreting and writing my findings.

Positionality Statement

I was deeply mindful of my position as a White, non-autistic, female researcher who is not involved in law enforcement as I aimed to center Black, autistic perspectives and the perspectives of LEOs in this research. I do not share the lived experiences of those at the center of this study, and although I continually strive to further my understanding of what such experiences are like, I know that I am not a part of these communities. I stated my positionality to each of my participants at the outset of our interview and expressed my appreciation for their trust in sharing their experiences with me. Additionally, as a mother of autistic son, I have a nuanced understanding of what it is like to be autistic. Further, as a doctoral student, I have been

a Teacher's Assistant for the Disability Studies department at UCLA and that has helped shape my understanding of disability, race and what it means to live in the intersectionality of both of those identities. I wrote in a reflection journal throughout this research to check my personal biases and help promote my self-understanding in the role of researcher and the differences between me and my participants (Meyer & Willis, 2019). I used a reflexive approach through journaling when contacting potential participants and when analyzing the data once it was collected to help keep my personal biases in check.

CHAPTER V: RESULTS

The findings from this study are broken down into three sections that emerged as major themes from this study. In the first section, I discuss the perceptions and perspectives of both groups of interactions that occurred within the school setting. In the second section I discuss the perceptions and perspectives of both groups of interactions that occurred outside of the school setting. In the third section, I discuss training and education received for both groups for optimal interactions and related recommendations. Overall findings are reflected in Tables 3 and 4, respectively, below.

Had interactions with LEOs in school	Satisfied with Interactions in School	Had interactions with LEOs outside of School?	Satisfied with that Interactions	Recommend training about autism for LEOs	Name	Received police-awareness education when in school	Recommend police - awareness education for students
No	N/A	Yes	No	Yes	Michael	No	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Anthony	No	No
Yes	Yes and No	Yes	No	Yes	Martin	No	Yes
No	N/A	No	N/A	Yes	Alex	No	Yes

Table 3. Overview of experiences, satisfaction, and education of autistic participants

Name	Had interactions with autistic students in school	Satisfied with interactions in school	Had Interactions with autistic individuals outside of school	Satisfied with those interactions	Recommend police-awareness education for autistic students	Participated in police awareness education for students with disabilities
Sergeant Ross	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sergeant Stone	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sergeant Montoya	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Officer Cole	Not Sure	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Table 4. Overview of experiences, satisfaction, and involvement in police-awareness education for LEOs.

Interactions in Schools

To address the first two goals of this study, examining the perceptions of interactions between Black, autistic students (Group One) and LEOs (Group Two) and their satisfaction with

these experiences, I asked participants if they had any interactions when they were in school and how they felt about them.

Group One

Of the four autistic participants in this group, two of them, Anthony and Martin recalled having interactions with LEOs in school. While Anthony was satisfied with his interactions, Martin was satisfied with some of his interactions and very unsatisfied with others. Three of the four LEOs recalled having interactions and all of them reported being satisfied with them.

Each of the participants that had interactions in school spoke fondly of positive, friendly relationships that were formed between students and LEOs. For Anthony, his close relationships developed with some of the officers through the dual roles they played as officers and sports coaches at his school. He said,

> At first, they tried to figure out how to deal with me as autistic person. But then eventually once they saw that I could play (football), they respected me more and more…I didn't fall into that stereotype because they respected my play - it actually supported me. And they protect me from all bullying even.

Having grown up in Chicago in a school that required walking through metal detectors, Anthony was used to interaction with law enforcement officers in and around school. He spoke fondly of his head coach and defensive coordinator of his football team, both of whom were also officers. He also developed relationships with officers who worked in the local park districts while he was in high school, one of whom he considers "like a father figure" and "mentor" to this day. He overall felt protected by the officers with whom he had relationships in school.

Martin also developed positive relationships with some of the officers in his school – relationships that he maintains to this day. Describing a difficult childhood in which he was nonverbal until the age of 13, placed on many medications as he was sent through 17 foster homes and 16 hospitals which included electrical shock therapy and other forms of abuse, Martin appreciated the kindness of the officers in school who would escort him to class.
What surprised him, however, was that it was the White officers, as opposed to the Black officers on campus, with whom he developed these close bonds:

> And surprisingly, the White officers like used to take me to class. And if …my teacher needed somebody to escort me to my next class, they was doing it gladly…I can call three of their names right now, since I know them since I was in sixth grade. And I still know them. To this day. I still know their kids (and) their grandkids.

Like Anthony, Martin is still in touch with officers from his time in school. As Anthony and Marin are currently 34 and 39 years old, respectively, these positive relationships with officers from their school days have had a lasting impact.

Despite having long lasting positive relationships with three officers he knew from school, Martin also reported negative experiences interacting with LEOs in school. Sometimes, he felt a difference between the way he was treated by White officers and Black officers and thought that he was treated worse by officers who were Black because he was Black. He explained,

> I saw how they talked to the other races. And it was pleasant, 'Have a good day.' Soon me and my friends would all pass, "what all you N-words doing? Y'all ain't gonna be studying in class anyway, probably going to … the back of the school, drinking and smoking.' Now again, these people are black, so I was confused… For me…the coin was

flipped. I would expect it from somebody else. Not…my people. I got it mostly from my people."

Although this was over 20 years ago, this degrading treatment he received by officers he considered his "people" was still hurtful.

Martin also reported very negative interactions with LEOs all throughout his time in middle school in Georgia and high school in New York. He attributes "getting treated like a suspect" to the fact that he was living in poverty in "the projects" and was Black:

> Oh, anybody that may look like a suspect, or they may think that looks like a suspect, you will get treated like a suspect. So, you know, it was the constant pat downs, it was the constant, you know, get on the walls, it was the constant, you know, kicking your leg apart, search your stuff… of that nature.

Non-verbal until he was 13, he was overwhelmed by the aggressive way he was touched and thrown into police cars from officers that were at his school. He recalls repeatedly urinating on himself when he was overcome by anxiety from the way he was being treated. During his most consequential interaction with officers in high school, Martin got accused of a crime he did not commit and ended up spending five months in jail in the middle of tenth grade. Being in and out of many foster homes and group homes throughout his childhood, Martin was often hungry and took advantage of free lunches offered at school. One day, the person sitting next to him initiated a food fight which led to a group of students being called to the principal's office and then being sent to a Juvenile detention facility for "damaging school property." Having never had been in trouble in school, Martin was very confused as to how this happened to him. Even though this

was many years ago he still feels the humiliation he felt when they were taking him in hand cuffs down the school hallway. He recalls,

> And they were walking me down the hallway. handcuffs on, head down…Listen, let me tell you something. I don't care what nobody say- that's the most embarrassing experience on God's Green Earth…you see a girl you like - you may got a crush on... You walk around that long hallway with handcuffs on, your head down, you hearing gasping of breaths Like 'Dang, man, what happened?' Like you in all of it.

Further, he is still upset that he was accused of throwing food when he would never have wasted food because he was usually hungry because of not getting enough food at home. Additionally, his time spent in jail was horrible. He ended up spending five months in an adult prison with "murderers, rapists, kidnappers - grown men" until eventually a judge dismissed his case and released him and his classmates from jail. In his reflections, it was evident that the wrongful accusations and humiliation of being handcuffed in school on the way to the police car were at least equally upsetting as the time he was forced to spend in an adult jail cell.

