Policing along the spectrum: Reducing risk and improving service delivery

Thomas B Leydier
Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Abstract

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex life-long neurodevelopmental disorder that affects social skills, language, learning, cognitive function, physical abilities, and behavior. Moreover, autism is becoming increasingly prevalent in Canada and abroad. Inevitably, law enforcement professionals will interact with the autistic population in their duties; however, many exchanges produce poor outcomes. Physical restraint is often used, and the benefit of autism-trained Crisis Intervention Teams is underutilized, especially in Canada. In addition, current training outcomes for law enforcement professionals are ephemeral and unlikely to yield mastery. This article argues three antidotes to improve service delivery and reduce risk: Crisis Intervention Teams that incorporate autism training; methodologically sound and rigorously evaluated practical training; and community outreach, which creates relationships proactively and fosters trust. Future research should: analyze the outcomes of autistic-trained Crisis Intervention Teams; determine qualitatively what the population with autism and their stakeholders seek in a comprehensive training curriculum; and determine the success of nascent training courses and community outreach goals.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder, neurodiversity, developmental disorder, neurodevelopmental disorder, Crisis Intervention Teams, policing autism, training

Submitted 6 Dec 2021, Revise received 2 Apr 2022, accepted 1 Jun 2022
provides an overview of the fundamental characteristics of ASD, then turns to how these characteristics might impact interactions with LEPs and how the overall prevalence of ASD is increasing. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations, suggesting a tripartite holistic method for improving service delivery between LEPs and people with ASD.

**Practical implications and what this article adds**

Many studies discuss the necessity of autism training for LEPs or the utility of CITs in diverting people with mental health issues from the custodial setting to treatment centers. Moreover, there is a paucity of research into interactions between LEPs and people with ASD, especially in Canada. However, this article aims to synergize three practical implementations for law enforcement organizations and leaders to consider and execute into their policies and practices to serve their autistic client groups better. Although many law enforcement agencies might access none or only one of the three suggestions, there is continuous room for improvement. This article aims to make suggestions to augment existing approaches or start anew. From the literature, it appears a combination of approaches is needed to address people with ASD adequately, to be discussed below. This article criticizes current practices and offers a tripartite holistic approach to providing better service delivery to people with ASD.

This holistic tripartite method includes: (a) implementing CITs trained in ASD; (b) training LEPs on ASD using a rigorously evaluated curriculum (something needing much more research); and (c) proactively engaging the ASD population to build trust and understanding. CITs are helpful, but many officers remain untrained and under-equipped to recognize people with ASD. Therefore, implementing CITs without the concomitant training in ASD is inadequate for the ASD population—although more research is needed. Further, training in autism should not be delivered haphazardly. ASD training for LEPs requires rigorously evaluated training programs, assessing knowledge acquisition and outcomes. Measures, such as Love et al.’s (2021) 13-item self-efficacy scale are a potential starting point. Training should also incorporate collaboration with other stakeholders, including families and people with autism.

**Law enforcement professionals**

This article adopts the term LEPs, representing chiefly police officers, with whom Debbaudt (2001) indicated people with developmental disorders, including ASD, interact approximately seven times more often than those without a developmental disability. However, this term also subsumes other actors within the remit of law enforcement, such as border guards, security, and other sworn peace officers. Indeed, the article argues, as ASD prevalence rises, it is inferred that the actors within various law enforcement roles will interact with this population more frequently. Therefore, although primarily directed at policing, it behooves other agencies to undertake similar practices and awareness for their members, and the article is not blind to this reality.

**Explaining ASD**

At the outset, it is sensible to explain what ASD is and its behavioral outputs, underlining its salient features and characteristics. ASD is not homogenous—indeed, the term “spectrum” encompasses a host of neurodiversity, such as Asperger’s syndrome. Individuals demonstrate varying degrees of severity and symptoms along the spectrum and, consequently, are affected differently. For instance, some people with ASD are nonverbal, whereas others have no issue with communication. This variation and range of ability between people with ASD necessitates proper training, so LEPs can effectively improve their service delivery to this diverse population (Ofner et al., 2018; Debbaudt, 2002).

**What is ASD?**

ASD is a complex life-long neurodevelopmental disorder that affects social skills, language, learning, cognitive function, physical abilities, and behavior, with a significant heritability element (Chaste and Leboyer, 2012). In Canada, medical teams, including psychologists and physicians, usually diagnose ASD in children (Ofner et al., 2018). However, ASD’s breadth of symptomology and its onset delay often make it challenging to diagnose (Boutot, 2017; McCarty and Frye, 2020; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2014, cited in Fuld, 2018). Nevertheless, two features are imperative for diagnosing ASD: impairment to social and nonsocial functions.

