

Police officer perspectives on intellectual disability

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine police officer perceptions about persons with intellectual disabilities.

Design/methodology/approach – In this study, 188 officers from three police districts in the Southeast USA were surveyed using a modified Social Distance Questionnaire.

Findings – Results indicate that the majority of police officers surveyed had little or no training with regard to disabilities and that most are willing to interact socially with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Further, this study found that female officers had significantly greater positive attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities than male respondents and that white respondents were more knowledgeable about these individuals than those from minority backgrounds.

Research limitations/implications – While these results are significant, it should be noted that the number of female and minority participants was relatively low.

Practical implications – The paper includes recommendations for professional development for police officer and criminal justice training programs.

Social implications – As individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities are increasingly integrated into society, their vulnerability to mishandling by the criminal justice system and police officers intensifies. This paper allows police officers and those within the field of criminal justice an opportunity to examine perceptions as they seek to understand how police and general societal perceptions impact the way that people interact with persons with intellectual disabilities.

Originality/value – This paper fulfills a need to examine attitudes of police officers toward citizens with intellectual disabilities in the communities in which they live. These attitudes often affect the way that police officers interact with citizens and identify additional training needs to better prepare officers for diverse individuals they may will encounter.

Keywords Intellectual disability, Disability awareness, Police officer attitudes, Police officer professional development

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Historically, public perceptions regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities have often included notions of criminality. More recently, as these individuals are afforded increasing opportunities for social integration, a growing awareness of their vulnerability to mishandling by the criminal justice system has emerged. However, the perceptions

of police officers regarding persons with intellectual disability remain an under-researched area. Those with disabilities represent approximately 19 percent of the non-institutionalized civilian population in the USA (Brault, 2012). “Crimes committed against this population constitute serious human rights violations, and measures must be taken to address this problem” (Hughes, 2014, p. 1).

Review of the literature

The discrimination and marginalization of persons with disabilities is seen throughout history and in our own media, which “sanitizes” disability to make it palatable to a non-disabled audience (Ross, 2001). Stigmatization is a “deeply discrediting” attribute that undermines a person’s value in society (Goffman, 1963). Historical documentation evidences the devastating effect ignorance and perspective can have on the treatment of people who are stigmatized by society, as in the case of Nazi Germany, whereby tens of thousands of persons with disabilities were murdered (Mostert, 2002). The USA is not without issue. According to Hutchison *et al.* (2013):

Mental institutions housed individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities until the 1960s. Community-based alternatives became the preferred treatment method to relieve overcrowding and declining living conditions. This movement towards deinstitutionalization had several unintended consequences, including placing responsibility on the criminal justice system to serve as mental health providers (p. 1).

Persons with disabilities are more likely to have interactions with law enforcement than non-disabled individuals (Bartley, 2006; Chown, 2010; Kewley, 2001) and are more likely to be victims of crimes or unfairly targeted due to people’s perception (Bartley, 2006; Kewley, 2001). Downes went as far as to say, “people call [police] because they’re odd.” Hughes (2014) reported that individuals with disabilities experienced violence at much higher rates than people without disabilities and that in specific disability populations such as individuals with severe mental illness, the likelihood of being a crime victim is eleven times higher than in the general population.

Although police officers are most often on the front line when dealing with crime victims, perpetrators, and witnesses, their ability to recognize, understand and provide support for individuals with disabilities is frequently limited leading to the potential for misunderstanding and differential treatment. Modell and Cropp (2007) discussed how police officers often respond to situations involving individuals with intellectual disability with preconceived notions shaped by “apprehension, fear and anxiety” (p. 61) while McAfee *et al.* (2001) found that although the degree of tolerance varied, police officers responded differently to crimes if a person with an intellectual disability was involved. In the UK, Scior *et al.* (2013) found increased concerns regarding stigma associated with intellectual disabilities for ethnic minorities in their large sample ($n = 1,002$) and argue that increased contact and awareness should be a focus for all attempts to reduce stigma for those with intellectual disabilities. Further, Douglas and Cuskelly (2012) reported that among the police officers they studied, appearance, was the characteristic that was most often cited as the way an individual with an intellectual disability could be recognized. In addition to perpetuating a false and negative stereotype, this lack of awareness regarding the characteristics of individuals with intellectual disabilities could likely result in failure to recognize the need for support for these individuals and unfair treatment.