Group Two

The officers that reported having interactions with disabled students also reflected on the positive relationships they formed and all reported being satisfied with their experiences. The officers interviewed for this study spent varied amounts of times working with schools. Sergeant Montoya has been an officer for 18 years and worked a variety of roles including undercover work. When he was an SRO, he was the only SRO for 4100 students in his district. Sergeant Ross was a teacher before he became an officer and worked with juveniles in schools for most of his 22 years in law enforcement. He then became a supervisor of SROs in schools for eight years

before he retired. He was the only SRO for all 12 schools in his district when he began his work which included 3,000 students in just one of their high schools. Sergeant Stone also spent most of his career as an SRO and was also a supervisor of SROs in schools at the end of his career in schools. Officer Cole mainly worked outside of schools with surveillance, domestic terrorism, and gangs, but would go into schools when he was called in, usually to charter or private schools that did not have their own SROs on campus. Themes that emerged included the importance of collaboration with faculty in school, the benefit of forming positive relationships with students in school, and long- term positive relationships that they maintain with disabled students long after they graduate high school.

The officers valued collaboration with special education teachers and faculty and tried to spend time with them in their classrooms as a way fostering relationships with the students. Sergeant Ross explained that the faculty

> had special relationships with their students and that was my way in. And then I was able to see them interact when a student was under stress…if he was having a bad day or something had upset that student, and I saw how they interact with them and…the techniques that they use to calm that student down.

Sergeant Ross now trains more junior SROs about how best to interact with students and emphasizes the importance of getting to know the teachers in schools, especially the special education teachers. He continued,

> If I didn't work with them, how would I know the students? How would I know how to deal with that student when they're upset, or they're agitated, or there's some type of stress going on in their life?... We teach our SROs in our training that you are really

> doing yourself a disservice if you don't get to know your school, your special education teachers and aides that work with these students.

Referring to lunch times and cooking times with students, Sergeant Ross referred to them as "relationship builders:"

> You know how they always say, 'the time families have around the table,' that's kind of what it was. Everybody's relaxed. Everybody's eating…cookies, sometimes it was some type of casserole, whatever it may be, but we sit down and eat together…and the kids would get excited about you coming in also.

The genuine affection he had towards these students and desire to build rapport with them was apparent through his tone and his enthusiasm towards this topic. Sergeant Stone also visited classrooms during lunch to build relationships with the faculty and students. He explained,

> It's just literally as a stop-in, getting to know the educator first. We have to build a relationship with the educator to help them understand what our true value is and understand where our true heart is. If the administration or the school officials believe that our purpose is to come in and arrest kids, that'll never fly, right?... If they understand our heart comes into it with the idea to try to build those relationships, then they tend to welcome us in those classrooms. "Oh, look, it's officer so on and say hi." And you know, we give maybe a fist bump or say hello, and, and that collaboration is very beneficial.

It was clear that Sergeant Stone thinks that there could be some misconceptions as to the roles and intentions of SROs in schools and that it is up to the officers to "help them understand what (their) true value is..true heart is." Mentioning that there is the possibility that administration

might think the purpose of SROs is to “come in and arrest kids” signaled Sergeant Stone’s belief that such a perception exists and needs to be dispelled. As it was to Sergeant Ross, it was important to him to share that his intentions are far from that and how hard he worked to dispel that misperception in schools. It was also important to him to share his narrative of working hard to build trust and relationships with families and students with disabilities. It was evident from our conversation that officers can be in complex and difficult situations while navigating their duties to ensure a safe environment in school and interacting with students whose disabilities may cause them to exhibit atypical or even dangerous behavior. He said that he

> spent a lot of time with the special education instructors...because…then (he) was able to see… see them interact when a student was, you know, under stress, if he was having a bad day or something had, you know, upset that student and I saw how they interact with them and, and the techniques that they use to calm that student down….what it took, and how they, the cues that they use to kind of, you know, divert the attention away from what the stressor was, and to calm the student down.

Sergeant Stone relayed a story that exemplified the benefits of these types of observations and relationship builders. One time, a nonverbal student who he estimated was 6 foot 4 inches and 240 pounds, became very agitated in the lunchroom. Instead of pushing the picture of a hamburger on his iPad as he usually did to communicate, he was growing increasingly agitated and not successfully communicating his needs. Instead of approaching him, Sergeant Stone quickly sent for his teacher and aide whom he had observed interacting well with him in class and they were able to take him aside and figure out what his needs were (he was actually feeling ill and did not want to eat anything). Sergeant Stone said,

> If I hadn't had a relationship with those teachers and understood that this kid didn't speak, he couldn't verbalize and I just walked in on it as an officer off of the street, he may have reacted differently.

Sergeant Stone felt like there is a value in having officers in school all the time because outcomes of potentially violent situations could be much better with officers who have spent the time building relationships with students with disabilities and staff who are already well-acquainted with them.

Sergeant Ross relayed with pride another story about the relationship he was able to build with Adam, an autistic student whom he helped overcome his fear of officers that developed after witnessing his father get pulled over by an officer while driving. He developed a plan in collaboration with Adam's teacher and parents that involved him gradually increasing his presence around Adam in a non-threatening way. Beginning with a casual wave to the class through the window, Sergeant Ross gradually moved closer into the classroom until he could walk into the classroom without upsetting Adam. He now encourages other officers to build "proactive interactions." He said,

> we believe that if we build a relationship where they're not when they're not in crisis, that we have a higher likelihood of being able to de-escalate the crisis at the moment that we are needed.

He referred to his motto of being "consistent and persistent." This applies both to school safety rules and checks such as doors being locked and having cameras everywhere necessary and also to his relationship with students with disabilities. He said,

> When I'm working with our students with disabilities, and I'm trying to build a relationship, I want to be consistent, and I want to be persistent. I want to continually strive to build a positive relationship and…help this child become successful, whatever success looks like for that child. You do that with that consistency. And then you just pour your heart into it, and you stay persistent with it to keep pushing and keep driving.

Sergeant Ross demonstrated his commitment to persistence through the story he relayed about Adam and the extent he went to work with his teachers and family to help overcome his fear of officers. Sergeants Ross, Stone, and Montoya spoke of maintaining meaningful relationships with disabled students for years after they graduate. One factor that contributes to this is that students in special education often stay in high school longer than the typical four years. Officer Ross is in regular contact with a former student who he now sees working in the local grocery store and with Adam, the student who was initially fearful of him and all officers. Adam's father recently told him how appreciative they were of his efforts. He explained,

> He just was overflowing with how appreciative of he was at the time that I spent with his child, when he was at (the school), and the relationship and the bond that we were able to build over the time… He is an incredible kid, and he still is an incredible young man.

Adam, now 32 years old, and Sergeant Ross maintain their relationship both in church and as friends on Facebook to this day. Sergeant Stone also spoke enthusiastically about his relationship with an autistic student, Justin, whom he has known since fourth grade. He described the tremendous amount of effort he put into forming a relationship with him in school since he was in fourth grade. Although Justin was destructive to property and violent at times, Sergeant Stone got to know him so well that eventually just the sight of him would calm the student down. When he graduated, Sergeant Stone continued to visit him in the local burger joint he worked in.

He continually talks about wizardry with Justin even though he is not personally interested in it. He knows that connecting with Justin about wizardry, one of his areas of passion, would help build his relationship with him. Sergeant Montoya also spoke fondly about frequently seeing former students in the neighborhood and how he loves catching up with them as they grow older. He explained,

> It's so great to just have those relationships and being able to have those conversations and earn their trust and have that open dialogue. Because we see it. We're a microcosm of our society right now. And it's so difficult in society, it's either, unfortunately, you're 'with us or against us' kind of mentality all over society when that shouldn't be how it is. We're all in this together.

Sergeant Montoya felt that there is a negative perception of law enforcement that views them as not working on the same team as the rest of society and that bothered him a great deal. He views it as being "in this together" and wished that others would view law enforcement in the same way.

Interactions Beyond School

Group One

Three out of the four participants from Group One reported having experiences with LEOs beyond school, and they were all very upset with those interactions. Some common themes from these interactions were feeling like the officers did not care about their well-being, confusion over why the officers were responding the way that they were, and not getting recognition or accommodations for being autistic. In contrast, all the LEOs reported being satisfied with the interactions they had with disabled individuals outside of the school setting.