For the former, social hindrances for ASD can be conceptualized and understood as “mind-blindness” (Frith and Happé, 2005: 788), which creates difficulty in understanding others’ emotional reactions and behaviors. To people without ASD, eye contact, emotional intelligence, or the capacity to estimate someone’s internal emotional state occur naturally. However, people with ASD are deficient in understanding, comprehending, and recognizing another’s emotional states, needs, and wants. The incapacity to empathize or translate normative behavioral actions, such as reaching for someone’s hand, places
people with ASD in a challenging position socially. Insofar as people with ASD tend to struggle with social cues and emotional states and situations, they are generally impaired in interpreting the reasons for someone else’s actions or behavior, and commonly score low on tests that measure this function (Boutot, 2017; Frith and Happé, 2005).

Additional social impairments for people with ASD are hindrances in interpreting other people’s countenances and reading emotional expressions from their faces and voices. The facial expressions of others or the intonation of a person’s voice are not easily understood, which inevitably makes social interaction challenging. One hypothesis for this deficit is that people with ASD from childhood tend to focus on the areas surrounding the eyes, such as the outer region of the face or environment. This is contrary to children without ASD, who intuitively focus on the face and eyes from birth to receive their emotional cues and information (Boutot, 2017; Frith and Happé, 2005). For instance, Klin et al. (2002, cited in Frith and Happé, 2005) demonstrated that when shown footage of two people talking, children with ASD focused on the mouth, whereas children without ASD focused on the eyes.

The second diagnostic imperative is repetitive motor patterns, extreme rigidity, vapid self-interest, inflexibility, and strict routine and ritual patterns. Moreover, rigid thoughts pervade the minds of those with ASD, who often catastrophize negative thoughts and have difficulty not ruminating over them (Storch et al., 2013, cited in Fuld, 2018). Researchers have explained that these deficits typically result from poor executive functioning. Indeed, the high-level mental capacity to organize, plan, and approach new situations with openness and willingness appears obstructed in people with ASD. Poor adaptability is commonplace (Boutot, 2017; Frith and Happé, 2005). This constellation of afflicting symptoms and impacts will directly produce atypical behaviors.

### Relevant behavioral impacts of ASD for LEPs

The variation in symptoms among individuals with autism results in different behavioral outcomes. However, there are some characteristics that are typical of ASD, and the following are most salient for LEPs in their duties:

- May appear uncooperative and unwilling: individuals with autism commonly avoid eye contact with their interlocutors. Many people with autism report finding the sensation of eye contact uncomfortable, giving rise to negative emotional and concomitant physiological states (Trevisan et al., 2017). Moreover, people with ASD may not understand standard conversation etiquette, such as reciprocating or listening appropriately. Indeed, they can be poor listeners. Also, they may default to repeating comfortable phrases, topics, or familiar stories when encountering unfamiliar or stressful situations. This inability to engage in standard dialect can make people with ASD appear recalcitrant or rude. Lastly, people with autism are matter of fact and typically do not understand innuendo, double meanings, or jokes (Boutot, 2017; Debbaudt, 2002).

- Unable to understand behavioral cues and symbols: individuals with autism may not recognize or interpret behavioral cues, such as countenance, posture, stance, and verbal intonation. Moreover, they might not comprehend environmental symbols that are recognizable and easily interpretable by the layperson. For instance, the police uniform, vehicle, lights, and siren, might confuse a person with autism. Because of their social cognitive limitations, people with ASD might not obey commands. It is not because of irreverence that this resistance occurs, but because of the person’s social cognitive limitations. Further, people with ASD have difficulty understanding normative spatial expectations and will often stand too close or too far (Boutot, 2017; Debbaudt, 2002).

- Resistance to change: as highlighted earlier, people with ASD steadfastly adhere to rituals and routines. This insistence on familiarity and sameness bonds the person to their usual patterns of activity. Naturally, when something disturbs and interferes with these routines, the individual with autism can become escalated and excitable. Therefore, when LEPs interact with individuals with autism, the disturbance to their routines and the unfamiliar situations they face might heighten emotional responses, such as anger. The response to this heightened emotional state can engender aggressiveness and violent outbursts observed through kicking, screaming, hitting, and biting. Injuries to themselves or others can result from these outbursts (Boutot, 2017; Debbaudt, 2002).

- Inability to express their needs: people with ASD generally have difficulty expressing their needs and wants. This makes communication and providing useful service delivery challenging. They may not gesticulate or verbally articulate well, making provision of care difficult, especially when they are in an escalated state. This frustration can, although not exclusively, result in self-stimulating behaviors, in which people with ASD flap their arms, swirl objects or move their hands in a repetitive motion.
These behaviors can convey to unskilled LEPs that the person is not listening or cooperating when these are typical actions, especially during heightened emotional circumstances (Boutot, 2017; Debbaudt, 2002).