Baldry *et al.* (2013) mapped the experiences of 2,731 people who had served time in prison in Australia. They concluded that for the individuals they studied who had

intellectual disabilities, early intervention was essential to prevent problems from compounding in their interactions with the criminal justice system. The researchers cited a lack of recognition of disability as a key factor in “on-going and long-term entmeshment” (p. 228) in the criminal justice system for individuals with intellectual disabilities. This, of course, points to a need for training and professional development of criminal justice personnel.

Unfortunately, most police officers receive very little training on how to identify and interact with people who have intellectual disabilities (Downes, 2004). Spivak and Thomas (2013) believe that more training, specifically specialized police training, is recommended for police in communicating with people with intellectual disabilities. According to Downes, 2004, who works in Florida, many people within the criminal justice system even use the terms “mentally ill” and “mentally handicapped” interchangeably. Similarly, Henshaw and Thomas (2012) found that many of the police officers they studied in Australia confused mental illness and intellectual disability or categorized intellectual disability as a mental illness further highlighting the need for differentiated training. Hughes (2014) claims:

Although evidence suggests that most law enforcement agencies provide some training on mental health issues, little is known about the nature and amount of the training. According a national study of 7 of 84 law enforcement agencies, the extent of training on mental health issues averaged 6.5 hours in academy training and one hour in-service training for police officers. More than a third did not provide post-academy training on disability issues. A national survey found that only 56 of 133 departments provided disability awareness officer training at an average of 1.5 hours per year (p. 2).

The bottom line is each state is responsible for the education of its police force, but the majority of states do not devote a great deal of training time to the characteristics of those with disabilities. McAfee and Musso (1995) surveyed all states in the USA and found that with regard to disability training for new recruits, only 16 states addressed intellectual disability specifically in their training with most providing an overview with little content about how to interact with someone whose intellectual functioning differs from the norm. In the state of Florida where the present study took place, police cadets take 14 hours of coursework regarding citizens with mental illness and only about four hours of that time is dedicated to discussing persons with intellectual disabilities (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2006).

Hauser *et al.* (2014) also claim “persons with intellectual disability come into frequent and underreported contact with the legal system” (p. 1). Louisiana has a special department assigned to handle any dealings the department has with the mentally ill or handicapped (Tebo, 2007). An existing two-day training for officers was developed by the University of Chicago and covers legal issues, how to recognize, communicate, and interact with a person who has a disability, victimization of people with disabilities, offenders with disabilities, and resources/services available to persons with disabilities (Fitzsimmons-Cova and Seidman, 2001). On the international front, The UK’s Blackstone’s Police Operational Handbook, a handy guide for police officers to keep with them, includes a comprehensive disability section (Bridges, 2006).

According to Van der Put *et al.* (2014), juvenile offenders in Washington State with intellectual disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system with intellectual disability being a risk factor for delinquency and likelihood of involvement in repeat offenses. Moreover, their crimes tend to be against persons more so than those committed by juvenile offenders without intellectual disabilities (Asscher *et al.*, 2012). Research on

juveniles in the criminal justice system shows that the offender with an intellectual disability is likely to be older, have attended special education while in school, be non-white, attended less school, and have less incidence of drug abuse than a delinquent without an intellectual disability (Wallace in Greene, 1991). Kandel (in Greene, 1991) found that non-delinquent youth had higher IQs than juvenile delinquents.

If an accused criminal has an intellectual disability, they are often unfairly assumed to have committed the crime. One police officer is quoted as saying that persons with intellectual disabilities are “the last to leave the scene, the first to get arrested, and the first to confess” (Beirne-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 140). Robert Perske (1990) studied specific cases of persons with intellectual disability and their experiences within the criminal justice system in the USA. He found multiple cases of criminals with intellectual disabilities who were either manipulated into committing a crime whereby they did not have the capacity to understand the consequences of their actions or individuals that were accused of a crime they never committed. In discussing the ability of court-appointed defense attorneys to fairly defend such accusations, he quotes some lawyers, “He can’t possibly be retarded because he doesn’t drool [...] because you can see how normal he looks [...] because he’s so big” (Perske, 1990, p. 41). Two brothers, both with intellectual disabilities, in North Carolina were convicted of the murder and rape of a girl when they were teens 30 years ago and were released in September 2014 from death row and a life-in-prison sentence due to DNA exoneration. One of the lawyers voiced the outrage of so many, “It’s terrifying that our justice system allowed two intellectually disabled children to go to prison for a crime they had nothing to do with, and then to suffer there for 30 years.” The brothers confessed after over five hours of intense interrogation by police and later recanted the confession and maintained their innocence for the past three decades. (BBC News, 2014) Police officers are the first line of defense against such injustice, so investigation of their perceptions is key in determining the need for future training.