Feeling like the officers did not care enough about their well-being was a sentiment expressed by the three autistic participants who had interactions with LEOs outside of school. Michael, a 21-year-old engineering student at the time (two years ago), still cannot understand the cold reaction of the officers. Having just been involved in a significant car accident, he was confused about the officers' focus in the immediate aftermath. He tried to tell them what happened, and that he had injured his knee, but they did not seem to care about how he was physically doing. Instead, they immediately jumped to ask him if he was under the influence or trying to kill himself, neither of which was true. He said,

> I was in a lot of pain that I didn't really recognize…but it didn't seem like they cared about me very much.

Although two years has passed since the accident, Michael was still visibly upset by the officers' lack of concern for his well-being. Unfortunately, the situation only became increasingly dire for him that evening as he was arrested, questioned without an attorney or parent present, and ultimately unjustly sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Martin had repeated negative experiences with LEOs beyond school and also never felt like they showed sensitivity to how he was feeling:

> Well, I always hyperventilated every time they touched me because again, you have to understand I have autism. So calm touch and deep touch are the little issues for me. So I have to know that you are calmly touching me versus aggressively and deeply touching me. And again, years ago, police wasn't calmly touching you. They was aggressively following you and patting you down. So I hyperventilated every time somebody used to do that - I used the bathroom on myself while he was patting me down and stuff of that nature, then the words came out, you know, they start saying stuff that was not

> appropriate. And, you know, they threw me in a wagon, or they threw me in the back seat.

Martin mentioned the embarrassment he suffered from having bathroom accidents several times during our interview. He still cannot understand how officers could observe this happen to a child/young adult and show no concern about how he was doing.

Confusion lingers with participants from Group One over their interactions with LEOs. Michael was completely confused as to why the officers were responding to him the way that they did. He was having trouble walking because he hurt his knee and he was concerned as to how the passengers in the other car involved in the accident were doing. The officers paid no attention to his knee hurting and ignored his questions asking about the others involved in the accident. Instead, they asked him if he was trying to kill himself. Due to his echolalia, a common trait of autism where individuals repeat back what they hear, the officers mistook the way he responded for an affirmative response to intended suicide. This led to them taking him into their police car and straight to jail and with ultimately being charged with attempted murder and aggravated and malicious wounding for non-fatal car accident (that was actually caused by a seizure while he was driving - another condition often associated with autism). It has now been two years since Michael was released from prison with a partial pardon after serving three years in prison for the accident. He said,

> Why wouldn't you want to take everyone to the hospital and then try to figure out what happened afterwards -after one's been checked out? Why are you so worried about if I've been drinking or if I've been smoking whatever or doing drugs or taking any medication – or why are you so concerned with the question of if I was actually trying to kill myself for now - why? Like it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense….

He is still confused as to why the officers showed little compassion to him in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

Anthony was also very confused by an interaction he had with an officer. While celebrating his birthday with a friend at a night club, an officer tackled him to the ground following an incident. What confused him the most was that the bouncer who was dressed in plain clothes is the one who assaulted him and only then revealed to him his badge and told him that he was an LEO. When he was returning from the restroom he saw his friend, who had too much to drink, getting thrown out of the club by a group of people who he assumed were other club-goers who got in a fight with him when he wasn't there. Upon going to help his friend, he was knocked down and hand cuffed. That is when it was revealed to him that the bouncer was an under-cover officer. He remembered being so confused of not understanding the concept that bouncers could also be officers, so it was extra hard for him to figure out what was going on at the time. He said, "I didn't know that bouncers could be police officers, so I thought it was regular people about to jump him." He was overwhelmed by his confusion as to why he was being hand-cuffed and how a bouncer could also be a police officer.

Martin also remembered being very confused by his interaction with an officer upon being thrown on the floor and sent to jail on June 12, 1993, a date etched in his memory because he had just finished meeting the rapper, Biggie Smalls, after his concert. He was elated when the rapper gave him and his friend each a $100 bill and told them to stay in school. "That was the highlight of my whole life," he said. He was confused when the police came up to him and his friend right afterwards, which he attributes to him being Black and wearing baggy clothing. He relayed what happened next:

They threw us on the ground. The guy had his knee on my bubble coat. So he pressin' me down and he pressin' me down and he was like, 'you know what? Y'all know you're about to commit a crime. We taking you in before you commit one - we have to take you back in.'

When he got to jail, they accused them being involved in a murder that morning, which he knew nothing about and could not even express himself about because he was nonverbal at the time. He said,

I'm getting thrown and handcuffs on me and police on in my face talking about a murder. I have no idea. I can't even spell murder.

Like Michael and Anthony, Martin remains confused to this day later about what went on that day and why the situation escalated the way that it did. They also did not think the officers recognized that they were autistic or made any accommodations for them after being told they had a disability. Despite displaying several common traits of autism after his accident, Michael does not think the officers recognized that he was autistic. For Anthony at the club, his friend clearly told the officer that he was autistic and begged them to get off him:

My friend was pleading, 'Let him go! He's autistic! He didn't do anything!' And I know I got kicked in the jaw. I got kicked in the shin.

Martin's grandmother came into the precinct after the post-concert incident speaking very firmly to the LEOs telling them,

Look at it like this, this young man has a disability. You roughing him up, You throwing him, you aggressively pushing him and put your hands on him. And he literally has a disability. He literally just used the bathroom on his-self in your precinct.

In another incident later in his life when he was again taken to the station wrongly accused of doing drugs, he told the officers he was autistic, but they did not show any change in their behavior. When I asked him if he told them he was autistic, he replied that he did:

> Oh I'm saying it when they was slamming me to the ground, when they had their knee to the back of my head.

He gave a little chuckle as he said that, as if to say that it was obvious that they didn't care to act differently to him because he is autistic – especially given the extreme way he was being treated.

Participants of Group One lived in a constant state of fear of interactions with officers. After being sentenced to 50 years in prison for a car accident, Michael is scared to drive in a car – even as a passenger. Anthony has a fear of being "lynched" by law enforcement after what happened to him in the club and is scared to drive in rural areas alone. He recalled one time he was in the car with his partner as she was taking him to the train station driving through a rural area when she got stopped by police for speeding. He was "entirely freaking out" for fear of being arrested. He attributed their being let go by the police to his girlfriend being White and being able to "connect with the officer." Even though she is also autistic, Anthony thought the officers let her off the hook without even a ticket because she is White. Martin also lives with constant fear of LEOs, especially after another incident with an LEO as an adult where he was visiting family in the 'projects' in Georgia:

> I was actually literally eating a watermelon Jolly Rancher, had headphones on, listening to some jazz music. And I get slammed down, my Walkman get snatched off. They handcuffing me because we look like we're about to sell a whole bunch of drugs and nobody got drugs on them.

This also led to him being taken to the station for questioning until he was released in the middle of the night. He believes that he is stereotyped for how he looks:

> I'm a big African American guy…so in the dark, I guess sometimes I may look scary…I don't want to be accused.

This fear led him to stay in his house for a long time after that incident, and he still uses apps to deliver food to him at home instead of going out to shop or eat to minimize his chances of getting arrested. He also has told his family that he will only meet up with them in big public places near restaurants or coffee shops and won't go to their homes to visit them because he is frightened that he will be arrested there again for no justifiable reason.

Group Two

In contrast to the difficult interactions had by Group One with LEOs outside of the school setting, most of the officers did not report any difficult interactions and shared only stories of positive interactions. Sergeant Stone, who spent most of his 18 years in law enforcement working in schools in one district in California, spoke fondly of the relationships he developed in schools that carried over into the community setting. Because he spent time as an SRO in elementary, middle, and high schools, he had the opportunity to watch some of these students grow up. He was proud of his relationship with one student that evolved since he was in early elementary school. Although the first time he met him it was because he was called into the room to help quell a violent outburst he was having while he was "destroying the classroom," he learned how to connect with him and help de-escalate situations without too much interference.