A word on co-morbidities, risk, and mental illness

As mentioned above, another compounding influence for individuals with autism is the likelihood of co-morbidities. Co-morbidities are secondary diseases or pathologies that trail alongside the central disorder. Indeed, increasing research demonstrates that people with ASD are more at risk for mental illness (Kerns et al., 2016; Matson and Williams, 2014; Reinvalle, 2016, cited in Fuld, 2018). Some research has found that people with ASD are more likely to have coinciding mood disorders compared with other populations. Indeed, the American Psychological Association reports that approximately 70% of people with autism have a mental illness, and 40% have more than one mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2013, cited in Fuld, 2018). Mayes et al. (2013, cited in Fuld, 2018) found that suicidal ideation and coinciding attempts are 28 times higher for people with autism than for people without. Another under-researched and surfacing topic is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and aversive childhood experiences. Nascent research indicates that this is mainly unexplored terrain; however, some studies point toward a higher likelihood of PTSD in people with ASD (Mayes et al., 2013; Storch et al., 2013, cited in Fuld, 2018).

Prevalence of ASD

The prevalence and diagnosis of ASD have been exponentially increasing (Matson and Kozlowski, 2011), with no end in sight (Hertz-Picciotto and Delwiche, 2009, cited in Matson and Kozlowski, 2011). Chiarotti and Venerosi (2020) assert that the exponential rise in ASD is a global epidemic. However, there has been much debate in the literature over this growth. Some explanations cite environmental and cultural influences; however, this area requires more research (Matson and Kozlowski, 2011). Conversely, some authors posit expanding diagnostic criteria, earlier age at diagnosis, and increased awareness of ASD as explanations (Matson and Kozlowski, 2011). Whether the reasons rest with expanding and heterogenous diagnostic criteria or more natural understandings is not known, but the prevalence of ASD is increasing.

The National ASD Monitoring System examined the increasing prevalence of children with ASD in Canada. The findings included 5–17-year-olds across six provinces and one territory. In 2015, the monitoring system indicated that 1 in 66 was diagnosed with ASD: this figure was 1 in 42 for males and 1 in 162 for females—meaning males are four times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than females. Historical data from three provinces indicated that ASD diagnosis had seen a sharp uptick in the past decade, reaching nearly three times previously captured rates (Ofner et al., 2018). Similarly, Ouellette-Kuntz et al. (2014) examined ASD prevalence across three regions of Canada between 2008 and 2010 among children aged 2–14 years, observing a 9.7% to 14.6% increase annually. Finally, Debbaudt (2002) asserts that ASD prevalence in the USA in the late 1980s was 2–5 people per 10,000, whereas at the turn of the millennium, it was 1 in 250 people. Recent American data suggest 1 in 68 eight-year-olds have ASD (Ofner et al., 2018).

ASD and the criminal justice system

Although there is no evidence that people with ASD commit more crimes than people without ASD (Debbaudt, 2002; Ghaiziuddin et al. 1991; Mouridsen, 2012, cited in Teagardin et al., 2012), there is some evidence that people with high-functioning autism are overrepresented in the CJS (Haskins and Silva, 2006, cited in Teagardin et al., 2012) and, similarly, commit more crime than their counterparts with lower functioning ASD (Langstrom et al., 2009; Mouridsen et al., 2008, cited in Teagardin et al., 2012). Moreover, some authors assert that particular rare groups of individuals with autism may commit even more severe offenses (Maras et al., 2015; Mouridsen, 2012). In addition, co-morbidities in people with ASD, such as their predisposition for increased mental illness, indicate a heightened risk factor for criminal behavior (Mouridsen, 2012). Salerno and Schuller (2019) note that possessing both mental illness and an ASD diagnosis significantly increases the likelihood of encountering the CJS as an offender.

Likewise, some researchers have examined LEPs’ interactions with ASD populations, particularly measuring this population’s satisfaction with these experiences. For instance, Crane et al. (2016) examined outcomes between LEPs and people with ASD in England and Wales. They found that this autistic population was mainly dissatisfied with their experience, and only 37% of officers interacting with this population had relevant training. Conversely, Tint et al. (2017) showed that of 284 individuals with autism, 16% had interacted with LEPs in the previous 12 to 18 months and one in five interactions resulted in physical restraint. Notwithstanding this finding, 63% reported satisfaction, although caregivers gave higher satisfaction rates than individuals with ASD, potentially skewing the results. Finally, Salerno and Schuller (2019) measured...
police interaction outcomes among 35 adults with autism in Canada. The results indicated that 80% had a police incident, and 42% required physical restraint. Participants were primarily unsatisfied with the police’s performance and awareness of ASD. Undoubtedly, more comprehensive research is required to identify satisfaction rates and the reasons for success.