Social Distance Theory

Attitudinal domains play a role in shaping a police officer’s opinions toward persons with intellectual disabilities. For this reason and more, Social Distance Theory has been selected as the theoretical basis of this study. Social Distance Theory predicts that the more experiences the officers have with persons who had an intellectual disability, the more comfortable they should be with that population (Cooke, 2014; Dietrich *et al.*, 2004; Magee and Smith, 2013). In the midst of the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1980s when there was large scale movement of individuals with disabilities from large residential facilities to community settings, Haring *et al.* (1983), a classic study still relevant today and germane to this study, identified four domains that influence attitude toward disability based on the Social Distance theoretical framework, knowledge of intellectual disability (previously referred to as “mental retardation,” contact with persons who have said disability, affect toward this population, and social willingness to interact with those who have an intellectual disability. The literature evidences that the criminal justice system, like societal opinion at large, is wrought with issues in not understanding intellectual disability (knowledge), not being willing to spend time with those who have intellectual disabilities in leisure settings or even admit to having a disability themselves (social willingness), being fearful of behaviors exhibited by persons with intellectual disabilities (affect), and not having frequent enough and/or purposeful positive interactions with persons who have intellectual disabilities (contact) (Carter *et al.*, 2001; Castañeto and Willemsen, 2006; Hergenrather and Rhodes, 2007; Modell and Mak, 2008; Nikolarazi *et al.*, 2005; Roper Starch Worldwide, 1995).

The present study was conducted to begin to address the challenges facing individuals with intellectual disabilities in the criminal justice system as delineated above. The role each of the aforementioned attitudinal domains play in shaping a police officer's opinion toward persons with intellectual disabilities was examined in this study.

Methods

Participants

A convenience sample of 188 participants consented to participate in this study, but only 157 participant questionnaires were fully completed and used for the complete statistical analysis. That said, of the 188 officers who participated in the study, a majority ($n = 114$, 60.6 percent) described themselves as patrol officers. Demographics of participants matters in this study. The gender and ethnicity of the participants is helpful beginning to understand differences in attitudes and perceptions in this study.

The gender distribution was skewed toward males, who accounted for more than two-thirds of the sample ($n = 166$, 88.3 percent). Average age of respondents and years of experience in the force was 40.3 and 11.8, respectively. The majority of respondents were Caucasian ($n = 170$, 90.4 percent), followed by Black ($n = 10$, 5.3), Hispanic ($n = 6$, 3.2), and other ($n = 2$, 1.1 percent).

Three different police districts were surveyed. One district was divided into three different bureaus consisting of a bureau of detectives and two geographically separate patrol bureaus. The three districts surveyed were fully assured they would not be named in the study, so each of the three respective districts are represented by a variable and accompanying description. The response rate varied between the three districts, mainly due to different levels of pressure to complete the survey from the administrative teams, as noted in Table I.

Instrument and limitations

Participants were administered a modified version of the Social Distance Questionnaire (SDQ) (Haring *et al.*, 1983). Item construction was based on the premise that knowledge, social willingness, contact, and affect are critical indicators of the manner in which people would interact with persons with disabilities. The original SDQ contained 63 items representing four subscales: knowledge, social willingness, contact, and affect (Haring *et al.*, 1983). Ten items constitute the knowledge subscale, eliciting responses pertaining to accurate knowledge about persons with disabilities. The social willingness subscale had 20 items asking respondents to indicate their self-perception and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. The contact subscale had 25 items soliciting information about actual interactions with persons with disabilities. A final set of eight items, labeled affect subscale, probes the feelings of participants toward persons with disabilities. Reported psychometric characteristics for the SDQ have been satisfactory:

Table I.
Response rate
by district

District	Distributed	% Return
Small, higher SES district	25	88.0
Medium sized, medium SES district	100	29.0
Large district: investigative bureau	100	45.0
Large district: north patrol bureau	145	52.4
Large district: central patrol bureau	245	6.5
Total	615	30.6

the SDQ developers reported a Cronbach's coefficient α of 0.89, and Carter *et al.* (2001) obtained a test-retest reliability of 0.94 for the version of SDQ where they modified only for updated terminology.