These days, when he sees him in the community, they often take pictures together and spend a few minutes catching up. He said,

> It's a real big pride thing that I have with this young man because he is such a great young man now. But he struggled right? He struggled with a lot of emotional challenges. He had a tremendous ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) score, he had a lot of childhood dynamic that was going on – probably some mental illness with his parents. But his SRO quite honestly was a consistent piece in his life for many, many years. And that's the relationship piece that comes along with it… And it's a great relationship.

Because the SROs worked primarily in schools, their professional interactions on the job with individuals outside of the school setting were limited. The interactions that Sergeant Stone talked about that occurred outside of the school setting were all with former students.

The only law officer who shared about an interaction with an autistic individual who was not a former student was Sergeant Cole. Sergeatn Cole was not designated as a school resource officer, but rather had many other positions within the field of law enforcement (including working for surveillance and undercover), and he talked about professional interactions with disabled individuals whom he had no previous relationships from a school setting. Overall, he expressed frustration that LEOs are placed in the position of dealing with non-violent mental health crises when he thinks there are better trained professionals that should be called instead. He did not understand why there are more calls made today for police involvement with issues such as someone refusing to take their medication than there used to be 20 years ago. He said,

> We're handling things that as police officers we never did before. They still existed; people weren't taking their medications. People were saying I'm suicidal. Maybe they

> call that inside line and say, I want to kill myself to get some attention really quick. I don't know. But we would never really get involved. It would be the county worker, social workers, city employees, the fire department, county fire. Now they're doing it straight police. So we like go in there, we're the triage nurse, figure out what's going on. And then decipher where they gotta go from there. Oh, you know what? They're having a manic episode let's call FD. Or you know what? They really do need medical help, let's call MFT. Oh, they meet the criteria for 51-50. Let's take them, and we'll do it ourselves, or let's call on our MEU specialized unit to see if they can come meet us to take them. I mean, all these things. So there's a lot of stuff that we never did before that we're doing now.

Mentioning the negative press LEOs get in the media for situations gone awry with disabled individuals, he wondered why it is that other responders are not called first to deal with these crises. He thought it was not the best use of his time on the field nor in the best interest of the person having a crisis, for LEOs to be called as the first responders to non-violent mental health issues. He continued,

> But it really is bogging everybody down. Because that is the majority of radio calls, at least for my division. A lot of them are people with disabilities that are having an episode or mental illness. And a lot of the times, it really is not a police matter, and they don't qualify to be hospitalized. It's just more of we're there to triage the situation.

Sergeant Cole suggested that someone like his wife, a special education teacher "who can talk to anybody" would be great dealing with someone who was refusing to take their medication. He felt that if people like her were sent to deal with these crises, then his response time to criminal activity and crises that need immediate police involvement would drop.

One such experience, Sergeant Cole elaborated, was when he was called to deal with a "male with possible mental illness" who was reported to be swinging a pipe. He did not receive any other details about the situation before he arrived at the home in a housing project. As he pulled up, he saw a 19-year-old young man swinging a pipe around in a possibly threatening manner. Because he did not know if anyone was armed inside the house, he couldn't go up to the door and instead radioed the family to come outside. There were already three officer units there at the time and as soon as the young adult's mother came out of the house, he could immediately tell this was not an emergency situation because of her calm demeanor. He surmised the non-verbal young man might be autistic by the way he was pacing in the front yard and avoiding eye contact. He also knew that autistic individuals often have self-soothing objects and his mother confirmed when asked that this pipe served this purpose for him. He knew that if he approached him and tried to take it away it would most likely lead to a physical situation so instead, he asked her what usually calms her son down. When she replied that he likes ice cream he asked a family member nearby to get ice cream for him, which they did, and he immediately stopped swinging his pipe and relaxed. The situation ended peacefully, and the officers left the scene, but Sergeant Cole was frustrated that they were called to this scene at the outset. His sense was that the family wanted the LEOs to place him on a 51-50 hold to take him in to a hospital so other people could take over his care because they were tired of caring for him.

It was clear from this story that Sergeant Cole was well acquainted with typical traits of autism and did everything he could to prevent the situation from escalating. He knew that approaching the young man and trying to take away his pipe could have had dire consequences, and he was successful in his intervention strategies. It was also clear that he was frustrated by the

way law enforcement is called to deal with these types of situations as the first line of response when there are others who are better suited to intervene.

Police-awareness Education

To address the third goal of this study, to identify whether participants received police awareness education or autism awareness training and their related recommendations, I asked participants from both groups about their experiences with this. None of the participants from Group One received education about how to best interact with police (police-awareness education); three of them recommend this for students, while one of them did not because he thought the onus of learning ways of interacting should be placed entirely on the LEOs. Ideas that emerged when asked about what would be important to learn about interacting with LEOs were learning basic rights that citizens have when being questioned by LEOs, following instructions, staying calm, asking to call a parent or guardian or lawyer, and the best ways to act upon being questioned. Alex mentioned that although he did not receive any education about interacting with LEOs in school, he knows "the talk" his mother gave him about LEO interaction as a Black male was different for him than it was for his brothers. In addition to the basic speech his brothers received about taking extra precautions as Black males whenever interacting with police out of fear that the interaction will lead to underserved violence, for him, 'the talk" had the added component of his being extra cautious:

> And so that's kind of part of black culture, in a sense, the talk preparing your sons for having interactions with police, but I do feel like it was it was a little different for me, like I said, I have autism as well - in her making sure I'm careful and making sure every precaution is taken and I know what to do in certain situations.

He appreciated his mother's advice about this and carries around a card explaining that he is autistic in case he is pulled over by the police.

Alex and Michael also spoke of the importance of knowing basic rights if approached by LEOs. Michael, who served three years of his 50-year sentence, had many thoughts about what would be important to teach autistic students about interacting with law enforcement, including,

> What are your basic rights if you do get pulled over even for a very simple traffic violation? Like you're driving around, and your taillight goes out, or your blinker is not working, or you're like a month or two over your tags expiring. So something very simple and miniscule - because, as you obviously seen in the news, they (LEOs) can turn a very simple traffic stop into what we've seen in the past couple of years. So I do believe yes, especially for kids who are autistic, and could possibly get into a serious situation as mine, it will help a lot.

Michael experienced first-hand the trauma that can ensue from something completely unintentional and believed strongly that students should learn about their basic rights.
Martin and Alex mentioned that such education is important to set up for the future.

Martin felt it is important because one's guardians are not always going to be there to protect them and it would benefit all students, and especially disabled students to learn how to interact with officers for a time that they might be caught alone one day by LEOs:

> When you're 17, 18 years old, mommy and daddy may not be there for you all the time. They may not be able to go to the store with you, they may not be able to go to the arcade or Dave and Busters. So you need to be able to learn how to handle yourself accordingly when a cop comes.

Alex also mentioned preparation for the future, especially for minoritized and disabled individuals:

> Part of course, of being in high school… is preparing you for real world encounters. And there's a good chance that whether, like, no matter what the situation is, whether you're in trouble or not, you may interact with the police. So, it's good to for people, particularly, minorities and people with a diagnosis to kind of have a blueprint on how to approach interactions with police officers.

Anthony was the sole participant who thought that students should not receive police-awareness education because “at the end of the day, that's still being in fear of the police.” The responsibility is on LEOs to learn about autism and how to “handle students of color – especially students of color with disabilities.” The ‘burden’ of learning how to best interact is not – and should not- be placed on students and instead is the responsibility of LEOs.

All the participants from Group One, however, thought it was important for LEOs to receive training about how to best interact with autistic individuals. They all thought it is important to for LEOs to be able to identify someone who is autistic or disabled and to recognize the common traits of autism, so they do not confuse them with disobedient behavior. Martin said,

> I think all officers, whether they state police, regular police, school police, whatever the title is, if you're a police, period, you need extensive disability training. You need to be able to identify just from eye level, the different types of disabilities that you may or may not see. You need to be able to understand how to handle these individuals.