It appears, on the whole, that research is conflicting on ASD relevance and its link with criminal activity; however, it seems that specific subsets of individuals with autism commit more significant crimes than individuals without autism (Maras et al., 2015). Moreover, it appears that people with ASD interact with LEPs quite commonly. However, people with ASD are not solely offenders or subjects interacting with the CJS. Individuals with autism also face the CJS as witnesses and victims of crime. Indeed, LEPs are more likely to encounter people with ASD in this capacity. Harrell (2011, cited in Teagardin et al., 2012) shows that people with developmental disabilities are almost twice as likely to be victims of crime compared with individuals without autism. Similarly, Petersilia (2001, cited in Teagardin et al., 2012) demonstrates that people with ASD are more likely to be taken advantage of and mistreated compare with individuals without autism, suggesting a higher likelihood of victimization. Engelbrecht (2018) states that people with ASD are more likely to be harassed and bullied in the prison system.

### Improving service delivery and reducing risk

As autism becomes increasingly prevalent, LEPs will interact more frequently with this population (Teagardin et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the media are replete with examples of deleterious exchanges between people with autism and LEPs. For example, the violent apprehension of 17-year-old Troy Canales in New York, who had difficulty maintaining eye contact during his interaction with LEPs; the lawsuit claims the police punched Troy in the face, and the officers had no formal training with ASD (Goldensohn, 2015). Consider the lawsuit in Worcester, Massachusetts, after a child with autism began acting out in the vehicle while the mother was driving. The mother called an ambulance to get medication for her son; however, the police arrived first and, as the lawsuit alleges, pinned the 10-year-old to the ground, breaking a bone in his arm (AP News, 2020). Cases such as these underscore the necessity of supplying improved service delivery to this population. Fortunately, three unique solutions emerge from the literature and form the tripartite holistic method of this article: training, CITs, and community outreach.

### The imperative of training/community outreach and CITs

#### Interactions once in the CJS

Naturally, the CJS and interactions with LEPs result in detention and arrest, housing inmates, whether temporarily or not, within the custodial system. Initial interactions with LEPs and people with ASD already result in overwhelming and heightened stimulus for people with autism. However, the addition of and forthcoming process of arrest and detention of people with autism are antithetical to their symptoms: namely, adherence to routine, sensitivities to smell, sound, and taste, and communication deficits (Dickie et al., 2018). Prison is an unfavorable environment for anyone, whether neurodiverse or not. Nevertheless, addition of this environment for people with ASD exasperates their symptoms, resulting in the potential for increased harm and adverse outcomes (Crane et al., 2016; Woodbury-Smith and Dien, 2014, cited in Holloway et al., 2020).

Crane et al. (2016) indicated that people with ASD in the custodial setting felt adrift and isolated, fearful of unfair treatment if they disclosed their diagnosis while possessing difficulties adjusting to the environment, such as interview rooms and booking. This unsettling feeling pervaded their interactions, leading to communication difficulties and abject stress. Moreover, Allen et al. (2008, cited in Holloway et al., 2020) noted that people with ASD in the custodial setting felt confused and unable to understand the experience. Helverschou et al. (2018) similarly reported that people with ASD felt disoriented and overwhelmed by the custody setting. Likewise, once in the penal system, people with ASD are at increased risk of bullying and harassment (Allely, 2015; Engelbrecht, 2018).

Holloway et al. (2020) undertook a unique approach in their research, taking two individuals with autism on a walkthrough of the police custodial setting located within the department. Participants engaged with the booking area, processing (fingerprints/photographs), and cell/holding area. Afterward, interviews uncovered several central themes of relevance, namely unfamiliarity, need for support, excess stimulus, and clear communication. Although the sample size in Holloway et al. (2020) was small, it dovetails with other research, such as Crane et al. (2016) and Allen et al. (2008, cited in Holloway et al., 2020), that people with autism feel overwhelmed and confused within the custodial system. Further, Holloway et al. (2020) show the potential for a training curriculum for LEPs once people with ASD encounter the custodial or penal system, mitigating negative encounters.

### The necessity of training/community engagement

From the above, it becomes clear why training is essential. Love
et al. (2021), in their study of 620 US-based LEPs, found that the more enhanced their knowledge-base of ASD, the better equipped they felt to interact with this population. Moreover, the Autism Society of America advocates the use of training for LEPs to reduce harmful incidents and causing unnecessary harm (Autism Society, 2020). Finally, Tint et al. (2017) followed 284 people with ASD, including youth, in Ontario, Canada, for 12–18 months. Of this sample, 16% had interactions with LEPs, and one-third had adverse outcomes. The authors indicate that training programs must enhance the self-efficacy and knowledge-base of LEPs toward ASD, specifically, “it is important for law enforcement officers to understand the diversity of presenting issues for individuals with ASD and the diversity of ASD in itself” (Tint et al., 2017: 2645). Lastly, proactive collaboration and consultation with people with ASD and their caregivers are also essential.

