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INCREASING AWARENESS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN LAW  
ENFORCEMENT IN HISPANIC COMMUNITIES

A Thesis

by

ANNETTE M. CANO

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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Major Subject: Communication Sciences and Disorders



INCREASING AWARENESS OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS IN LAW  
ENFORCEMENT IN HISPANIC COMMUNITIES

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by  
ANNETTE M. CANO

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May 2018



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## ABSTRACT

Cano, Annette, M., Increasing Awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Law Enforcement in Hispanic Communities. Master of Science (MS), May 2018, 43 pp., 4 tables, 15 figures, references, 47 titles.

The aim of the present study was to study autism awareness amongst law enforcement officers (LEO) and first responders (FR) serving the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). A 23-question survey was conducted to collect demographic data, knowledge, and level of training that officers and responders have when serving individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Literature review findings suggested commonalities between ASD in the justice system, law enforcement perception and training of ASD, media and perception of law enforcement, and racial profiling. Results indicated LEOs at the university level and private sector were knowledgeable of ASD characteristics. Most participants were trained and had set protocols for people with disabilities (PWD), specifically ASD. Although the majority of the participants expressed the need for awareness for ASD, some participants were reluctant to acquire information regarding ASD from this study.





## DEDICATION

None of this would have been possible without God, first and foremost, and the prayers and love of my grandparents. I am thankful for my parents, John and Lupita, for planting the seed of knowledge and supporting me through all my trials and tribulations. Also, to my sister Amber and newfound brother Rudy, thank you for all of your love and support. I would like to thank my family in Christ and extended family members for their prayers and words of wisdom. Lastly, I would like to thank my Communication Sciences and Disorders family for the encouragement and unconditional love that has been shared throughout the years.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, law enforcement officers (LEOs) have come under scrutiny for their interactions with members of the Autism community. One event, in particular, the shooting of behavioral therapist Charles Kinsey in Miami, Florida (Christopher, 2016), exemplified the need for Autism training amongst LEOs and first responders (FRs). During this highly publicized incident, Mr. Kinsey was shot in the leg while protecting his client mistakenly identified as carrying a weapon. It was reported after the incident that he was diagnosed with Autism and was, in fact, playing with a toy truck (Cockburn, 2016). Although the client was not harmed during the encounter, the brutal actions taken by the law enforcement brought to light the many dangers individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) face as a result of miscommunication and lack of training LEOs receive about ASD (Christopher, 2016).

A second event also worth mentioning took place on July 19, 2017. A 14-year-old, Connor Leibel, was detained by a police officer during an outing at one of his favorite parks in his hometown of Arizona while his caregiver stepped away to make a brief phone call (Silberman, 2017). Officer David Grossman, a certified drug recognition expert, mistakenly identified Connor's stimming, his self-stimulating act of repeatedly raising a piece of yarn to his nose to smell it, as a sign of drug intoxication (Silberman, 2017). Connor's mother filed a complaint after this event occurred, leading to an internal investigation with the Buckeye Police Department (Silberman, 2017). Officer Grossman was eventually cleared of his charges

(Silberman, 2017). The results of this investigation exposed the reality of not only the Buckeye Police Department, but possibly most, if not all LEOs. According to the Buckeye Police Department, it would be impossible to teach LEOs to recognize all symptoms and behaviors due to Autism's widespread spectrum (Silberman, 2017).

Given these events, this research is intended to educate law enforcement agencies about Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and the available resources to better serve their community. As quoted by David Perry (2017, para. 17), there must be a "baseline of presumption of compliance" to avoid these situations. Advocacy for ASD must also be made to different levels of LEOs, most importantly. In order to provide access and utilize these resources to the fullest, we must begin with the general information of ASD and see how these statistics can affect a region such as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), a predominantly Hispanic-populated area.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) defines ASD as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social communication and social interaction, which include the presence of restricted, repetitive behaviors (2017). ASD can be caused by different etiologies such as neurobiological factors, environmental factors, and genetics (ASHA, 2017; Autism Speaks, 2017).

Neurobiological factors are abnormalities in the genetic code that can result in brain developmental abnormalities (ASHA, 2017; Autism Speaks, 2017). These factors found amongst individuals with ASD include problems with genetic code development, structural and functional abnormalities of the brain, and the brain's response to different environments. Environmental factors can also increase the occurrence of ASD. Such factors may include: pre- and post-natal components (e.g., diet, exposure to drugs and toxins, etc.), advanced parental age, complications

within pregnancy and/or birth, and pregnancies less than a year apart (ASHA, 2017; Autism Speaks, 2017).

ASD is typically diagnosed around the age of two years, but can also be identified past the age of four (as cited by CDC, 2016). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 59 children are identified with ASD (as cited by CDC, 2014). It is more prevalent in boys than girls (1:42; 1:189) according to the CDC (Autism Speaks, 2017). The CDC suggests there is an under identification of children who are Hispanic due to disparities among different ethnicities (ASHA, 2017). White children have the highest prevalence rate (12 per 1,000) in comparison to African American children (10.2 per 1,000) and Hispanic children (7.9 per 1,000; ASHA, 2017). Genetic or chromosomal conditions or disorders (e.g., Down Syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, tuberous sclerosis) can also increase the risk factors of ASD (as cited by Chakrabarti & Fombonne, 2005; Autism Speaks, 2017; CDC, 2018). These genetic or chromosomal conditions can be passed down or arise spontaneously in the embryo (CDC, 2018; Autism Speaks, 2017).

Deficits in social communication include difficulty in joint attention and social exchange, in addition to challenges in verbal and nonverbal usage for social interaction (ASHA, 2017). Other characteristics can include isolated, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. These behaviors or acts can be exhibited through repetitive speech (echolalia), motor movements (e.g., hand flapping or finger flicking) or use of objects (e.g., Connor's use of the piece of yarn to touch his nose), in addition to, inflexible adherence to routines, and hypo- (little) or hyper- (high) sensitivity to sensory input (ASHA, 2017).

Communication discrepancies are not only exhibited by individuals with Autism, but with their conversational partners, as well (ASHA, 2017). Family members, caregivers, teachers,

friends, classmates, speech-language pathologists, and other service providers can often feel like ineffective communication partners to individuals with ASD (ASHA, 2017). They may have difficulty interpreting and responding to behaviors elicited from individuals with ASD (ASHA, 2017).

These deficits in social communication are organized into criteria established by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5; as cited by American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals meeting this criterion are diagnosed with ASD with one of three levels of severity (ASHA, 2017). The levels of severity are defined by the amount of support needed by the individual in the areas of social communication and with restricted, repetitive behaviors (ASHA, 2017). Levels of severity may vary by context and may also fluctuate over time, which means assistance needed by the individual with ASD may differ in different situations (ASHA, 2017).

## CHAPTER II

### SIGNIFICANCE

#### **Population in the Rio Grande Valley**

The media influences our perception of many aspects of life, particularly LEOs assessing individuals with special needs. Nearly half of individuals with ASD are more likely to wander off making law enforcement officers nine times more likely to encounter them (Autism Speaks, 2012; Autism Speaks as cited by Debbaudt, n.d.; Saunders, 2016). The individuals they come in contact with are as diverse as the type of patients speech-language pathologists (SLP) serve. It is imperative to investigate the knowledge of LEOs and FRs on ASD to ensure the safety of others in various communities such as the RGV.

To do this, we must look at the geographical region of the RGV. The RGV consists of four counties: Starr, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Willacy (Rio Grande Valley Texas, 2017). As of 2016, the population across the RGV is 1,356,910, of which 91.4% are Hispanic. A combined of 78.3% of these constituents speak another language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). It is also estimated ASD can affect 7.9 per 1,000 Hispanic children (as cited by U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). Given these statistics, it is vital to assess the knowledge of our LEOs and FRs to continue increasing awareness of ASD.

#### **Law enforcement and People with Disabilities**

Perry and Carter-Long (2016), on behalf of the Ruderman Family Foundation, examined media coverage of law enforcement use of force in disability. The researchers found people with



disabilities (PWD) make up one-third to half of all cases of individuals being killed by LEOs (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016). According to Perry and Carter-Long (2016, p. 5), “disability is the missing word in media coverage of police violence.” After three years of media coverage of police violence and disability, Perry and Carter-Long (2016) found the following patterns in their study. First, they discovered the word “disability” is often omitted as an attribute in these cases (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016, p.6). Next, they found an impairment is used to evoke pity or sympathy for the victim (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016, p.6). A medical condition or “mental illness” is marked as the reason for their deaths (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016, p.6). Lastly, the researchers discovered some rare instances of thoughtful examinations of disability from within its social context that demonstrated the intersecting forces leading to dangerous use-of-force incidents (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016, p.6). These tragic incidents are opportunities to pave the way for a better model of policing for people with disabilities, especially individuals with ASD.