The SDQ was edited to fit the purpose of this study. Like the modification by Carter *et al.* (2001), adaptation of the original survey for the current study consisted of updating the terminology in the survey such that it reflects the current terminology in the field. Terminology in the original SDQ that read as "retarded person" or "handicapped person" was exchanged for "person with mental retardation." It is important to note that since the time this survey was conducted, the term "mental retardation" has been phased out and is no longer considered acceptable language to be used when referring to individuals with intellectual disabilities. We struggled with using this language at all when conducting the survey, but retained it since the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disability had not yet fully adopted the new terminology. Further, in conducting our pilot study, it was apparent that the general public and police officers in particular, were not familiar with the meaning of "intellectual disability," but could relate to the term "mental retardation." Even the accepted term at the time "mental handicap" was often interchanged with "mental illness" by the target population when researchers conducted the preliminary research for this survey. Additionally, since the focus of this study was on adults and not high-school students (see Haring *et al.*, 1983), terms referring to "students," "class," or "school" were exchanged for "people," "social situation," or "leisure activity."

Another modification was in the participant's response format. The original survey has multiple format responses (e.g. "agree/disagree/unsure," "yes/no," "hardly ever/once in a while/a lot"). The rating scale in the adapted SDQ is "forced choice" in the sense that no neutral choice is available (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree). Having no neutral choice does not affect validity of the survey results, but reinforces the validity of the Likert scale utilized. A Likert scale that has no mid-point can be preferable and "[...] the explicit offer of a mid-point is largely one of individual researcher preference" (Garland, 1991, p. 4).

In order to explore each police officer's attitude toward people with intellectual disabilities in a more personal way and to clarify the views empirically secured by the quantitative (SDQ) questionnaire, five qualitative items were developed, based on the literature, and validated by three content experts with varied backgrounds in the field of special education. Two questions and two statements reflecting each a domain of the SDQ were included in the survey packet. The questions are related to knowledge and affect domains, respectively and dealt with how the police officer would know if someone they were interacting with had an intellectual disability and under what conditions they would adopt a child with an intellectual disability.

The statements are related to contact and social willingness domains, respectively. Statements asked police officers to describe their personal experience with individuals who have intellectual disabilities, imagine their significant other had befriended a person with an intellectual disability, and describe social events they would be willing to attend with their significant other and their new friend. The last item was developed to ascertain police officers readiness to interact with people with disabilities and asked them to describe any previous disability training they had received. These additional items were coded and analyzed for themes. Key responses were identified. Additionally, a demographic instrument requested information about their gender, race, age, years of experience, and career.

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted with 19 police officers to identify needed revisions and to explore the reliability of the scale. Each police officer received a survey packet with the informed consent document, the survey packet, and a feedback form. The results of the pilot study revealed that 12 questions on the SDQ were statistically inconsistent within their respective domains. Once these questions were removed, Cronbach's α increased to 0.79. The final version of the quantitative survey contained 47 items. Based on feedback received, no changes were made to the open-ended items or the demographic form.

Procedures

Survey packets were distributed to police officers at various police stations in Western Central Florida. The convenience sample of officers that voluntarily took the survey may or may not have been reflective of the agency composition. The survey packet began with a cover letter describing the purpose of the study and the rights of the participants. The second section addressed general background information about police officers. The third section requested responses to five open-ended items to clarify the views and training experiences of the sample. The fourth section included the SDQ (Haring *et al.*, 1983). The last item in the packet was a blank raffle ticket intended to increase response rate of surveys. The entire packet was estimated to take each participant approximately 15 minutes to complete. All responses were anonymous.

Before proceeding with the scoring of the SDQ survey, respondent's surveys that omitted four or more items from their instrument were removed from the sample. After removing 31 surveys from all responses ($n=188$), the final sample included 157 participants. The Cronbach's α for this sample was 0.87, indicating a very high reliability. With only seven items each, affect and knowledge had the lowest scores, Cronbach α s of 0.61 and 0.48, respectively. The Contact domain reliability was adequate with a Cronbach α of 0.77. Social Willingness had the highest reliability score of 0.92.

Results*Quantitative findings*

Due to the small number of minority officers, ethnicity was recoded to the dichotomy of white/non-white. Additionally, the knowledge domain subscale was transformed to better satisfy the assumption of normality required by a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). The transformed variable is the inverse of 30 minus the knowledge domain subscale score. Another required assumption of MANCOVA was that the subscales (the dependent variables) must be highly correlated. All correlations were significant at $p < 0.001$, Table II.