ASD training in the Canadian context is currently lacking. However, police departments deliver mandatory training for mental illnesses, such as psychotic disorders and depression, at the academy level (Coleman and Cotton, 2014). Nevertheless, training for ASD needs to be more prevalent (Northcott, 2018); most academies do not offer ASD training (Coleman and Cotton, 2014), which is only starting to take root. However, ASD training also needs to incorporate the autistic community to better understand their needs—hence, community engagement. Indeed, most prevailing LEP ASD training programs miss this essential component (Moursden, 2012; Railey et al., 2020). For instance, one example of current LEP Canadian ASD training is a 1-hour course delivered by the Toronto Police Service via the Canadian Police Knowledge Network (2022). Therefore, what is essential is not only training for LEPs, but also an interactive, collaborative process of engaging with the ASD community and bridging the gulf of understanding between each group. How this training’s efficacy might be enhanced is discussed next.

### Improving training for LEPs

Numerous authors and surveys of people with ASD and their caregivers stress the imperative of autism training for LEPs (Moursden, 2012; Railey et al., 2020; Salerno and Schuller, 2015; Teagardin et al., 2012). Notably, Teagardin et al. (2012), in assessing mastery and retention of ASD training for law enforcement, observed marked improvements from pre- to post-study; however, the results were still underwhelming. The study demonstrates that providing successful ASD training to LEPs will require practical experience and classroom sessions. In accessing the opinions of people with ASD toward creating practical LEPs training, Railey et al. (2020) suggested that ASD training should be mandatory and include a community aspect. This community aspect involves LEPs committing to their communities and proactively reaching out to the ASD population, especially in schools or locations where young people with ASD frequent. Training yields the boat, but community engagement provides the water.

The bidirectional response of community involvement and mandatory training shows promise for interactions between this population and LEPs. Salerno and Schuller (2015) indicate that in their sample, people with ASD generally fear LEPs in their interactions and broadly. Crane et al. (2016) evidenced similar results. This fear of LEPs and the CJS comes from negative interactions, general nervousness, and mistrust toward LEPs (Salerno and Schuller, 2015). Trust, conversely, can improve the disclosure of ASD symptoms to LEPs from this client group. Understanding that a general fear pervades interactions between people with ASD and LEPs, it is not surprising that disclosure is lacking in their contacts (Salerno and Schuller, 2015). Community outreach establishes relationships and trust, breaking down the bulwarks between these groups.

Community involvement and outreach can also mean establishing such protocols as the York Regional Police program in Ontario, Canada, of registering vulnerable persons within a department-held database (York Regional Police, 2022). This database retains unique information and data on individuals, such as communication deficits, atypical social responses, and situational and environmental triggers—however, Lunsky and Weiss (2017) report that many families are unfamiliar with such programs. Programs such as that employed by York Regional Police prepare officers for the arrival of a person with ASD and help to mitigate unfavorable outcomes during an interaction. However, it is prudent for LEPs to conduct outreach to local autism networks to guarantee that services, such as the vulnerability register, are understood by families and those with ASD—another community engagement project.

### The imperative of CITs trained in ASD

Using the Memphis model CIT as an example, CITs train select volunteer LEPs with mental health disorders. Moreover, CIT members receive a collaborative training approach, including the practical expertise of family members, advocates, and medical teams. Although currently specific to mental health, the training can also include developmental disabilities, such as ASD. Further, the training involves networking, partnership, and collaborative engagement to resolve mental health crises and responses (Watson and Fulambarker, 2012).
Compton et al. (2008) found that CIT training increased LEPs’ confidence and ability to engage people with mental health and developmental disabilities. Also, Compton et al.’s research indicated that the model shows promise to reduce officer injuries and overall harm in interactions. Similarly, Dupont and Cochran (2000, cited in Watson and Fulambarker, 2012) found that CIT’s reduced arrests and increased referral to external mental health services, a finding equally espoused by Franz and Borum (2011). Semple et al. (2021) found support for CIT in a small Canadian sample for reducing costs and lessening physical apprehensions of people with mental illnesses.

The success of CITs hinges on developing a core group of LEPs responding to mental health incidents and their police dispatchers’ comprehension of the CIT. In this way, the CIT typically comprises LEPs who exhibit a passion for serving this population and are well skilled in these interactions, expressing empathy and patience. Further, the CIT members understand their partnerships and resources in their community through collaborative training, thus, integrating and referring clients to various mental health outreach groups and external services (Compton et al., 2008; Watson and Fulambarker, 2012).