### **Current Available Resources**

Unfortunate events such as the Kinsey and Leibel incident are reminders that interactions between individuals with ASD and LEOs and/or FRs are crucial. One false move and a situation can escalate, which is why advocacy for both (ASD & LEO/FR) is necessary. Fortunately, there are individuals across the country working to make a difference, and prevent tragic events such as the Kinsey or Leibel case from reoccurring.

### **Spectrum Shield**

Spectrum Shield is a program founded by actress, Holly Robinson-Peete, and her son’s Speech-Language Pathologist, Pamela Wiley (Law, 2017). This program trains young men with ASD how to interact with police officers (Law, 2017). This program exposes police officers to the unique behavior patterns and characteristics of ASD (Law, 2017). The Spectrum Shield

program is held at *Beyond the Label Ranch* outside of Los Angeles, California and co-run by Stan Campbell, a retired police officer from the Oklahoma Police Department (Law, 2017). Spectrum Shield educates LEOs, first-hand, that there are no certain types of behaviors or a type of “look” with ASD (Law, 2017, p. 56-57). The young participants with Autism are encouraged to reveal their diagnosis to officers during the program (Law, 2017). They also learned why officers follow strict protocols and how when alarmed they can respond to quick movements that may lead to a calamity (Law, 2017). Volunteer officers and program leaders teach these individuals with Autism how to interact with LEOs through drills and simulated pat-downs and traffic stops (Law, 2017). Ms. Wiley notes the following instructions for individuals with ASD are crucial to follow: “it is important to monitor your nonverbal communication because actions speak louder than words, follow all instructions explicitly, ask for permission before making any sudden movements, and be prepared for sensory stimulation” (e.g., pat-downs; Law, 2017 p. 56-57).

## **CARE**

Another program with the same purpose as Spectrum Shield is CARE (Cop Autism Response Education) established by Officer Robert Zink of St. Paul, Minnesota. He shares his life experience as a father of two sons with ASD. He also educates LEOs about Autism and how to de-escalate difficult situations between them (Moini, 2017). It was important for Officer Zink to make a difference in his community and to prevent any misrepresentation of his children if they were to encounter a police officer (Moini, 2017). Although no specific protocol was mentioned, Officer Zink stated that this program has been helpful for families to create a bond between LEOs and children with Autism (Moini, 2017).

## **Autism Risk and Safety Management**

Autism Risk and Safety Management founder, Dennis Debbaudt, developed a curriculum for LEOs and FRs to implement when encountering an individual with Autism (Saunders, 2016; Autism Speaks, 2017; Autism Risk and Safety Management, 2018). He provides easy access to the training videos and downloadable resources on his website for parents, LEOs, and FRs (Autism Risk and Safety Management, 2018). Mr. Debbaudt also gives training presentations across the globe to bring awareness of ASD and help LEOs and FRs better serve the community (Autism Risk and Safety Management, 2018). Bebo's Angels, a local nonprofit advocacy group in the RGV for ASD, hosted Mr. Debbaudt in McAllen two years ago in order to bring awareness to our LEOs across the Valley (Mejia, 2016). LEOs and FRs from across the RGV attended this presentation to increase awareness with how to "interact with those who have Autism" (as cited by Mejia, 2016, para. 1). It would be substantial to learn whether or not LEOs and FRs in the RGV are still implementing this curriculum with their protocol in their daily routine.

## CHAPTER III

### TERMINOLOGY

In order to fully assess the knowledge and awareness of LEOs and FRs, an extensive search of references concerning people with disabilities (PWD) was conducted. Scarce law enforcement-based glossary of terms regarding PWD, specifically ASD, were detected. Only one resource with terminology related to PWD was found, but only contained definitions of mental health terms (PMHC Toolkit, n.d.). While this may be beneficial, it did not provide any information or characteristics of ASD (PMHC Toolkit, n.d.). Due to the lack of material on behalf of law enforcement, a holistic view of this project had to be taken by asking “What can benefit our LEOs and FRs?” Officer Grossman did not understand the term “stimming” when apprehending Connor Leibel last year (Silberman, 2017). Familiarity with this vocabulary will allow LEOs and FRs to, potentially, become more aware and prevent miscommunication. Carefully selected terms were grouped into two categories: disorders or related disorders on the spectrum and characteristics or behavioral terms associated with ASD. Reference to the definition of these terms can be found in Table 1. Each term will be reviewed in their respective categories.

#### **Disorders or Related Disorders on the Spectrum**

This section refers to disorders associated with ASD. ASD is defined as a group of complex disorders of brain development characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal

and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). It should be noted that Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), and Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), are not included under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5) criteria for ASD. Asperger's Syndrome is another developmental disorder under ASD defined by impairments in communication and social development, in addition to, repetitive interests and behaviors without a significant delay in language and cognitive development (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). PDD is a group of conditions involving delays in development of many basic skills such as the "ability to socialize with others, to communicate and use imagination" (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p.6). PDD can also be categorized as PDD-NOS. PDD-NOS refers to children that have significant problems with communication and play, and some difficulty interacting with others, but are considered too social for the diagnosis of Autism (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.).

### **Behavioral Terms Associated with ASD**

Although Asperger's Syndrome, PDD, and PDD-NOS are no longer included in the DSM-5, it would be useful as a supplement to understand the different type of behavioral terms associated with ASD. This section refers to behavioral terms about ASD. Compulsions are defined as "deliberate repetitive behaviors that follow specific rules" (e.g., cleaning, checking, or counting; as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p. 2). Autism Speaks also explains restricted patterns of interest may be an indicator of compulsions in young children (n.d.). The repetition of words or phrases heard previously, either immediately or subsequently after, is defined as echolalia (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). Hyperresponsiveness, also known as hypersensitivity or sensory defensiveness, is described as a tendency that is outside of the norm to negatively react to

sensory input considered to be harmless or non-irritating to others (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). “Abnormal sensitivity to sensory input,” or the lack of feeling to sensory stimulation, is defined as hyporesponsiveness. (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p. 5). Hyporesponsiveness is also known as hyposensitivity (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). Eye gaze, facial expressions, body postures and gestures, are things people do to convey information or express emotions without words are defined as nonverbal behaviors (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.). Obsessions are characterized by “persistent and intrusive repetitive thoughts” (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p.6). “Repetitive movements or speech or sticking to one idea or task with a compulsive quality to it” is recognized as perseveration (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p. 6). Stimming, or “self-stimulating behaviors,” is a term that is characterized by “repetitive movements or posturing of the body that stimulate one's senses” (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d., p.10). Some stimming behaviors serve as a regulatory function such as calming one’s self, increasing concentration or shutting out an overwhelming sound (as cited by Autism Speaks, n.d.).

It is essential to have this terminology “under our belt” in order to be competent and well-rounded professionals. This can apply to all cultures around the world. While mistakes are inevitable, it is important to have access to as many resources possible to ensure the safety of our community, as well as our LEOs and FRs. It is vital to see these mistakes as opportunities to correct the wrongs that other have made in order to ensure a safe environment.

## CHAPTER IV

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the lack of scholarly literature describing LEOs perception of ASD in communication sciences and disorders databases, such as ComDisDome, a vast search was conducted through different online databases related to law enforcement databases (e.g., Criminal Justice Abstracts, Social Sciences, and Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection), as well as state and government websites (e.g., Department of Public Safety, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection). Scholarly peer-reviewed journals that spanned over the last ten years were reviewed; however, active research beyond the past ten years were also examined. After reviewing 31 articles identified by the literature, commonalities were found between law enforcement and Autism Spectrum Disorders; law enforcement, training program and people with disabilities; law enforcement, perception, and media influence; racial profiling, Hispanic, and law enforcement. The commonalities found include:

#### **Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Justice System**

Thanks to individuals such as Dennis Debbaudt, awareness of ASD in the criminal justice system is on the rise (Autism Risk and Safety Management, 2018; Freckleton & List, 2009; Cheely, et al., 2012; Brown, et al., 2016; Crane, et al., 2016; Rava, et al., 2017; Tint, et al., 2017; Turcotte, et al., 2018). Novel research and training programs prospectively pave the way for awareness, professional competency for LEOs and FRs, prevention of adverse consequences, and, most importantly, trust between LEOs, FRs, and the community. In order to achieve this, we

must know the prevalence of ASD in the justice system and the need for reform to accomplish these goals.

### **Prevalence of ASD in the Justice System**

It is estimated that 20% of youths diagnosed with ASD have had some form of interaction with law enforcement by the age of 21; five percent have been detained (Tint, et al., 2012; Rava, et al., 2017). A study found an 8% conviction rate criminality presence in individuals with ASD (as cited by Cheely, et al., 2012). Another study discovered 11.4% of youth with ASD have had involved in the juvenile system (as cited by Cheely, et al., 2012).