Michael relayed a story that occurred in Israel when police tried to stop an autistic young adult while he was walking and ended up killing him when he did not stop walking and reached into his pocket for his phone. He continued,

> …they need to they need to be able to tell if…this person is autistic or has ADHD or bipolar disorder or he's schizophrenic or anything like that, even OCD - like people with OCD are subject to having anxiety meltdowns. So, training in that would, would be largely beneficial to the police officer, so they don't get themselves into a situation where they're sending someone to jail that doesn't really belong there - that should be mentally evaluated or physically evaluated.

All the participants were fearful that their behavior could be misinterpreted by LEOs. Anthony said it was important that they know "that certain parts of autism does not make us a criminal. It's us just displaying autism." For example,

> learn that if we stem and flap our arms, that it is not the code for we tryin' to do something awful, just us stimming or reacting to something scary…Or if we walk back and forth it's also a way of stimming - not planning to get into trouble.

Similarly, Alex stressed the importance of LEOs understanding both common autistic traits and common Black cultural behavior because autistic behavior might be taken "even-worse" if the individual is autistic and Black and the LEOs are not that "familiar with Black people." He said,

> Something I consider is when you show those (autistic) traits, like as a black male, sometimes people may take that even worse, given some of the just realities of stereotypes. That's something that I consider a lot especially if they haven't had as much experience, maybe, around black people. And then you might see someone who's Black

> and autistic, and they might not present socially the way a lot of other people do. Or they might take them as being blunt or whatever, they might view that more negatively than they view you know, a white person because, you know, they're not, they're already not as familiar with black people, you know, hypothetically speaking. So, I think that dynamic comes into play, probably with autistic, Black people.

All of Group One participants also referred to the importance of recognizing common atypical speech patterns of autistic individuals and not misinterpreting them for something else. Alex said, "how we talk and respond can sometimes throw people off" and that they can be misinterpreted for being "blunt." Anthony added speaking in third person or speaking in a different way:

> Some of us may be more matter of fact and not answer questions they expect us to answer in a certain way. we may give 'em an answer that they don't like, but we could be in trouble because of the response.

Michael included "being able to pick up echolalia," the speech related trait that he previously mentioned was grossly misinterpreted and led to his imprisonment after his accident.

Understanding that autistic individuals may need more time to process information was also referred to by most Group One Participants. Alex said they "may have trouble sometimes processing things as quickly as other people" and Michael said LEOs need to learn to have more patience. Anxiety can cause them to need more time to calm down and relax before responding:

> I know that when I'm, when my anxiety is pretty high…it's gonna take a minute to self soothe, and get engaged, get there, and calm down, and relax and breathe. So, patience - I mean you're getting paid to make sure that this person's life is okay, to put it very

simply. So why would you want to rush something and take the risk of escalating the situation, instead of just sitting there?

Most of the participants spoke of the importance of the involvement of someone close to them who is non-autistic upon interaction with law enforcement. Involving a teacher or family member can help ease their anxiety and provide context to the LEOs if they are feeling overwhelmed. When he first was sent to prison, Michael was overwhelmed and overstimulated, but once his mother became involved with the warden, his situation improved. When asked what was overwhelming specifically, he replied,

> just all the new personalities and how volatile they were, just how loud it was all the time. Having to having to stick to your own routine while also having to live with other people's routines. Just that in itself, made it difficult.

Michael's mom became a relentless advocate for him and the fact that he was wrongly sent to prison and was autistic. He credits her involvement with his eventually getting a cell to himself. He said,

> as everyone was started finding out about my autism and my mom, and the warden drew a closer relationship. The warden was able to work out a system where I could work and do what I did…and keep me out of becoming too overstimulated or overwhelmed, or anything like that.

Martin used a super-hero analogy to convey his thoughts about the importance of collaborating with others who know them:

> You need to make sure before you go in the classroom… you have a clear understanding what's going on and what's been going on and you have the team behind you. This is Justice League. This is not just Batman and Superman.

As opposed to the individual nature of heroes like Batman and Superman, The Justice League approach signifies multiple heroes coming together to solve a given crisis.

All the LEOs thought that police-awareness education is a good idea for autistic students and the majority of them (SROs Sergeants Ross, Stone and Montoya) participated in some type of such education in schools. Most of the LEOs received some type of training related to autism at some point in their careers; all of them thought they learned more through their experiences than they did through training. All the LEOs demonstrated familiarity with traits common to autistic individuals. The aspects of LEO interactions they think that are important to highlight include what to do if one is pulled over while driving, reasons that officers use equipment such as flashlights and handcuffs, and the importance of following instructions. A theme that emerged from these responses was the role that the students/citizens can take in keeping themselves safe upon interaction with law enforcement.

Sergeant Ross explained that the officers are under stress when they approach a vehicle and that that there are steps that students/citizens can take to minimize officers' stress such as rolling down their windows and keeping their hands on a steering wheel. He also stressed how getting a ticket from an LEO does not mean that one is guilty and that is just a summons to appear in court. "And if you don't think you're guilty of it, you have the ability to go and present your side in court." Similarly, Sergeant Stone liked to impress upon students the fact that they

are their own biggest protectors and that the decisions they make when interacting with officers will keep them the safest:

> We encourage kids to understand that they are their biggest protectors… And that's the that's the startup that's the foundation of decision making… if you understand that your decisions are what helps you stay safe.

He also shows them handcuffs and teaches them that the number one reason LEOs use handcuffs is to "protect the violator" and that most of the time they are used to prevent someone from harming themselves. Additionally, he teaches them that there are times that they should not approach him socially on the street such as if they see him in the middle of pulling someone else over. However, when he is not in uniform and they see him, he would love for them to say hello to him. He spoke fondly of a recent interaction with a former student with disabilities that recently came up to him in the pet store and gave him a fist bump. Sergeant Montoya also has taught children in special education classes about law enforcement. He spoke fondly about a recent experience and views it as a way to "bridge the gap" with the community. He thinks police awareness education is a great idea and explained that if one makes good choices to listen to the officer, that will help the interaction go smoothly:

> Specifically, individuals with autism, giving them clear defined roles and expectations of a traffic stop. I think that's phenomenal. You know, a police officer, if he pulls you over, may turn his lights on because that's how they pull you over. Most likely they will. They may run their siren, they may use a speaker to tell you where to pull over. They may walk up on the driver's side or the passenger side depending on where you are. They may knock on your window if your windows rolled up. They will ask you for three things your driver's license, your registration and your proof of insurance. They would like you

> to keep your hands on your steering wheel at all times. So don't get out of the car and start running on instinct.

When asked about any training that they received about autism, none of the LEOs reported receiving any during the majority of their years in service, with three of them receiving some amount of education in autism late in their careers. The majority of them think there should be more training about autism mandated for officers.

Learning on the job

The LEOs interviewed for this study all served at least 18 years in law enforcement and learned most of what they know about autism through experience. They credited the teachers in the schools and/or their spouses who are special education teachers with teaching them what they need to know to have successful interactions with autistic individuals. After 14 years in his role, Sergeant Montoya had no training until about “four or five years ago” when he was mandated to take 16 hours of mental health training which he says is “needed tremendously.” He felt lucky that his wife is a special education teacher and that she taught him a lot of de-escalation techniques and tips on how to act with someone with disabilities:

> She gave me some tools and techniques on a certain way that you act with the general public for a certain situation is the 180 degrees opposite that you want to do with someone with disabilities.

Sergeant Ross did not receive any education about autism throughout his 22-year career in law enforcement and also reports learning from special education teachers he observed. He recalled feeling very frustrated by the lack of educational materials available to him when he started out. He contrasts how easy it was to get a gun for schools with how difficult it was to find training:

> If I wanted to find a firearm for school, I could pick between 10 of them, if I wanted to find a PPCT, which is how to control somebody with non-lethal holds and get them down the ground to subdue them, I can find five of those. But to deal with the student with special needs, they weren't, they were not there…I constantly looked for those classes, but they were not available.

