

**Police Officers' Perceptions Regarding their Interactions with the Disabled
in Kankakee County**

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Literature Review

Law enforcement and the community

In many service careers, people are taught how to handle situations based on who they are helping and the needs of that person. This is especially evident in the field of law enforcement, in which a person's capacity to understand and willingness to cooperate can have an immediate effect on a situation and its outcome. In an attempt to better meet the needs of the people they are helping, many law enforcement officials have recently shifted to a model of community policing, which seeks to improve communities through close relationships between officers and citizens. Community policing has three main components: proactively implementing problem solving, engaging with community organizations, and reorganizing institutional rules (Schuck, 2017). In doing so, this model gears officers towards improving the way they communicate with and engage with the community through good interpersonal skills. Additionally, it not only promotes collaboration between both groups of people, but also works to "dismantle symbolic and institutional barriers" (Cheng, 2019) and to increase accountability.

Though officers are trained quite extensively and this approach to policing appears to be making a positive change in creating safe and comfortable communities, there is still a concerning gap in training and resources available to officers when it comes to handling situations involving mental and intellectual disabilities (Gardner, Campbell, and Westdal, 2019).

Law enforcement and the disabled

According to the Americans with Disabilities Amendment Act of 2008, a disability is "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" of a person (Equal Opportunity for Individuals with Disabilities, 2008). Whether a disability is

physical or mental, it affects a person's way of life and his or her environment. Due to the circumstances and vulnerability of the disabled, they are often more susceptible to crimes against them, especially interpersonal violence (IPV), which is often committed by someone close to them, such as a caregiver (Child, Oswald, Curry, Hughes, Powers, 2011). In fact, the rate of violent crime against those with disabilities is over three times the rate for those without disabilities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017). Though the number of disabled victims is prevalent, officers still seem to struggle providing them with the assistance they need.

Research by Eadens et al. (2016) consisted of 157 officers from Southeastern USA that completed a modified version of the Social Distance Questionnaire regarding their interactions with the mentally disabled. The findings of these surveys indicated that although most officers showed a willingness to socially interact, a majority of them had very little, if any, training on how to handle calls and crimes involving people with such disabilities (Eadens et al., 2016).

Another study with a similar goal, which was completed by Hughes et al. in 2016, created focus groups of 25 police officers in Northwestern USA. The researchers discovered 17 themes related to officer experience handling violence against people with disabilities, which divided into three categories: 1) the situational context, 2) multiple challenges, and 3) investigational and prosecutorial difficulties. Amidst the officer responses, there was an intriguing commonality that officers expressed more frustration with the system, its policies, and its training, than they did with the victims themselves (Hughes et al, 2016). This reveals not only the prevalence of a lack of training but also a hopeful insight that officers view crime victims as people that need help, regardless of their disability.

Though officer training for working with the disabled seems to have been neglected, the addition of specific training has shown promising results. One study by Gardener, Campbell, and

Westdal (2019) interviewed 72 officers and found that the 19 participants who had received training about autism felt more adequately prepared for such calls than the 53 participants without training. Another study by Scantlebury et al. (2017) provided an extra day of mental health training to police officers in England. Though the training did not reduce the number of incidents reported within the study period, they found that the set of officers who received the extra training were much more likely to accurately mark incidents with the necessary mental health tags (Scantlebury et al., 2017).

In spite of these positive findings, however, Oswald et al. (2011) discovered that, of the 133 U.S. police departments that they surveyed, a majority of them did not have protocols or training in place for serving disabled crime victims, and some departments even lacked a formal definition of disability. Effective training on handling disabled victims and offenders is so incredibly important because of the extra barriers that exist in these situations. Research done by Child et al. (2011) involved interviewing disabled adults who had reported interpersonal violence to police. Through these interviews, the researchers found substantial, additional barriers beyond what is normally seen in officer-victim interactions. Some of the most prominent barriers identified were that victims are afraid to identify a disability, they have previously been blamed for crimes against them, they feel that their credibility is questioned by officers, and they face communication and accommodation difficulties. These barriers and a lack of training for how to overcome them make handling cases of crimes involving the intellectually disabled more difficult and, as discovered by Koskela, Pettit, and Drennan (2016), likely lead to the significant underreporting of such crimes.

Kankakee County

Though it is not a universal slogan for all police, a motto that can be found at almost any police department is “To Protect and Serve.” By purposely being so open-ended, this saying helps officers recognize their duty to protect and serve not just specific members of their community, but all members, as best they can. This undoubtedly includes the mentally and intellectually disabled, who frequently need extra assistance, but as seen in past research, often do not receive it. Though officers may want to help, they commonly lack the training to do so. Limited resources and insufficient training impair law enforcement interactions with the disabled which likely affects their ability to find justice. When these issues arise, victims with disabilities are often discouraged from reporting crimes against them (Child et al., 2011), which leaves the offenders untouched and thus affects everyone else in the community.

Although this impacts law enforcement in general, it has a specific impact on the people in Kankakee County. According to the Community Health Status Assessment for Kankakee County in 2018, 16.78% of the population was listed as having a disability, which is higher than Illinois’s 10.73% (CHSA, 2018). To put this in perspective, 12.6% of the U.S. population overall was listed as having a disability at the time (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Though Illinois has higher than average disabled population, a report by the American Network of Community Options and Resources in 2019, noted that the state had “taken no significant steps to improve policies” that better the lives of the intellectually and developmentally disabled (ANCOR, 2019). This, the report argues, caused Illinois to rank 44th among all states in efforts to serve intellectually and developmentally disabled individuals by The Case for Inclusion (ANCOR, 2019).

With Illinois being ranked so poorly in its assistance to the disabled, it is likely that there is a need for the state to re-examine its policies, and with the disabled population of Kankakee

County being so high, the area provides a good sample that offers ample opportunity for research and improvement.

This very need and opportunity led to the following study, which investigates the perceptions by members of Kankakee County law enforcement regarding their interactions with mentally and intellectually disabled members of the community, as well as discovers whether gaps exist in their training for handling such cases.

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