Cheely and colleagues (2012) compared the frequency, type, and outcome of criminal charges of 609 youth with ASD against non-ASD youths between the ages of 12-18. They found that the youth with ASD had higher criminal charges against persons and lower rates against property (Cheely, et al., 2012). Youths with ASD were more likely to be charged with school-based offenses (e.g., carrying a weapon, assault and battery upon a school employee, or threatening a life of a public employee or school teacher) and more likely to be charged with disturbing schools (Cheely, et al., 2012). Results also found youths with ASD were less likely to be charged with probation violations (Cheely, et al., 2012).

Turcotte, Shea, and Mandell (2018) examined frequency, correlates, and overlap of school disciplinary actions, psychiatric hospitalizations, and police contact among children and adolescents with ASD. The study consisted of survey results from 2,525 caregivers of individuals with ASD in elementary through high school (Turcotte, Shea, & Mandell, 2018). Results indicated 15% of children and adolescents with ASD experienced school disciplinary action, 7.9% were followed by police contact, and 7.8% with hospitalization (Turcotte, Shea, &



Mandell, 2018). They state any one of these experiences events would increase the risk of experiencing any one of the other events (Turcotte, Shea, & Mandell, 2018).

Statistics like these, regardless of sample size, are enough to bring awareness of ASD to light within the criminal justice system. It is clear that ASD is prevalent within our communities. Now we must observe the training and competency of these individuals to serve their constituents with ASD.

### **Law Enforcement Perception and Training of Autism Spectrum Disorders**

Although there is some evidence of training programs for law enforcement, implementation, and competency of these programs are insufficient (Crane, et al., 2016; Eadens, et al., 2016; Lurigio, Smith, & Harris, 2008; Viljoen, Bornman, Wiles, & Tonsing, 2017; Wells & Schafer, 2006). Although some parents of children with ASD were reported to be satisfied to very satisfied with their interaction with LEO's, others felt otherwise and "echoed the need for police training of ASD" (Tint, et al., 2012; Crane, et al., 2016). Barriers are evident, as in any profession, such as organizational/time constraints (Crane, et al., 2016). Nonetheless, there is a distinct acknowledgment for training in the ASD community, as well as with PWDs, from LEOs, adults with ASD, and parents and caregivers of individuals with ASD (Crane, et al., 2016, Wells & Schafer, 2006). Preparation and knowledge is key when assessing a situation to avoid negative media impressions of LEOs and FRs.

### **Media and Perception of Law Enforcement**

The manner in which the media constructs incidents about police misconduct influences our attitudes towards them (Graziano, Shuck, & Martin, 2010). This is not only found here in the United States, but all over the world. Overall, all studies reviewed agreed media influences our views with LEOs (Bassiouni, 1981; Gebotys, Roberts, & DasGupta, 1988; Graziano, Shuck, &

Martin, 2010, Sun, et al., 2014; Sun, et al., 2016; Wu, 2010; Wu, 2014). It is imperative for the media to balance their responsibility to provide full and fair coverage of incidents with their responsibility not to increase the threat of life and interfere with effective law enforcement (Bassiouni, 1981).

### **Racial Profiling**

Although there is no true explanation for racial profiling, it continues to exist in today's society (Aguirre, 2004; Engel & Johnson, 2006; Goldsmith, et al., 2009; Reitzel, Rice & Piquero, 2004; White, 2015, Wilkins & Williams, 2009). It not only occurs in rural neighborhoods, but in metropolitan areas such as New York City, as well (Goldsmith, et al., 2009; Reitzel, Rice & Piquero, 2004). Not only are Hispanics more likely to be subjected to traffic stops and personal and/or vehicle searches, but are more probable to be stopped by Latino officers (Engel & Johnson, 2006; White, 2015, Wilkins & Williams, 2009). Wilkins & Williams (2009, p. 1) suggest Latino officers are pressured to “represent blue” affecting their professional attitudes and behaviors. Aguirre (2004, p. 1) found the use of the “Hispanic identity” was negatively utilized to portray all Mexican Americans were either drug traffickers or illegal immigrants. Views such as these are damaging to this ethnic population, especially individuals with ASD within this ethnicity (Aguirre, 2004). This type of stereotype “marginalizes their presence, stifles their voice, and taints their social identity” that can “restrict their opportunities and heighten their vulnerability” in their communities (Aguirre, 2004, p. 1).

## CHAPTER V

### METHOD

#### **Participants**

A total of 270 surveys were distributed to LEOs currently working in the private sector and at the university level. Twenty-one participants consented to a 23-question survey (consent page with 22 questions). Out of the 21 participants, 17 attempted to complete the survey. This produced a return rate of six percent. Participant ages ranged from the ages of 30 to 62 (*Mage*= 44.875, *Range*= 46, *Standard Deviation*= 10.2). Gender information was acquired for demographic purposes only.

#### **Materials**

A 23-question online survey was used to examine the level of LEOs and FRs awareness and identification of ASD, which can be seen in Table 2 in the appendix section. This was completed by utilizing online software, Qualtrics, which analyzes patterns within the allotted questions. Questions were separated into several categories such as demographics, characteristics of ASD, and level of training. Based on Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations, survey questions remained optional to complete aside from the consent form. This, in turn, allowed participants to skip questions when completing the survey.

#### **Procedure**

The survey was distributed to 270 law enforcement officers in the private sector and university level upon the IRB approval which was obtained in March 2018. Data collection

occurred over the course of 5 weeks. The survey was distributed via email in order to provide the participants with an easily accessible format to accommodate their busy schedules.

In order to explore LEOs and FRs awareness of ASD, the survey was grouped into three sections: demographics, knowledge of ASD characteristics, and the level of training these professionals have to serve their constituents with ASD. Questions regarding demographics were carefully selected and organized into: ethnicity, years of service, and number of LEOs and FRs able to speak Spanish. This is important information due to the region's high Hispanic population. Questions were composed of multiple choice, yes/no, and fill in the blank answer choices to provide a quick array of answer choices. Questions regarding characteristics of ASD were given a 5-point Likert scale, that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree as a level of measurement on an interval level to observe their perception of ASD (Social Research Methods, n.d.).

These questions were derived from the only existing scholarly investigation found titled, "Improving Communication between Law Enforcement and Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders" conducted by Texas Woman's University's associate professor of the communication sciences and disorders program, Dr. June Levitt, Ph.D, CCC-SLP (2017). As previously mentioned, two possible responses such as yes/no answer in the level of training portion of the survey were made available for immediate selection for these professionals (Social Research Methods, n.d.).

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data achieved were analyzed via quantitative analysis via Qualtrics, Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word. Data were reported anonymously with descriptive

statistics. The frequency of the patterns of the participant's responses and central tendencies, including the mean, median, and mode were analyzed.

## CHAPTER VI

### RESULTS

#### **Demographics**

Due to IRB rules and regulations, not all survey questions were completed, which resulted in an incomplete data set. Therefore, accumulated data was analyzed by each individual question. A total of 17 participants contributed to this study. The majority of the subjects were male ( $n= 13$ , 76.47%) as shown in Figure 1: Gender. The majority were also of Hispanic heritage ( $n= 14$ , 82.35%) as shown in Figure 2: Race. Figure 3: Age, depicts the largest age group in this study which were in the age group of 30-39 years of age ( $n= 6$ , 37.5%) and 40-49 years of age ( $n= 5$ , 31.25%), followed by 50-59 years of age ( $n= 4$ , 25%), and 60+ years of age ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%) This were the age break downs out of a total of 16 individuals that provided a response to the survey question regarding age.

Figure 4: Title/Agency displays the participants' title and agency served under, which a total of 15 individuals answered. The largest group were police officers ( $n= 5$ , 33%) and police sergeant's ( $n= 5$ , 33%), followed by police lieutenant ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), assistant chief of police ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), police chief ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), Hidalgo County sheriff's office ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), the CEO of private security company AISI ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%). Figure 5 describes the participant's years of services in the community, which a total of 16 LEOs answered. The majority of the participants responded to serving our community for 5 years or less ( $n= 6$ , 37.5%), followed by 6-10 years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), 16-20 years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), 20+ years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), then 11-15 years ( $n= 1$ ,

6.25%). Figure 6 showed the participants knowledge of speaking another language other than English, which a total of 17 people answered. The majority of the sample size answered 'Yes' to speaking another language other than English ( $n= 16$ , 94.12%). One participant ( $n= 1$ , 5.88%) did not speak another language other than English.

### **Characteristics**

This section of the questionnaire consisted of LEOs knowledge of ASD and characteristics associated with ASD. Figure 7 shows the number of participants who had knowledge of ASD. Out of a total of 17 participants, 14 (82.35%) knew what ASD were compared to the rest of the sample size ( $n= 3$ , 17.65%). Although the majority of the sample size knew what ASD were, the majority of the participants did not have personal knowledge of anyone with ASD ( $n= 10$ , 58.82%) see Figure 8. This can be compared to the rest of the respondents ( $n= 7$ , 41.18%).