A two-way MANCOVA was conducted to determine the effect of gender, minority ethnicity, and years of experience on the four dependent variables, the SDQ subscales of knowledge, affect, contact, and social willingness. Significant differences were found between genders, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.91$, $F(4, 150) = 3.597$, $p = 0.008$. Significant differences were found based on minority ethnicity, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.94$, $F(4, 150) = 2.549$, $p = 0.04$. Years of experience also had a significant relationship to attitude, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.94$, $F(4, 150) = 2.523$, $p = 0.04$. This means that those who were female, minority, and/or had more experience often scored higher on the SDQ, which indicates a slightly more positive attitude toward those with intellectual disabilities than other officers who

Table II.
Correlations

		K	C	A	S
Knowledge transformed (K)	<i>r</i>	1	0.350**	0.472**	0.472**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.000
	<i>n</i>	157	157	157	157
Contact subscale score (C)	<i>r</i>	0.350**	1	0.518**	0.650**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000
	<i>n</i>	157	157	157	157
Affect subscale score (A)	<i>r</i>	0.472**	0.518**	1	0.750**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000
	<i>n</i>	157	157	157	157
Social subscale score (S)	<i>r</i>	0.472**	0.650**	0.750**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	<i>n</i>	157	157	157	157

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

were male, white, and/or had less experience. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilks' Λ was 0.09, 0.06, and 0.06 for gender, minority ethnicity, and experience, respectively. The η^2 indicated a small effect size for all three variables, meaning that the effect of being a minority, female, or having more experience only slightly increased the officer's overall attitudinal score toward those with intellectual disabilities. However, the standardized difference between women and men in the affect domain, $d = 0.79$, indicated a large effect size within that one particular subscale. Furthermore, the standardized difference between Whites and minorities in the knowledge domain, $d = 0.64$, indicated a moderate effect size. All other standardized differences based on gender or minority status indicated small effect sizes. Table III contains the means and the standard deviations of the dependent variables for gender by minority status.

An analysis of variances (ANOVA) on each dependent variable was conducted as follow-up tests to the MANCOVA. Using the Bonferroni method, each ANOVA was tested at the 0.025 level. The ANOVA on the Affect domain scores was significant, $F(1, 153) = 10.34$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$, while the ANOVA on all other domain scores were not significant: Knowledge, $F(1, 153) = 1.11$, $p = 0.30$; Contact, $F(1, 153) = 0.13$, $p = 0.72$; and Social Willingness, $F(1, 153) = 1.52$, $p = 0.22$. *Post hoc* analyses to the univariate ANOVA for the affect domain scores consisted of pairwise comparisons to find which gender and ethnicity had higher affect scores. Results indicate that females had more positive attitudes in the affect domain and the standardized difference, $d = 0.79$, indicated a large effect size. In conclusion, gender was significantly related to the Affect domain, Table IV.

Although, minority status and experience were both significantly related to overall attitudes as described in the MANCOVA results, neither of their relationships with any one domain subscale was sufficiently strong to generate statistically significant results in the univariate tests.

Qualitative findings

To explore the officers' perceptions about intellectual disability in a more nuanced way and add additional insight to the empirically secured data from the SDQ instrument, all participant packets included a Qualitative Data Collection Instrument survey. This survey asked participants to complete an open-ended question representing each domain: knowledge, contact, affect, and social willingness. Several special education

Domain subscale	Gender	Minority status	M	SD
Knowledge	Male	White	25.61	2.13
		Non-white	24.36	2.62
		Total	25.51	2.19
	Female	White	26.06	1.95
		Non-white	24.00	4.24
		Total	25.84	2.19
	Total	White	25.66	2.11
		Non-white	24.31	2.69
		Total	25.55	2.18
Contact	Male	White	48.14	6.87
		Non-white	49.82	6.32
		Total	48.28	6.82
	Female	White	48.47	6.85
		Non-white	52.00	1.41
		Total	48.84	6.56
	Total	White	48.18	6.84
		Non-white	50.15	5.84
		Total	48.34	6.77
Affect	Male	White	20.60	3.15
		Non-white	20.73	3.66
		Total	20.61	3.18
	Female	White	23.18	2.40
		Non-white	23.00	4.24
		Total	23.16	2.48
	Total	White	20.91	3.17
		Non-white	21.08	3.66
		Total	20.92	3.20
Social	Male	White	47.73	9.66
		Non-white	44.73	11.8
		Total	47.49	9.83
	Female	White	50.65	7.47
		Non-white	48.00	0.00
		Total	50.37	7.09
	Total	White	48.08	9.45
		Non-white	45.23	10.84
		Total	47.84	9.57