Since retirement from working in schools, he has devoted much time to developing adolescent mental health educational tools for officers and is currently involved with training SROs how best to interact with students.

Despite learning a lot about autism on the job, all the SROs felt that SROs could use more training about autism. Officer Cole, the only LEO that was not a full time SRO did not feel that more formal training was necessary. Sergeant Montoya felt that officers need to learn more so they can be more pro-active about their interactions. He said,

> we shouldn't wait until a tragedy occurs before we take action…But it seems in my experience that we are often playing catch up because a negative situation has occurred. And we weren't giving the training or the appropriate training beforehand.

He added the importance of LEOs who work in schools of getting training that is specific to juveniles. "We need to know the law as it pertains to juveniles because it is very technical, and it's completely different than dealing with adults." As an example, he referenced the number of hours a juvenile can be detained before they get sent to their parents or juvenile hall is specific to juvenile law. Sergeant Stone, who is also involved now in training SROs about working with juveniles and juveniles with disabilities thinks it is especially important to train SROs about the basic laws related to special education and student with disabilities. He said,

> Have an understanding, when you hear an acronym of IEP or even FAPE and least restrictive environment, all these different terms, we need to help our SROs understand what all that means, so that they have logical conversations, and a little bit of awareness of the disabilities that we see so they can have some immediate response to it.

Officer Cole was the only one in Group Two who did not think they need more training about autism because they have one weeklong course they need to take once in their careers and the rest they learn sufficiently from experience: “I think we get enough. I don't think we do need more because we get so much experience out in the field. And that is our training.”

To gauge whether the LEOs were familiar with common characteristics of autism, I asked them what they thought would be important for other officers to know about interacting with someone autistic. All of them were easily able to identify at least three traits commonly shared by autistic individuals or behavior modifications on the part of LEOs that would be likely be helpful for an autistic individual. Sergeant Ross said, “I'm just going to try to slow my demeanor down and I'm going to try to remain calm.” Sergeant Stone also mentioned the importance of slowing down when approaching someone autistic. Sensory sensitives were mentioned by the majority of the officers: Sergeant Ross said he is careful not to touch them-even on their shoulders- as he might do to a typical student, because he has learned they might not like to be touched. Sergeant Montoya included their dislike of loud noises and their tendency to run away – particularly towards water. Sergeants Montoya and Cole both mentioned that they might be wearing particular clothing or accessories such as headphones to block out loud noises. Sergeant Cole also included the importance of not mistaking their demeanor such as lack of eye contact while staring off into the distance as being drunk and also not mistaking echolalia for something else:

basically, the ones that may stare off in the distance may be rigid and may be, I've had interactions with a guy that loves to play the drums, he always hits things with the sticks. I mean, that's all he does, and he has his headphones on, and you shall not touch his headphones, his drum sets or sticks, and he will set off. And you could talk to him with, you know, with his headphones on and doing the drums or whatever. I mean, a person that may be nonverbal, and you know, you don't smell the alcohol on them, you could see their eyes that they're not majorly dilated or constricted, supine or the influence, but they do still have exhibited behaviors of being under the influence where they're staring off in the distance, not acknowledging you not making eye contact with you… Or you could be asking them a question. And they asked you the same question back, or, oh, yeah, they keep answering in the same way, in the same manner. And they're not changing it up.

A common theme that emerged from our conversations was frustration with the amount of responsibility placed on them. This was mentioned either in regard to the very high LEO to student ratio in a given school or school district or in regard to the number of issues that they are expected to deal with. Sergeant Montoya said,

> I don't know if I should say it, but we're the like the garbage disposal…we're, asked to do so many things. We're marriage counselors or counselors. We're marriage therapists we're enforcers of the law, we wear so many different hats and sometimes we aren't given all the training and tools to wear that hat, we're just saying, 'give it to law enforcement.' And maybe that's not the correct avenue, maybe we need to fund and train professionals in this particular field.

Suggesting funding other types of professionals to deal with mental health and disability related issues was also mentioned by Officer Cole. He expressed frustration that protocol has changed to

LEOs being automatically sent out to deal with mental health issues and that there are better trained professionals who should be first contacted to deal with them. He believed if there's a violent situation of course they should be called, but he is perplexed as to why LEOs are sent out so frequently now to deal with, for example, someone who is refusing to take their medicine. He agreed with recent media attention calling for mental health clinicians to be trained to be sent to these types of situations so they can try for a positive outcome.

> But it used to always be the clinicians would go out with their own teams, and they would do their evaluations or do whatever. And that's the number they would call, but now everybody's calling 911. He said "So that's why cops are getting burned out and frustrated. Because it's like, what? when this become our problem?"

He also thought that response time would drop for other urgent calls that genuinely need LEO involvement if other trained professionals would be called for these non-violent issues.

"But majority of the time," he said, "it can be handled by other people than us."

Chapter VI: Discussion & Implications

This study aimed to evaluate the experiences and perspectives of interactions between Black, autistic individuals and Law Enforcement in schools and beyond. While the number of research papers related to the topic of interactions between autistic individuals and law enforcement is growing (Railey et al., 2021, Crane et al., 2016, Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020), none of them focus on the experiences of autistic individuals who identify as Black or focus on the interactions that take place specifically in the school setting. The research goals of this study were exploratory in nature to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Black, autistic individuals and of law enforcement officers about their interactions.

Based on the findings, there was an overall discrepancy between the satisfaction of interactions between these two groups. Regarding experiences in the school context, half of the autistic individuals recall having interactions with LEOs. Of those, Anthony had positive experiences and Martin had both positive and negative experiences; his negative experiences far exceeded his positive ones. The types of positive interactions included casual interactions from football coaches who were also officers at school with Anthony and friendly officers escorting Martin to classes. However, Martin, also had repeated negative experiences with SROs in schools. He attributes "getting treated like a suspect" multiple times throughout his time in school to being Black, and he as ultimately was sent to jail where he spent five months in the middle of 10th grade for a food fight, in which he did not partake. His experiences of being non-verbal and Black and being sent to jail directly from school as a result of a crime he did not commit are consistent with studies that show that Black and disabled students are more likely have criminal consequences when disciplined in school (Zirkel, 2019).

Based on findings from interviews with LEOs, most LEOs who worked in schools had interactions with autistic students and were satisfied with their experiences. Most of them spent time in the classrooms getting to know the students and special education teachers and were invested in forming positive bonds with students. Similar to the overall findings of the studies reviewed in this paper that explored autistic perspectives on their interactions with law enforcement (Gibbs & Haas, 2020; Holloway et al., 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020, Salerno & Schuller, 2019, Crane et al., 2016) which were that the majority reported negative experiences, none of the autistic individuals in this study that had interactions with law enforcement beyond school were satisfied with their experiences. The fear that LEOs would misinterpret their typical autistic behaviors was a particular concern to autistic participants in the above referenced studies. In this study, Michael, for example, knows that his echolalia is the reason he was repeating back officers' questions to them after his accident and that was used against him in court when he was sentenced to 50 years in prison. Like other studies where autistic participants were concerned that they did or would feel anxious or overwhelmed when interacting with LEOs (Railey, Bowers-Campbell, et al., 2020), all of the participants in the present study did report feeling anxious or overwhelmed during their interactions with LEOs. Unable to express himself verbally, Martin relays that he used the bathroom on himself on more than one occasion when he was being interrogated by the police. Anthony was completely overwhelmed as he was "knocked down and cuffed…punched in the jaw…kicked in the shin" by an officer at the club whom he did not even realize was an officer.