CITs show utility in reducing interactions with the CJS, which, as highlighted above, is significantly damaging for people with ASD. If LEPs can divert entrance to the CJS and harmful custodial settings, people with ASD will unquestionably have better outcomes. Although the research on CITs primarily focuses on mental health disorders (not exclusively ASD), the utility of CITs for people with ASD is inferred to be similarly effective. However, this presupposes that LEPs first understand ASD. Regardless, Bratina et al. (2020) found that CITs diverted people with mental health crises to proper community centers rather than detention centers. Similarly, Tyuse (2012) reviewed the 4-year results of the implementation of CITs in St Louis, Missouri, USA, and found that CITs are significantly valuable for diverting mental health subjects from custodial settings to treatment centers.

Although becoming the norm in Canadian policing (Coleman and Cotton, 2014), current mental health training, especially ASD training, remains inadequate (Aghasi and Beaudoin, 2021; Northcott, 2018; Tint et al., 2017). LEPs fail to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental health problems. Moreover, the research into CITs in Canada demonstrates that various departments are utilizing CITs in some capacity (Koziarski et al., 2021), although the breadth of their actual application is unknown. Regardless, training on ASD in Canadian police forces is lacking—it is rare to find ASD training at the academy level (Coleman and Cotton, 2014; Tint et al., 2017). Therefore, although CITs are being applied more frequently in Canadian policing (Koziarski et al., 2021), this is to the exclusion and needs of people with autism. Tint et al. (2017) suggests extending CITs to include people with ASD.

**Recommendations**

**Integrate CIT units into Canadian departments with explicit training for ASD**

Railey et al. (2020) discovered consensus among LEPs, people with ASD, and caregivers that the most desired qualities for approaching situations involving LEPs and people with ASD were: de-escalation, clear communication, keeping distance, patience, and approaching with empathy. However, all of these qualities presuppose an understanding and recognition of ASD. Therefore, CIT members trained in ASD who recognize these characteristics demonstrate promise for successfully engaging this population. Further, in a Canadian sample, Salerno and Schuller (2015) showed that of the 35 individuals with ASD surveyed, only one reported that a CIT responded to their incident, indicating that the actual application of CITs is unknown. The provision of CIT teams in the United States and Canada has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing arrests and harm (Compton et al., 2008; Franz and Borum, 2011; Watson and Fulambarker, 2012; Semple et al., 2021).

Although CITs are becoming more commonplace in the Canadian law enforcement context, their utility for ASD is insufficient if the LEPs of those CITs are under skilled and ill-trained in recognizing and managing ASD. Current mental health training programs for LEPs primarily discuss psychotic disorders, depression, and anxiety, whereas ASD training is increasingly rare (Coleman and Cotton, 2014). So, although CITs show promise in softening LEPs’ approaches to people with mental illness, their utility for bettering interactions with people with ASD is circumscribed by the extent of the LEPs’ training on autism. CITs must include people with ASD to better serve this population (Tint et al., 2017).

**Furnish rigorously evaluated methodologically sound training to LEPs**

As Teagardin et al. (2012) demonstrated, mere classroom instruction about ASD is unlikely to produce enduring knowledge acquisition or mastery of the material. Unquestionably, more research is required to shore up the scarcity of research in the field and determine the efficacy of training for LEPs and the appropriate curriculum needed (Crane et al., 2016; Railey et al., 2020; Salerno and Schuller, 2015). Moreover, Railey et al. (2020) expressed the necessity of going beyond mere pedagogic
teaching methods toward andragogical teaching styles, signifying that teaching should involve interaction with and the involvement of knowledgeable instructors, such as caregivers and clinicians, not solely videos and classroom instruction. This collaborative approach is absent in current ASD training for Canadian LEPs.

The training should be bidirectional, suggesting that caregivers should also understand LEPs’ approaches and strategies to best prepare for interactions. The York Regional Police (2022) vulnerable person registry is a judicious starting point toward this end. LEPs are better prepared by registering vulnerable individuals, but an invitation for trust is equally extended to develop relationships with the caregiver and family. Debbaudt (2002) drives this point home by discussing that caregivers and those with ASD need to be directly involved in ASD training for LEPs. Gardner and Campbell (2020) conducted recent research which demonstrated that LEPs who better understood ASD, its impacts, and symptoms reduced adverse outcomes, suggesting that understanding ASD directly from the source is advantageous for LEPs in their training curriculum.

Primary to training is the need to evaluate training outcomes rigorously. For instance, Love et al. (2021) created a 13-item self-efficacy scale that measures officers’ perceived ability to interact with people with ASD and their actual knowledge acquisition on the topic from training. The next logical step is applying measurement tools like these to actual interactions and determining their impact on mitigating aversive outcomes. Love et al.’s (2021) measurement is one example; however, the distillation from the above is that training should not be haphazardly applied or arbitrary—it requires rigorous evaluation to determine whether it accomplishes its mission in the long term, reducing harm and improving the abilities of LEPs to better serve people with ASD. More research is needed to determine proper ASD training programs for LEPs.