### **Awareness of Communication Characteristics**

A total of 16 individuals answered a seven question, five-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1-*Strongly Disagree*, 2-*Somewhat Disagree*, 3-*Neither Agree or Disagree*, 4-*Somewhat Agree*, 5-*Strongly Agree*. These questions concerned the participant's awareness of some of the characteristics of ASD as shown in Table 3. When asked if people with ASD often had delayed speech and language skills, one participant neither agreed nor disagreed ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%), nine participants somewhat agreed ( $n= 9$ , 56.25%), and six participants strongly agreed ( $n= 6$ , 37.5%). When asked whether some individuals with ASD were not able to communicate verbally, one participant strongly disagreed ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%), one participant somewhat disagreed ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%), three participants neither agreed nor disagreed ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), four participants somewhat agreed ( $n= 4$ , 25%), and seven participants strongly agreed ( $n= 7$ , 43.75%). When

asked if people with ASD often overreact to unfamiliar environments, one participant somewhat disagreed ( $n = 1$ , 6.25%), one participant neither agreed or disagreed ( $n = 1$ , 6.25%), seven participants somewhat agreed ( $n = 7$ , 43.75%), and seven participants strongly agreed ( $n = 7$ , 43.75%). When asked if it was common for people with ASD to repeat someone's utterance, one participant somewhat disagreed ( $n = 1$ , 6.25%), five participants neither agreed or disagreed, four somewhat agreed ( $n = 4$ , 25%), and six participants strongly agreed ( $n = 6$ , 37.5%).

### **Awareness of Social Characteristics**

When asked if individuals with ASD often resist or avoid physical contact, two participants somewhat disagreed ( $n = 2$ , 12.5%), three participants neither agreed or disagreed ( $n = 3$ , 18.75%), five participants somewhat agreed ( $n = 5$ , 31.25%), and six participants strongly agreed ( $n = 6$ , 37.5%). When asked if people with ASD avoid eye contact, three participants neither agreed or disagreed ( $n = 3$ , 18.75%), six participants somewhat agreed ( $n = 6$ , 37.5%), and seven participants strongly agreed ( $n = 7$ , 43.75%). When asked if people with ASD experience difficulty talking about their own feelings or understanding other people's feelings, seven participants neither agreed or disagreed ( $n = 7$ , 43.75%), four participants somewhat agreed ( $n = 4$ , 25%), five participants strongly agreed ( $n = 5$ , 31.25%).

### **Level of Training**

Figure 9 depicts the participant's responses when asked if they have ever encountered individuals with ASD, which 17 responded. The majority of the group responded 'No' ( $n = 12$ , 70.6%) in comparison to those who responded 'Yes' ( $n = 5$ , 29.4%). Figure 10 displays the participant's responses when asked if there was a protocol for people with special needs, specifically ASD. Out of five participants, four ( $n = 4$ , 80%) answered 'Yes' as shown in Figure 10. The rest of the sample size responded 'No' ( $n = 1$ , 20%) regarding a protocol for people with



special needs. Figure 11 shows how many respondents received training for ASD, which four participants answered. Out of four participants, the majority responded 'Yes' ( $n = 3$ , 75%) as compared to those who answered 'No' ( $n = 1$ , 25%). A total of five participants ( $n=5$ , 100%) felt there should be a protocol for people with special needs, specifically ASD were shown in Figure 12. Figure 13 portrays LEOs perception of assessing a situation with individuals with special needs, specifically ASD, which a total of 16 participants answered. The majority of the sample size responded 'Yes' ( $n = 13$ , 81.25%) to feeling well-equipped to handling a situation with someone diagnosed with ASD. Only 3 participants responded 'No' ( $n = 3$ , 18.75%). Figure 14 depicts a total of 17 participants' thoughts on the need for awareness of ASD. All participants responded "Yes" ( $n = 17$ , 100%). When asked if they would be interested in information regarding ASD as shown in Figure 15, which a total of 16 individuals responded. The majority responded 'Yes' ( $n = 13$ , 81.25%) and stated they would prefer the information in a text format. Three participants responded 'No' ( $n = 3$ , 18.75%).

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the knowledge of ASD from different levels of LEOs and FRs across the RGV. Results suggest LEOs in the private and university level demonstrated awareness of ASD, knowledge of characteristics of ASD, having a protocol for assessing situations with individuals with ASD, receiving training regarding ASD, feelings toward having a set protocol for people with special needs/ASD, and confidence in assessing situations with individuals with special needs/ASD. It was also encouraging to see LEOs in the RGV acknowledged the need for ASD awareness and were interested in further information. The interest for further information sparked the creation for not only LEOs, but for families, as well of an informational fact sheet by this graduate student. This can be seen on Table 4. The informational fact sheet is entitled: How to Improve Communication between the ASD Community and Law Enforcement and First Responders in the appendix. This material can be and will be shared to increase awareness and prevent miscommunication in the future, as well as ensure safety and trust, between both parties.

#### **Limitations**

Although data showed increased awareness for LEOs in the RGV concerning ASD, the majority of the respondents had not encountered individuals with ASD, limiting proficiency in serving this population. Other limitations to this study included the small sample size. The lack of diversity between the participants (LEOs and FRs) at the county, state, city, and

university/school level was another limitation. Most notably, not all participants responded to survey questions regarding having an established protocol for individuals with ASD, receiving training, and their perception of having an established protocol for ASD. This could be due to technological difficulties or participants not choosing to answer these questions. Another important limitation to this study was not including questions regarding knowledge of available resources pertinent to ASD information and protocols set in place for PWD, specifically ASD.

### **Future Directions**

Recommendations for future studies include, first and foremost, acquiring different levels of LEOs and FRs (e.g., county, state, city, and university/school level) to further amplify this study. A greater sample size would allow for a holistic view of the knowledge and perception of ASD of LEOs and FRs in the RGV. Another consideration should include the offer of an incentive to the survey participants during a face to face administration if all questions are answered. Lastly, it would be beneficial to include questions regarding knowledge of available resources regarding ASD and established protocols their agencies have for PWD, especially ASD.

### **Conclusion**

Literature findings and results of the survey revealed awareness and knowledge of ASD is increasing within law enforcement, which will, in turn, allow the safety of LEOs and the ASD population. It also proves that ASD is prevalent in the justice system and need for training is necessary to prevent tragic events such as Mr. Kinsey's and Connor Leibel. Awareness and advocacy for ASD as well as LEOs and FRs will improve communication on both sides of the field. Increasing awareness will ensure trust between the ASD community and law enforcement.

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## APPENDIX A



## APPENDIX A

### LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

#### **Autism Risk and Safety Management**

Autism Risk and Safety Management (2018).

Retrieved from: <https://www.autismriskmanagement.com/>

Table 1: Terminology		
Category	Word	Definition
<b>Disorders or Related Disorders on the Spectrum</b> (* = Not in DSM-5)		
	Autism Spectrum Disorders	A group of complex disorders of brain development characterized by difficulties in interaction, verbal, and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.
	Asperger Syndrome*	A developmental disorder on the Autism spectrum defined by impairments in communication and social development and by repetitive interests and behaviors, without a significant delay in language and cognitive development.
	Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD)*	A group of conditions involving delays in development of many basic skills, including the ability to socialize with others, communicate, and use imagination. Can be associated with ASD, Asperger Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Rett Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified.
	Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)*	A category of PDD referring to children having significant problems with communication, play, and some difficulty interacting with others, but are too social for the diagnosis of Autism.
<b>Behavioral Terms Associated with ASD</b>		
	Compulsions	Deliberate repetitive behaviors that follow specific rules, such as pertaining to

		cleaning, checking or counting. Restricted patterns of interest may be an early sign of compulsions in young children.
	Echolalia	Repeating words or phrases heard previously or either immediately after hearing a word or phrase or much later.
	Hyperresponsiveness	A tendency, outside of the norm, to react negatively or with alarm to sensory input which is generally considered harmless or non-irritating to others. This is also known as hypersensitivity and sensory defensiveness.
	Hyporesponsiveness	An abnormal insensitivity to sensory input. This is also known as hyposensitivity.
	Nonverbal Behaviors	Things people do to convey information or express emotions without words, such as eye gaze, facial expressions, body postures, and gestures.
	Obsessions	Persistent and intrusive repetitive thought. Preoccupations with specific kinds of objects or actions may be an early sign of obsessions.
	Perseveration	Repetitive movement(s) or speech or sticking to one idea or task that has a compulsive quality to it.
	Stimming	Repetitive movements or posturing of the body that stimulate one's senses. Some "stims" may serve as a regulatory function (e.g., calming, increasing concentration or shutting out an overwhelming sound). These are also known as "self-stimulating" behaviors.