Additionally, this study confirms fears expressed by autistic participants in Holloway et al.'s (2020) study with a staged participatory walk through of incarceration. However, as opposed to that study that was *staged*, the participants in this study were speaking from first-

hand actual experience of being incarcerated. Michael experienced several reactions that were consistent with those anticipated in Holloway et al.'s study such as issues with the bright lights, the lack of privacy and anxiety caused by the unfamiliarity of the prison environment.

Like the findings in Crane et al. (2016) there were discrepancies in this study between the perspectives of autistic individuals and LEOs. Despite the high level of unsatisfaction with LEO interaction reported by autistic individuals, the law enforcement officers report being largely satisfied with their interactions. In fact, all the LEOs in this study reported being satisfied with their interactions beyond school. They felt like they overall did a good job carefully approaching the individuals while being sensitive to features of autism such as lights and touch.

Several participants interviewed for this study spoke very fondly of the relationships that developed between LEOs and autistic students that began when they were in school. For example, despite his many negative interactions with law enforcement, Martin maintains relationships with three of the officers that he got to know when he was in school. He spoke fondly of his continued relationship with them, their children and even their grandchildren. The LEOs that worked in schools also spoke fondly of their continued relationships with former students with disabilities, be it at church or running into the grocery stores. It was clear from the findings in this study that these relationships were meaningful to everyone that spoke about them.

Similar to the findings in Salerno and Schuller (2019), Police awareness education for autistic students was favored by the majority of autistic participants in this study. However, none of them received any education about how to best interact with police. That said, all the SROs interviewed for this study were in favor of – and participated in– some form of police awareness education for students with disabilities.

Although most of the LEOs reported learning most of what they know about autism through experience, most of them thought that officers could use more education about autism. However, consistent with findings from Christiansen et al. (2021) that those with training or personal experience were more likely to recognize autism in vignettes, these officers were able to easily name common traits of autism. Many of the traits that the autistic participants mentioned as important to know about autism were the same traits that the LEOs mentioned unprompted. For example, echolalia, difficulties with eye contact and sensory sensitives were mentioned as common traits from members of both groups. Unlike the findings from Railey et al. (2021) where LEOs frequently reported limited knowledge of autism, all the LEOs from this study displayed strong knowledge of common characteristics of autism.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that only male participants were interviewed for both groups. To get a better understanding of the perspectives of both groups it would have been ideal to interview participants who identify as other genders. There were also no African American LEOs interviewed for this study which would add an important perspective. Further, an important limitation for this study was selection bias. The majority of those that volunteered to be interviewed from the autistic community are active members on social media and at least somewhat used to advocacy. Autistic participants also were accepted based on their self-identification as being autistic, with no additional verification required. In addition, the law enforcement officers that agreed to be interviewed each had many years of experience and were involved in training of other school resource officers or involved in community relations .As law enforcement officers, they may have also been invested in portraying a certain image and selectively choosing which stories to share in their narrative.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As interactions between Black, autistic individuals and law enforcement continue to surface in news stories, and with renewed attention to the roles of school resource officers after the recent Robb Elementary School shooting where 19 children and two adults were killed, it is important to focus on the interactions between these two groups to best understand how to maximize chances of successful experiences. Diamond and Hogue (2021) suggest a two-pronged approach that focuses both on police-awareness education for students and on autism awareness training for officers. The findings from this study are consistent with that recommendation. When it comes to input into the training, it appears from this study that it would be valuable to make sure to involve Black, autistic individuals in the training of law enforcement officers. Given the positive relationships that were formed between LEOs and students with disabilities in schools, increasing communication between these two groups could further enhance their interactions. Given that most autistic participants in this study had negative experiences with LEOs beyond school, it is imperative to involve Black individuals in the training of LEOs about autism. Nationally standardizing education and training would also set clear expectations as to what information is most important to learn for both groups.

Implications for Future Research

Future research can extend findings from this study to focus on other minoritized autistic communities and their interactions with law enforcement officers. As the prevalence of autism identified in other communities begins to grow, it is important to continue to study law enforcement interactions with these communities. Further, there is a dearth of research that focuses on school resource officers and the autistic communities and future research could help inform best topics to include in autism training for school resource officers specifically.

The current study also found discrepancies between the perspectives of LEOs on their interactions beyond school with autistic individuals and the perspectives of Black, autistic individuals of their interactions beyond schools. Further research should explore LEOs experiences with Black, autistic individuals, specifically, and inform development of training protocols that specifically addresses the intersectionality of Blackness and autism. The current study also revealed strong positive relationships between LEOs and students with disabilities and future research could focus on this area to better understand how those relationships develop and the value of such relationships to their broader communities.

APPENDIX

Appendix A

Sample of semi-structured interview guiding questions for Autistic Individuals

- Do/did you go to a school with school resource officers?
- Did you have any interactions with them?
- Can you tell me about one of them?
- Did they know you are autistic?
- Were you satisfied with the interaction?
- What do you think law enforcement officers should know about autistic students to have the chances for the best interactions with them?
- Did you have any education in school about how to best interact with law enforcement?
- Can you tell me about it?
- If not, do you think it’s a good idea to have some sort of education like that?
- What do you think would be helpful for autistic students to learn about interacting with law enforcement?
- Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with law enforcement?

Appendix B

Sample of semi-structured interview guiding questions for school resource officers

- What type of roles did/do you have in schools?
- Did you have any interactions with autistic students? Black autistic students?
- Can you tell me about one of the interactions?
- Did you know they were autistic at the time of interaction?
- Were you satisfied with the interaction?
- Is there something you wish they knew about you or did differently during your interaction?
- Did you have any training about autism and can you tell me a little bit about it?
- Are you satisfied with the training?
- What do you think would be helpful to learn about regarding interaction with autistic students?
- Have you ever worked in a school that provides education for autistic students about how to best interact with law enforcement?
- If not, do you think this is a good idea?
- What do you think would be helpful for autistic students to learn about interacting with law enforcement?
- Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with autistic students?

Appendix C

Constructing Initial Codes from Transcripts

Initial Codes	Transcript
If he didn’t work with special ed Teachers, he questions how he would know how to deal with student when upset Or something else going on Or stress in their life He teaches other SROs They should form Relationships with school faculty And special ed teachers and aides That work with students	If I didn't work with them, how would I know the students? How would I know how to deal with that student when they're upset, or they're agitated, or there's some type of stress going on in their life?... We teach our SROs in our training that you are really doing yourself a disservice if you don't get to know your school, your special education teachers and aides that work with these students.

Constructing Focused Codes from Transcripts

Focused Codes	Transcript

Importance of working with other faculty Learning how to interact with agitated students from working with faculty Training of SROs importance of getting to know/working with Special Education Staff	If I didn't work with them, how would I know the students? How would I know how to deal with that student when they're upset, or they're agitated, or there's some type of stress going on in their life?... We teach our SROs in our training that you are really doing yourself a disservice if you don't get to know your school, your special education teachers and aides that work with these students.

Constructing Themes from Focused Codes

Focused Codes	Theme	Supporting Quotes
Importance of working with other faculty Learning how to interact with agitated students from working with faculty	Valuing Collaboration	If I didn't work with them, how would I know the students? How would I know how to deal with that student when they're upset, or they're agitated, or there's

Trains other SROs importance of getting to know/working with Special Education Staff		some type of stress going on in their life? …you are really doing yourself a disservice if you don't get to know your school, your special education teachers and aides that work with these students.

References

Abram, A. (2020, June 25, 2020). Black, Disabled and at Risk: The Overlooked Problem of Police Violence Against Americans with DIsabilities. *Time*. https://time.com/5857438/police-violence-black-disabled/

Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *16*(1), 1-31. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.730511

Anthony, N. B., Kaycee. (2021). Black, Autistic, and Interactions with Law Enforcement. *ACADEMIA Letters*, Article 395.