Community engagement

All of the heretofore is practical yet reactive; however, as Railey et al. (2020) indicate, a community component must proactively beget trust between LEPs and people with ASD. Debbaudt (2002) exhausts these points in his book *Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals*. Engendering trust and collaboration between stakeholders, those with ASD, and LEPs is critical. Therefore, forming groups that pre-emptively interact at the community level is prudent and necessary to earn trust between those with ASD, their caregivers, and LEPs. Debbaudt (2002) supplies one example in Detroit, where advocates for ASD and developmental disabilities meet with hospital staff and LEPs each month to discuss and spread awareness of ASD. These initiatives are fruitful and necessary to mitigate challenges before they arise instead of merely attending to the challenges reactively as they occur. More should transpire to proactively extend the branch of trust between LEPs and people with ASD.

Conclusion

ASD is a complex developmental disorder that presents social and nonsocial symptoms (Boutot, 2017; Chaste and Leboyer, 2012). These symptoms, such as rigidity, resistance, and difficulty expressing needs can directly impact interactions with LEPs (Boutot, 2017; Debbaudt, 2002). Moreover, as ASD rates exponentially increase across Canada (Ofner et al., 2018), leading to what Chiarotti and Venerosi (2020) call an epidemic, LEPs must adjust and prepare accordingly. The kaleidoscope of autistic diversity urges LEPs to understand this developmental disability and empathetically engage these clients (Railey et al., 2020; Teagardin et al., 2012). Indeed, by developing CITs that are trained in mental health disorders and ASD; furnishing methodologically sound training that is both practical and instructional; and reaching outward proactively to engender relations grounded in trust with people with autism and their caregivers, LEPs step forward onto the promising path to reduce harm and improve service delivery for this diverse population. This article has offered a holistic tripartite method for improving service delivery to people with ASD, and it can guide policy and practices for law enforcement agencies seeking to serve better the deserving populace of people with ASD in their communities.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

ORCID iD

Thomas B Leydier

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4017-297X

References

Aghasi A and Beaudoin J (2021) ‘What needs to happen’—a review of current police response to mental health calls. *Voices of Forensic Science* 1(1): 153–164.
Allely CS (2015) Experiences of prison inmates with autism spectrum disorders and the knowledge and understanding of the spectrum amongst prison staff: a review. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities and Offending Behaviour* 6(2): 55–67.

AP News (2020) Woman sues Worcester over police treatment of autistic son. https://apnews.com/article/lawsuits-police-archive-worcester-05df37779d7e46a486b4dc2cd1e4389 (accessed 1 April 2022).

Autism Society (2020) The autism society calls for better training for law enforcement after the shooting of 13-year-old autistic youth. Available at: https://www.autism-society.org/news/the-autism-society-calls-for-better-training-for-law-enforcement-after-the-shooting-of-13-year-old-autistic-youth (accessed 15 November 2021).

Boutot AE (2017) *Autism Spectrum Disorders: Foundations, Characteristics, and Effective Strategies*, 2nd ed. Pearson Education, Inc.

Bratina MP, Carrero KM, Kim B, et al. (2020) Crisis intervention team training: when police encounter persons with mental illness. *Police Practice and Research* 21(3): 279–296.

Canadian Police Knowledge Network (2022) *Autism spectrum disorder*. https://www.cpkn.ca/en/course/autism-spectrum-disorder/.

Chaste P and Leboyer M (2012) Autism risk factors: genes, environment, and gene-environment interactions. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 14(3): 281–292.

Chiarotti F and Venerosi A (2020) Epidemiology of autism spectrum disorders: A review of worldwide prevalence estimates since 2014. *Brain Sciences* 10(5): 274.

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 and Management* 12(2): 256–273.

Coleman T and Cotton D (2014) *TEMPO: Police interactions A report towards improving interactions between police and people living with mental health problems*. Mental Health Commission. Available at: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/drupal/TEMPO%252520Police%252520Interactions%252520082014_0.pdf.

Compton MT, Bahora M, Watson AC, et al. (2008) A comprehensive review of extant research on crisis intervention team (CIT) programs. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 36(1): 47–55.

Crane L, Maras KL and Hawken T et al. (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.

Debbaut D (2001) *Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals: Recognizing and reducing risk situations for people with autism spectrum disorders*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Debbaut D (2002) *Autism, Advocates, and Law Enforcement Professionals: Recognizing and Reducing Risk Situations for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Jessica Kingsley Publisher.

Dickie I, Reveley S and Dorrity A (2018) The criminal justice system and people on the autism spectrum: perspectives on awareness and identification. *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science* 4(1): 1–21.

Engelbrecht N (2018) *Autistics in prison*. Embrace Autism. https://embrace-autism.com/autistics-in-prison/ (accessed 1 April 2022).

Franz S and Borum R (2011) Crisis intervention teams may prevent arrests of people with mental illnesses. *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 12(3): 265–272.