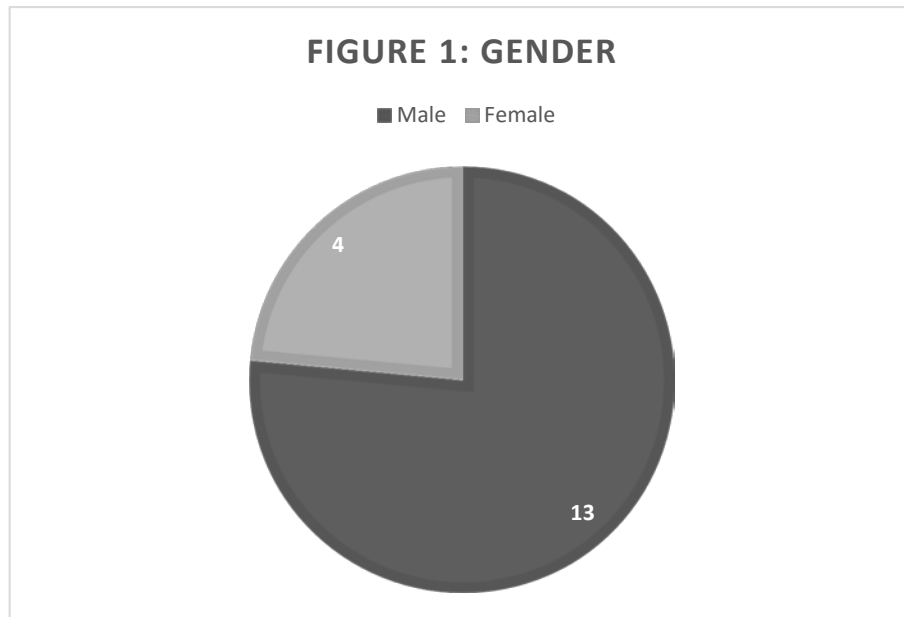
<b>Table 2: ASD Survey Questionnaire</b>	
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS</b>	
1. Gender	
2.Race/Ethnicity	
3.Age	
4.Title/Agency	
5.How long have you been serving our community?	
6.Do you know another language other than English?	
7.Do you know what Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are?	
8.Do you know anyone with ASD?	
<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	
9.People with ASD often have delayed speech and language skills	
10.Some of the people with ASD cannot communicate by verbal communication (they do not speak)	
11.People with Autism often overreact to unfamiliar environments such as sirens, flickering lights, police vehicles, and law enforcement officers in uniform.	
12.It is common for people with ASD to repeat someone's utterance. For example, when they are told to sit down, they may repeat the verbal command "sit down" without actually sitting down.	
13.People with ASD often resist or avoid physical contact.	
14.People with ASD often avoid eye contact.	
15People with ASD experience difficulty talking about their own feelings or understanding other people's feelings.	
<b>LEVEL OF TRAINING</b>	
16.Have you encountered individuals with ASD while on duty?	
17.Is there a certain protocol to follow when encountering people with special needs?	
18.Did you receive training on how to assess situations with individuals with special needs, specifically ASD?	
19.Do you feel there should be training/protocol for encountering people with special needs, specifically ASD?	
20.Do you feel well-equipped to handle a situation involving individuals with special needs, specifically ASD?	
21.Do you feel there's a need to know about ASD in your profession?	
22.Would you like information regarding ASD?	

**Table 3: Characteristics of ASD**

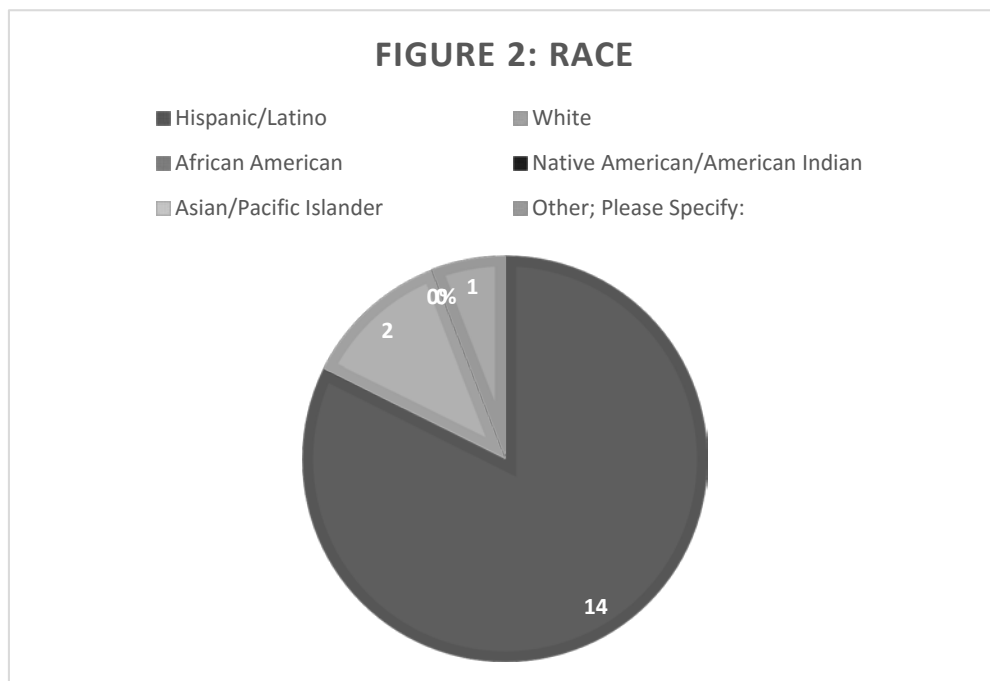
Question	Strongly disagree	n=	Somewhat disagree	n=	Neither agree nor disagree	n=	Somewhat agree	n=	Strongly agree	n=	Total
People with ASD often have delayed speech & language skills.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	6.25%	1	56.25%	9	37.50%	6	16
Some people with ASD cannot communicate verbally (they do not speak).	6.25%	1	6.25%	1	18.75%	3	25.00%	4	43.75%	7	16
People with Autism often overreact to unfamiliar environments such as sirens, flickering lights, police vehicles, and law enforcement officers in uniform.	0.00%	0	6.25%	1	6.25%	1	43.75%	7	43.75%	7	16
It is common for people with ASD to repeat someone's utterance. For example, when they are told to sit down, they may repeat the verbal command "sit down" without actually sitting down.	0.00%	0	6.25%	1	31.25%	5	25.00%	4	37.50%	6	16
People with ASD often resist or avoid physical contact.	0.00%	0	12.50%	2	18.75%	3	31.25%	5	37.50%	6	16
People with ASD often avoid eye contact.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	18.75%	3	37.50%	6	43.75%	7	16
People with ASD experience difficulty talking about their own feelings or understanding other people's feelings.	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	43.75%	7	25.00%	4	31.25%	5	16

**Table 4: HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE ASD COMMUNITY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AND FIRST RESPONDERS**

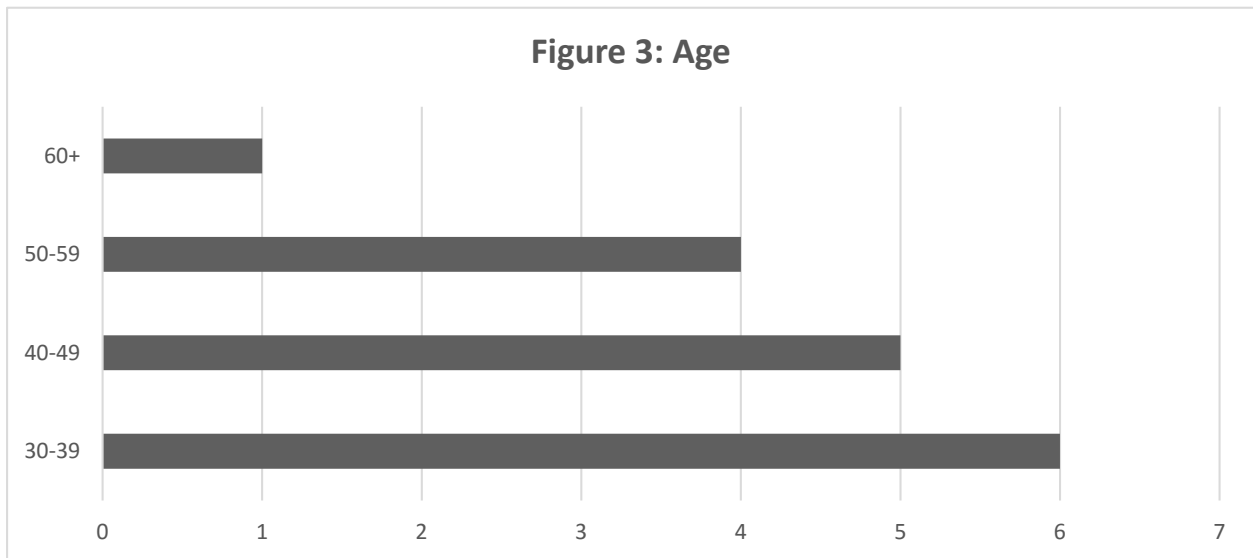
<b>What to do/NOT to do for Individuals with ASD or Families with children with ASD</b>	<b>What LEOs and FRs to look for</b>
Create a handout card or medical tag indicating individual has ASD	Check for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• medical alert tags</li> <li>• written material (e.g., handout card) indicating ASD</li> </ul>
Remain calm	May avoid eye contact
Follow instructions explicitly	May be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonverbal or limited vocabulary</li> <li>• May use gestures to communicate</li> </ul>
Don't make sudden movements	May be monotonous
Ask permission	May repeat utterances or instructions given to them
Monitor your nonverbal communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LEOs and FRs read into your body language than your verbal expression</li> </ul>	May exhibit repetitive physical actions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand flapping</li> <li>• Finger flicking</li> <li>• Twirling objects</li> </ul>
Be prepared for any sensory input (e.g., pat downs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Done to ensure safety, not to upset individual with ASD</li> </ul>	May rock back and forth or engage in self-abuse
Do not attempt to flee the scene	May not understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• body language or</li> <li>• recognize command presence (e.g., officer in uniform)</li> </ul>
Plan and Practice Disclosure Techniques <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• practice at home</li> <li>• include SLP in implementing techniques</li> </ul>	May have pidgeon-toed gait and running style
	May not: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ask for help</li> <li>• show indication of pain, even if harm is apparent</li> </ul>