Bottema-Beutel, K., Kapp, S. K., Lester, J. N., Sasson, N. J., & Hand, B. N. (2021). Avoiding Ableist Language: Suggestions for Autism Researchers. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(1), 18-29. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0014

Cascardi, M., Poythress, N. G., & Hall, A. (2000). Procedural justice in the context of civil commitment: An analogue study. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, *18*(6), 731-740.

Chown, N. (2010). 'Do You Have Any Difficulties That I May Not Be Aware of?' A Study of Autism Awareness and Understanding in the UK Police Service. *International journal of police science & management*, *12*(2), 256-273. https://doi.org/10.1350/ijps.2010.12.2.174

Christiansen, A., Minich, N. M., & Clark, M. (2021). Pilot Survey: Police Understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder [Article]. *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04968-z

Copenhaver, A., & Tewksbury, R. (2019). Interactions Between Autistic Individuals and Law Enforcement: a Mixed-Methods Exploratory Study. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *44*(2), 309-333. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-018-9452-8

Crane, L., Maras, K. L., Hawken, T., Mulcahy, S., & Memon, A. (2016). Experiences of autism spectrum disorder and policing in England and Wales: Surveying police and the autism community. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *46*(6), 2028-2041. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2729-1

Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders : DSM-5. (2013). (Fifth ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

Diamond, L. L., & Hogue, L. B. (2021). Preparing Students With Disabilities and Police for Successful Interactions. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 105345122199480. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451221994804

Fatal Force. (2021). https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/

Gardner, L., & Campbell, J. M. (2020). Law enforcement officers' preparation for calls involving autism: Prior experiences and response to training. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *50*(12), 4221-4229. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04485-5

Gardner, L., Campbell, J. M., & Westdal, J. (2019). Brief report: Descriptive analysis of law enforcement officers' experiences with and knowledge of autism. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *49*(3), 1278-1283. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3794-4

Gibbs, V., & Haas, K. (2020). Interactions between the police and the autistic community in Australia: Experiences and perspectives of autistic adults and parents/carers. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *50*(12), 4513-4526. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04510-7

Helverschou, S. B., Steindal, K., Nøttestad, J. A., & Howlin, P. (2018). Personal experiences of the criminal justice system by individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism*, *22*(4), 460-468.

Holloway, C. A., Munro, N., Jackson, J., Phillips, S., & Ropar, D. (2020). Exploring the autistic and police perspectives of the custody process through a participative walkthrough. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *97*, 103545-103545. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2019.103545

Homer, E. M., & Fisher, B. W. (2020). Police in schools and student arrest rates across the United States: Examining differences by race, ethnicity, and gender. *Journal of school violence*, *19*(2), 192-204. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2019.1604377

How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next. (2020). *New York Times (Online)*.

Iland, E. (2014). *BE SAFE the movie* Inclusion Films.

Javdani, S. (2019). Policing education: An empirical review of the challenges and impact of the work of school police officers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *63*(3-4), 253-269. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12306

Kelly, E., & Hassett-Walker, C. (2016). The training of New Jersey emergency service first responders in autism awareness. *Police Practice & Research: An International Journal*, *17*(6), 543-554. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2015.1121390

Lind, E. A., & Tyler, T. R. (1992). Procedural Justice in Organizations. In (pp. 173-202). Boston, MA: Springer US.

Maenner, M. J., Shaw, K. A., Bakian, A. V., Bilder, D. A., Durkin, M. S., Esler, A., Furnier, S. M., Hallas, L., Hall-Lande, J., Hudson, A., Hughes, M. M., Patrick, M., Pierce, K., Poynter, J. N., Salinas, A., Shenouda, J., Vehorn, A., Warren, Z., Constantino, J. N., . . . Cogswell, M. E. (2021). Prevalence and Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2018. *MMWR. Surveillance summaries*, *70*(11), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7011a1

May, D. C., Rice, C., & Minor, K. I. (2012). An examination of school resource officers' attitudes regarding behavioral Issues among students receiving special education services. *Current Issues in Education*, *15*(3).

McCleery, J. P., Zitter, A., Solórzano, R., Turnacioglu, S., Miller, J. S., Ravindran, V., & Parish-Morris, J. (2020). Safety and feasibility of an immersive virtual reality intervention program for teaching police interaction skills to adolescents and adults with autism. *Autism Research*, *13*(8), 1418-1424. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/aur.2352

Merkwae, A. (2015). SCHOOLING THE POLICE: RACE, DISABILITY, AND THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS. *Michigan journal of race & law*, *21*(1), 147-181.

Mertens, D. M. (2019). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. Sage Publications.

Meyer, K., & Willis, R. (2019). Looking Back to Move Forward: The Value of Reflexive Journaling for Novice Researchers. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *62*(5), 578-585. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2018.1559906

Modell, S. J., & Mak, S. (2008). A preliminary assessment of police officers' knowledge and perceptions of persons with disabilities. *Intellectual and developmental disabilities*, *46*(3), 183-189. https://doi.org/10.1352/2008.46:183-189

Moser, A., & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European Journal of General Practice*, *24*(1), 9-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091

Murphy, V., Kelleher, M., & Gulati, G. (2017). Autism awareness training for an Garda Siochana (letter to the editor). *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, *35*, 345-346.

Na, C., & Gottfredson, D. C. (2013). Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors. *Justice Quarterly*, *30*(4), 619-650. https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2011.615754

Petrosino, A. a. F., T. and Taylor, D. (2020). *Research in brief: School-based law enforcement.* Retrieved May 13, 2021 from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/relwestFiles/pdf/4-2-3-20_SRO_Brief_Approved_FINAL.pdf

Pigott, C., Stearns, A. E., & Khey, D. N. (2018). School resource officers and the school to prison pipeline: Discovering trends of expulsions in public schools. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *43*(1), 120-138. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12103-017-9412-8

Railey, K. S., Bowers-Campbell, J., Love, A. M. A., & Campbell, J. M. (2020). An exploration of law enforcement officers' training needs and interactions with individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, *50*(1), 101-117. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04227-2

Railey, K. S., Love, A. M. A., & Campbell, J. M. (2020). A Systematic Review of Law Enforcement Training Related to Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Focus on autism and other developmental disabilities*, *35*(4), 221-233. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357620922152

Railey, K. S., Love, A. M. A., & Campbell, J. M. (2021). A Scoping Review of Autism Spectrum Disorder and the Criminal Justice System. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *8*(1), 118-144. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-020-00203-0

Ryan, J. B., Katsiyannis, A., Counts, J. M., & Shelnut, J. C. (2017). The Growing Concerns Regarding School Resource Officers. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *53*(3), 188-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451217702108

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers / Johnny Saldaña* (3E. ed.). SAGE.

Salerno, A. C., & Schuller, R. A. (2019). A mixed-methods study of police experiences of adults with autism spectrum disorder in Canada. *International journal of law and psychiatry*, *64*, 18-25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlp.2019.01.002

Snow, M. D., Malloy, L. C., & Goldstein, N. E. S. (2021). Information gathering in school contexts: A national survey of school resource officers. *Law and Human Behavior*, *45*(4), 356-369. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000451

Teagardin, J., Dixon, D. R., Smith, M. N., & Granpeesheh, D. (2012). Randomized trial of law enforcement training on autism spectrum disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *6*(3), 1113-1118. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2012.02.002

Test, D. W., Smith, L. E., & Carter, E. W. (2014). Equipping Youth With Autism Spectrum Disorders for Adulthood:Promoting Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. *Remedial and Special Education*, *35*(2), 80-90. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932513514857

Watson, A. C., Angell, B., Vidalon, T., & Davis, K. (2010). Measuring perceived procedural justice and coercion among persons with mental illness in police encounters: the Police Contact Experience Scale [Article]. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *38*(2), 206-226. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20360

Zirkel, P. A. (2019). School Resource Officers and Students with Disabilities: A Disproportional Connection? *Exceptionality : the official journal of the Division for Research of the Council for Exceptional Children*, *27*(4), 299-314. https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2019.1579725