Frith U and Happé F (2005) *Autism spectrum disorder*. *Current Biology* 15(19): R786–R790.

Fuld S (2018) Autism spectrum disorder: the impact of stressful and traumatic life events and implications for clinical practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 46(3): 210–219.

Gardner L and Campbell JM (2020) Law enforcement officers’ preparation for calls involving autism: prior experiences and response to training. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 50: 4221–4229.

Ghaziuddin M, Tsai L and Ghaziuddin N (1991) Brief report: violence in Asperger syndrome, a critique. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 21(3): 349–354.

Goldensohn R (2015) *NYPD officers beat autistic teen in front of his home, lawsuit says*. DNA Info. Available at: https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20150708/fordham/nypd-officers-beat-autistic-teen-front-of-his-home-lawsuit-says/ (accessed 15 November 2021).

Helverschou SB, Steindal K, Nøttestad JA, et al. (2018) Personal experiences of the criminal justice system by individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism* 22(4): 460–468.

Holloway CA, Munro N, Jackson J, et al. (2020) Exploring the autistic and police perspectives of the custody process through a participative walkthrough. *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 97. DOI: 10.1016/j.ridd.2019.103545.

Koziarski J, O’Connor C and Frederick T (2021) Policing mental health: the composition and perceived challenges of co-response teams and crisis intervention teams in the Canadian context. *Police Practice and Research* 22(1): 977–995.

Love A, Usher EL, Toland MD, et al. (2021) Measuring police officer self-efficacy for working with individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 51(4): 1331–1345.

Lunsky Y and Weiss JA (2017) Emergency services and Canadians with autism. Policy Options. Available at: https://policyoptions.irpp.org/fr/magazines/october-2017/emergency-services-and-canadians-with-autism/.

Maras K, Mulcahy S and Crane L (2015) Is autism linked to criminality? *Autism* 19(5): 515–516.

Matson JL and Koziowski AM (2011) The increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 5: 418–425.
McCarty P and Frye RE (2020) Early detection and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder: why is it so difficult? *Seminars in Pediatric Neurology* 35: 1–7.

Mouridsen SE (2012) Current status of research on autism spectrum disorders and offending. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 6(1): 79–86.

Northcott P (2018) Understanding autism: police and supporters work to calm those in distress. RCMP-GRC. Available at: https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/gazette/understanding-autism (accessed 15 November 2021).

Ofner M, Coles A, Decou ML, et al. (2018) Autism spectrum disorder among children and youth in Canada 2018. Public Health Agency of Canada. Available at: https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder-children-youth-canada-2018/autism-spectrum-disorder-children-youth-canada-2018.pdf.

Ouellette-Kuntz H, Coo H, Lam M, et al. (2014) The changing prevalence of autism in three regions of Canada. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44(1): 120–136.

Railey KS, Bowers-Campbell J, Love AM, et al. (2020) An exploration of law enforcement officers’ training needs and interactions with individuals with an autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 50(1): 101–117.

Salerno AC and Schuller RA (2019) A mixed-methods study of police experiences of adults with an autism spectrum disorder in Canada. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 64: 18–25.

Semple T, Tomlin M, Bennell C, et al. (2021) An evaluation of a community-based mobile crisis intervention team in small Canadian police service. *Community Mental Health Journal* 57(3): 567–578.

Teagardin J, Dixon DR, Smith MN, et al. (2012) Randomized trial of law enforcement training on autism spectrum disorders. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 6(3): 1113–1118.

Tint A, Palucka AM, Bradley E, et al. (2017) Correlates police involvement among adolescents and adults with an autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 47(9): 2639–2647.

Trevisan DA, Roberts N, Lin C, et al. (2017) How do adults and teens with self-declared Autism Spectrum Disorder experience eye contact? A qualitative analysis of first-hand accounts. *PLoS One* 12(11): e0188446. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0188446.

Tyuse SW (2012) A crisis intervention team program: four-year outcomes. *Social Work in Mental Health* 10(6): 464–477.

Watson AC and Fulambarker AJ (2012) The crisis intervention team model of police response to mental health crises: A primer for mental health practitioners. *Best Practices in Mental Health* 8(2): 71.

Woodbury-Smith M and Dein K (2014) Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and unlawful behaviour: Where do we go from here? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44(11): 2734–2741.

York Regional Police (2022) Vulnerable person registry. Available at: https://www.yrp.ca/en/community/Vulnerable-Person-Registry.asp (accessed 1 April 2022).

**Author biography**

Thomas B. Leydier is a police officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in his 17th year of service. He is soon finishing his Masters of Public Safety and was the 2020 recipient of the Governor Generals Silver Academic Medal in his undergraduate degree. He hopes to continue his research into better serving the autistic population at the doctoral level.