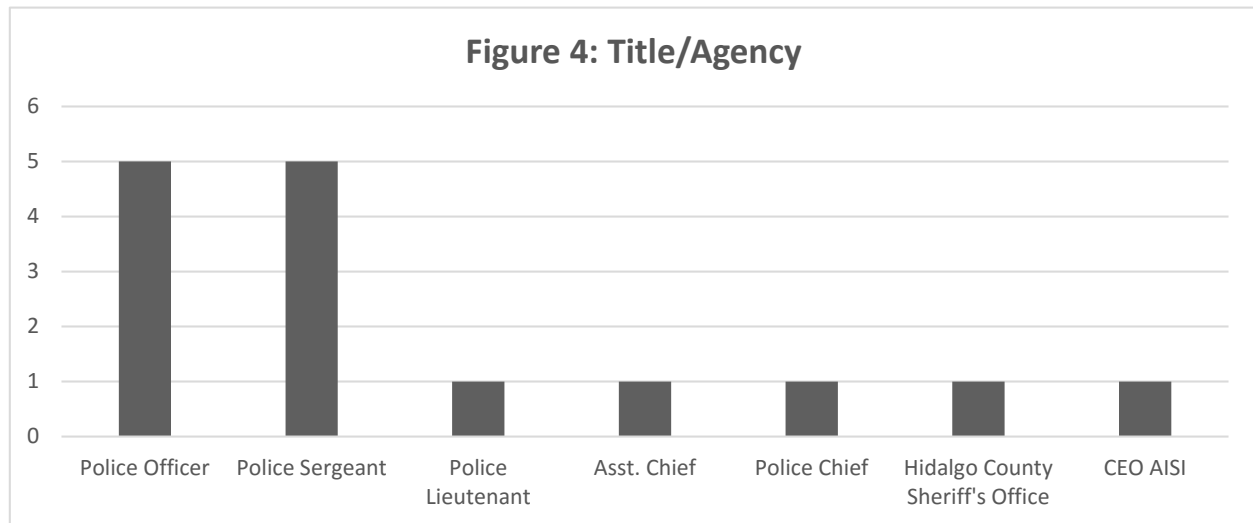
*Figure 1: Gender.* Survey results revealed the majority of the participants were male ( $n=13$ , 76.47%). The remaining were female ( $n=4$ , 23.53%).



*Figure 2: Race.* Results indicated the majority of the sample size were Hispanic ( $n= 14$ , 82.35%), followed by White ( $n= 2$ , 11.76%), and Other; Please Specify ( $n= 1$ , 5.88%).

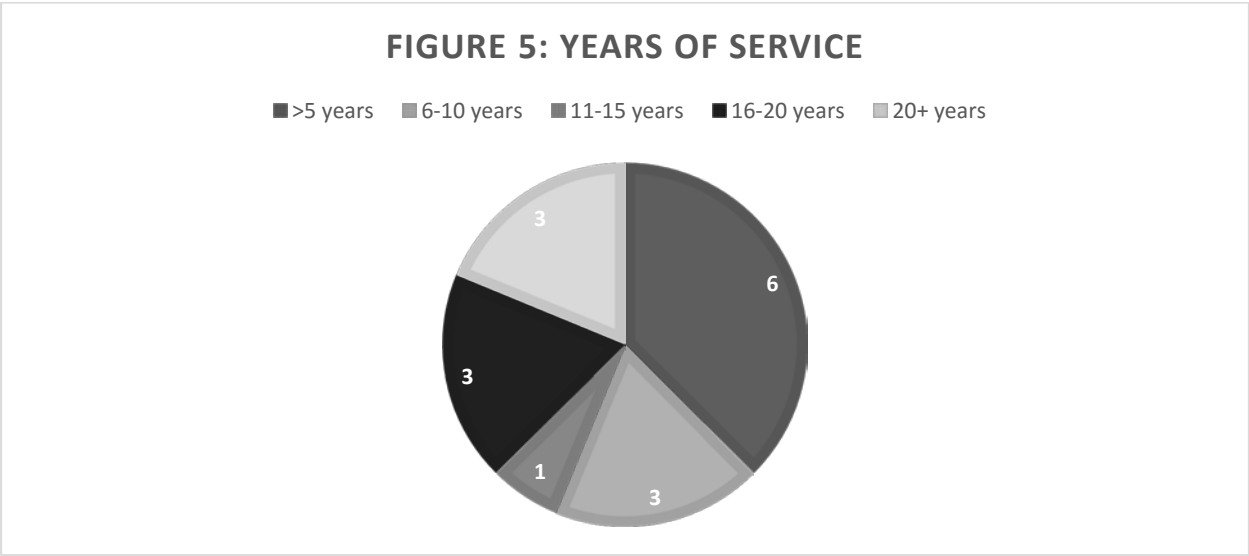


*Figure 3: Age.* Survey results revealed the largest age group in this study were within the age group of 30-39 ( $n= 6$ , 37.5%), followed by 40-49 age group ( $n= 5$ , 31.25%), then the 50-59 age group ( $n= 4$ , 25%), and 60+ age group ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%).

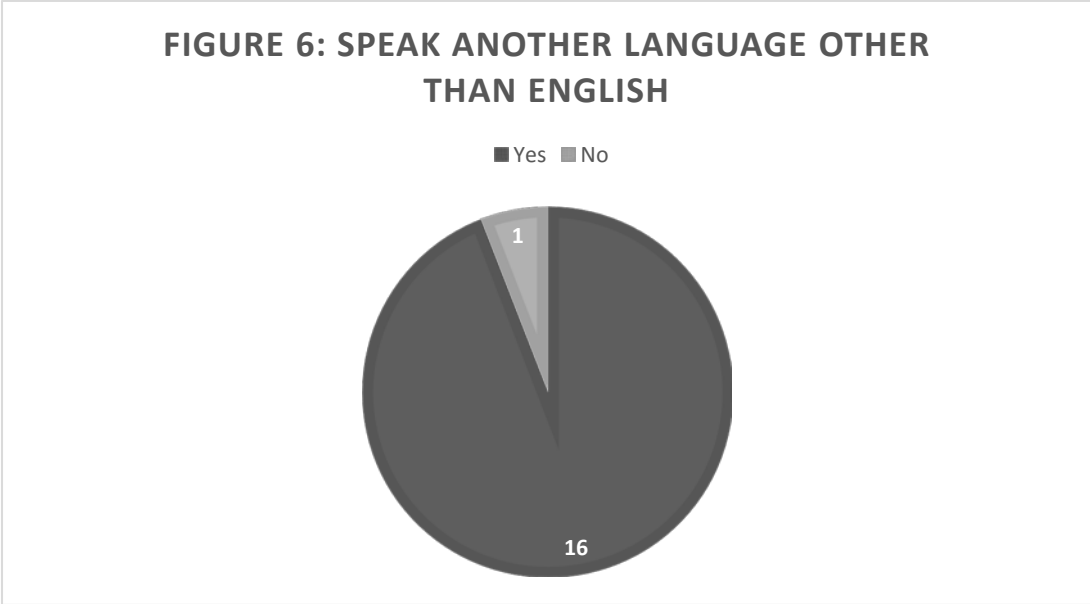


*Figure 4: Title/Agency.* Results revealed the majority of the group were classified as Police Officers ( $n= 5$ , 33%) and Police Sergeant's ( $n= 5$ , 33%). The remaining were classified as Police Lieutenant ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), Assistant Chief ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), Police Chief ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%), CEO AISI ( $n= 1$ , 6.6%).

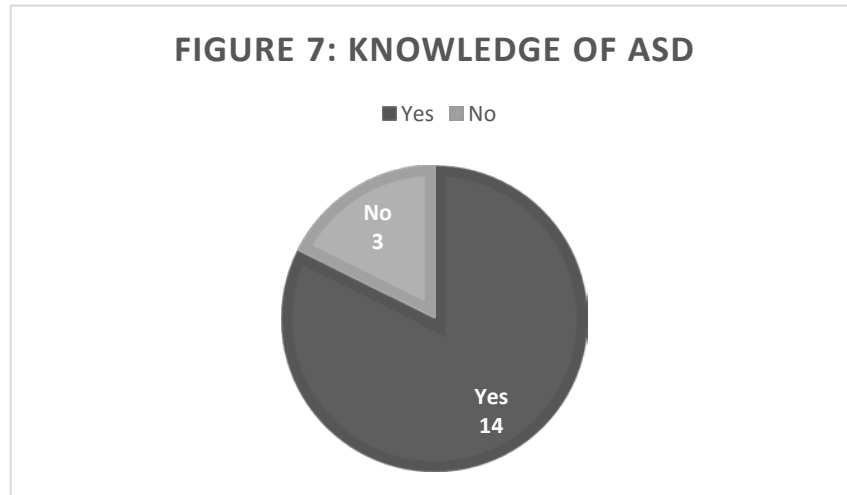




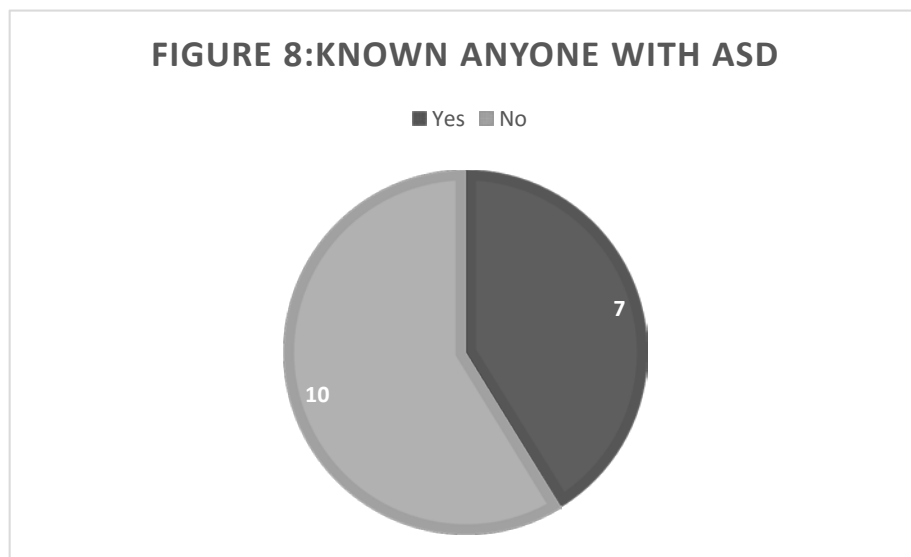
*Figure 5: Years of Service.* The survey results present the years of service the participants have served the community. The majority of the participants responded to serving our community for 5 years of less ( $n=6$ , 37.5%), followed by 6-10 years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), 16-20 years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%), and 20+ years ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%). The least number of participants served the community for 11-15 years ( $n= 1$ , 6.25%).



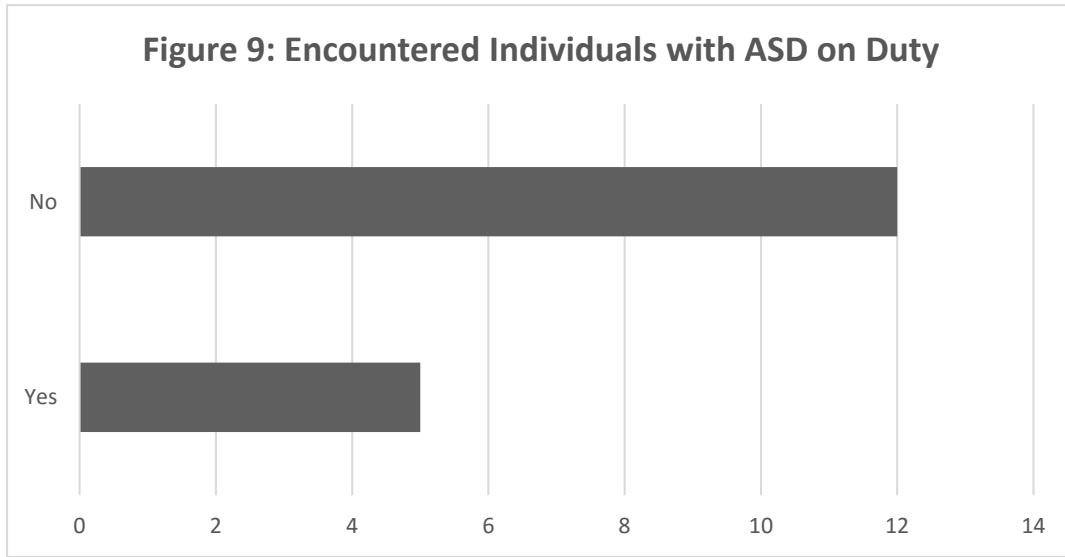
*Figure 6: Speak Another Language Other than English.* Survey results found the majority of the participants spoke another language other than English ( $n= 16$ , 94.12%), while the rest did not ( $n= 1$ , 5.88%).



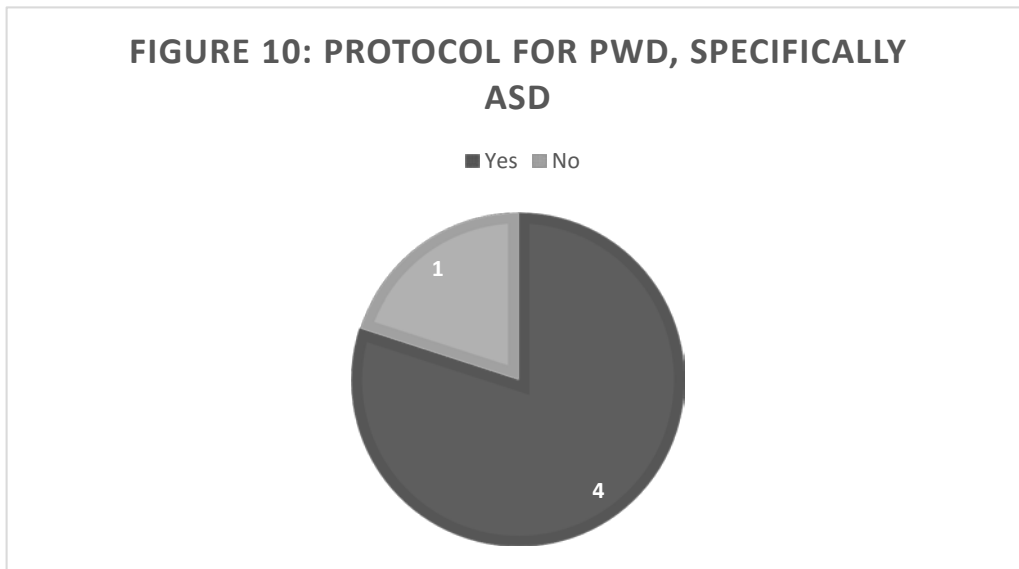
*Figure 7: Knowledge of ASD.* The majority of the participants had knowledge of ASD ( $n= 14$ , 82.35%). The remaining were not familiar with ASD ( $n= 3$ , 17.65%).



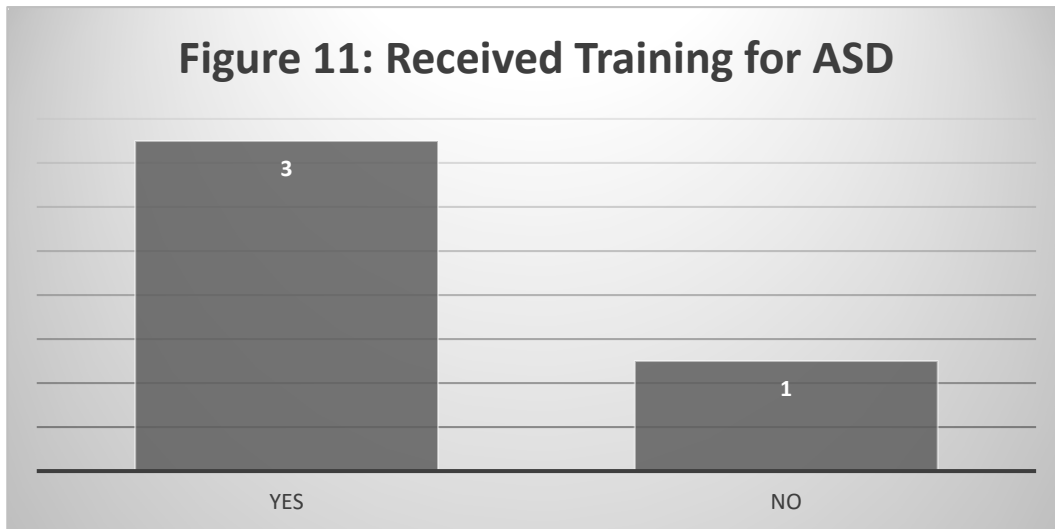
*Figure 8: Known Anyone with ASD.* Survey results revealed the majority of the participants did not know someone with ASD ( $n= 10$ , 58.82%). The rest of the sample group responded to knowing someone with ASD ( $n= 7$ , 41.18%).



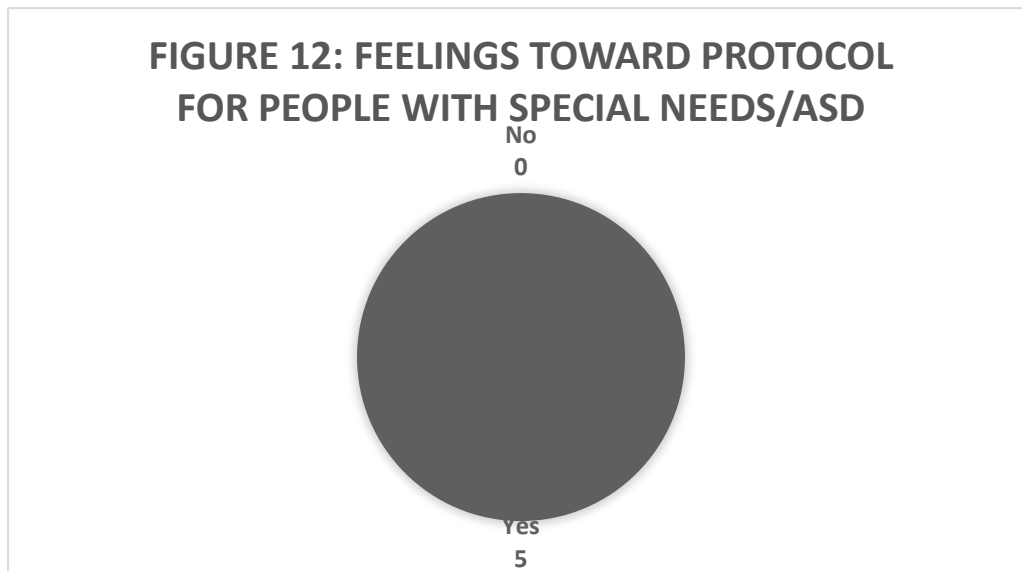
*Figure 9: Encountered Individuals with ASD on Duty.* Survey results show that the majority of the participants had not encountered individuals with ASD ( $n= 12$ , 70.6%). Only five participants responded ‘Yes’ to encountering an individual with ASD ( $n= 5$ , 29.4%).



*Figure 10: Protocol for PWD, specifically ASD.* When asked if these LEOs had an established protocol for PWD, specifically ASD, the majority of the participants responded ‘Yes’ ( $n= 4$ , 80%). The remaining participants did not have a protocol pertaining to PWD, specifically ASD ( $n= 1$ , 20%).

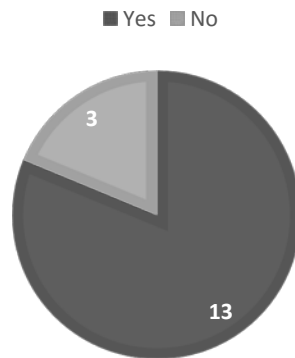


*Figure 11: Received Training for ASD.* Survey results revealed the majority of the group received training for ASD ( $n= 3$ , 75%) while the remaining did not ( $n= 1$ , 25%).



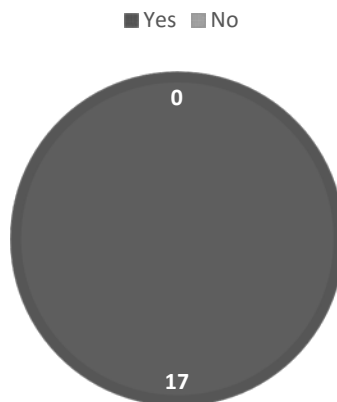
*Figure 12: Feelings Toward Protocol for People with Special Needs/ASD.* All participants felt there should be a protocol for people with special needs/ASD ( $n= 5$ , 100%).

**FIGURE 13: CONFIDENCE IN ASSESSING  
SITUATION WITH INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL  
NEEDS, SPECIFICALLY ASD**

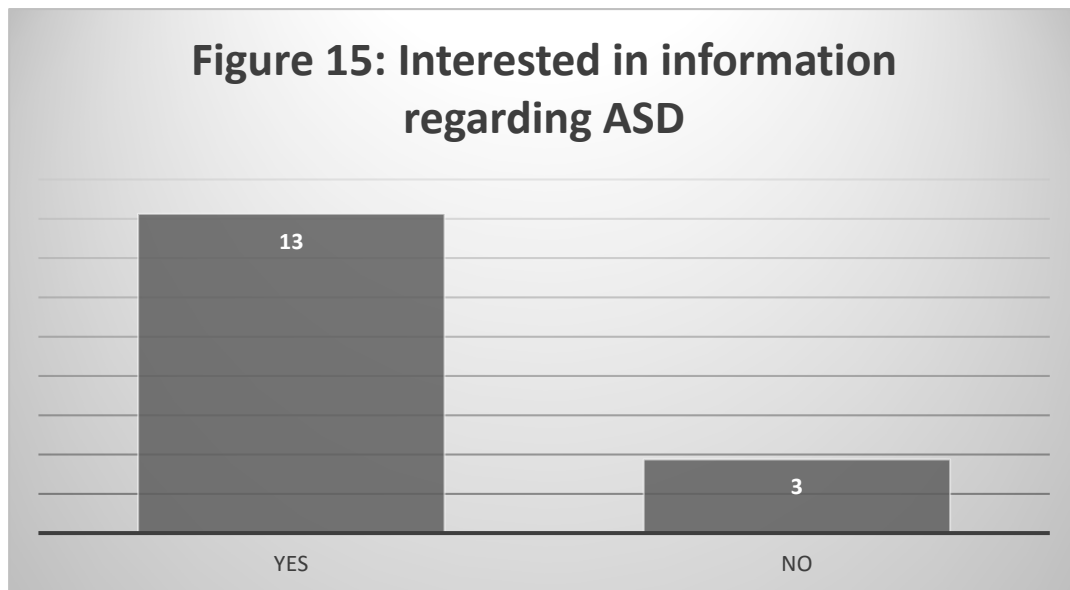


*Figure 13: Confidence in Assessing Situation with Individuals with Special Needs, specifically ASD.* Based on survey results, the majority of the participants felt confident in assessing situations with individuals with special needs, specifically ASD ( $n= 13$ , 81.25%). Three individuals did not feel confident in this area ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%).

**FIGURE 14: NEED FOR AWARENESS REGARDING  
ASD**



*Figure 14: Need for Awareness regarding ASD.* Results revealed all participants felt a need for awareness regarding ASD ( $n= 17$ , 100%).



*Figure 15: Interested in Information regarding ASD.* Although the majority of participants were interested in information regarding ASD ( $n= 13$ , 81.25%), there was a small amount that were not interested in ASD information ( $n= 3$ , 18.75%).

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Annette Marie Cano attended the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), formerly known as the University of Texas- Pan American (UTPA), from 2011-2016 and received a Bachelors of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders. She went on to receive her Masters of Science in Communication Sciences and Disorders from UTRGV, where she attended from 2016-2018.

Ms. Cano is a caring, passionate, and hardworking individual. She has presented at the state level regarding the effects of reimbursement changes for speech-language pathologists, culturally appropriate materials to utilize with the Hispanic community, and the efficacy of Milieu teaching in Spanish-dominant children at the state and national level. Her interests within her professional field include: Autism Spectrum Disorders, culturally diverse populations, and dysphagia in children and adults. She hopes to continue to expand the body of knowledge of professional interests in any of these areas. Her thesis, *Increasing Awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders in Law Enforcement in Hispanic Communities*, aims to evaluate the knowledge and competency law enforcement officers have in regard to Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Rio Grande Valley. It also aims to bring awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorders and resources available to assist law enforcement officers and first responders in serving this community. She can be contacted at [amc3926@gmail.com](mailto:amc3926@gmail.com).