Table III.
Means and standard deviations for attitude domain subscales by gender and minority status

Source	F ^a	Knowledge ^b	Contact ^b	Affect ^b	Social ^b
Gender	3.60**	1.11	0.13	10.34**	1.52
Minority	2.55*	2.16	0.91	0.03	1.10
Experience	2.52*	1.73	0.43	2.32	0.07
MSE		0.019	6.10	99.33	139.40

Notes: ^aMultivariate, ^bUnivariate. *,**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 level respectively

researchers validated this instrument as it went through multiple variations to find questions that accurately measured each individual subscale. Some of these qualitative questions considered Affect and Social Willingness, these are important and relevant aspects related to attitudes of police officers that go beyond their time on the

job. For convenience, the qualitative questions were analyzed by theme analysis using the first 22 submitted surveys. The thematic analysis identified patterns and themes in responses. An exploratory analysis of responses and categories was developed for each set of responses. Analysis of each question's response categories and respective themes were completed through frequency distributions, after each response was logged.

Results showed 32.4 percent of the 188 officers surveyed responded to the knowledge domain question that they would know someone had an intellectual disability based upon "cognitive" characteristics. Either behavioral, physical, or speech characteristics were identified by another 43.6 percent of officers. The question for the contact domain requested the officers to describe the amount of personal experience (outside work) they had with persons with intellectual disabilities. Only 32.5 percent indicated they had any personal contact with such persons. This meant that 62.9 percent of survey participants had little or no contact outside their police work. The Affect question asked officers about their willingness to adopt a child with an intellectual disability. The vast majority, 78.2 percent, responded in ways that indicated neutral or negative affect toward persons with intellectual disabilities. For the Social Willingness domain, 84.0 percent of officers indicated a willingness to attend events to which his/her significant other planned to attend with a person who had an intellectual disability. The final question explored the level of training the officers had with intellectual disabilities. It found that 84.1 percent claimed none or minimal training, with regard to all disabilities.

Conclusion

As individuals with intellectual disabilities are increasingly integrated into communities, the need for law enforcement personnel to recognize and appreciate the characteristics of these individuals and their well-documented vulnerability to potential mishandling in the criminal justice system, intensifies. Unfortunately, as revealed by the results of this study, the overwhelming majority of police officers surveyed report that they had little or no training with regard to individuals with intellectual disabilities, not to be confused with mental illness trainings. This finding is consistent with results of a nationwide survey of police academy training reported by McAfee and Musso (1995) two decades ago and suggests that despite the increased inclusion of individuals with disabilities in communities that has been occurring the past few decades, efforts to prepare police officers to effectively manage these individuals who may encounter the criminal justice system, has not increased considerably. Additionally, as seen in this study, police officers indicated a willingness to interact socially with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Consistent with the tenants of Social Distance Theory, this is an indication that as individuals with intellectual disabilities have been afforded increased opportunities for community integration, their social desirability has increased.

Interestingly, the results of this study supports that female police officers have significantly greater positive attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities than male respondents and that white respondents are more knowledgeable about individuals with intellectual disabilities than those from minority backgrounds. While these results are significant, it should be noted that the number of female and minority participants was relatively low. Surprisingly, neither age, nor years of experience, were found herein to be significantly related to police officers' attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Although, there was a statistically significant relationship between the four domain subscales and gender, minority

status, and experience. These three variables explained less than ten percent of the total variation in attitudes, as measured by the four domain subscales. This suggests that there may be a missing component that could be explored to better explain police officers' attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. More research is needed in this area to further investigate this phenomena.

Recommendations

The effectiveness of well-designed professional development for law enforcement personnel regarding the characteristics of community members with intellectual disabilities and appropriate strategies for interacting with these individuals is documented (McAfee and Musso, 1995; Bailey *et al.*, 2001). Although there is an enormous amount of literature on training surrounding mental illnesses for police, training on intellectual disabilities may or may not be the same. An individual with a mental illness such as depression may or may not have any intellectual disability (Cooper *et al.*, 2007; Deb *et al.*, 2001). Officers should be trained regarding the differences between mental illness and intellectual disability as the researchers in this study often found themselves explaining the differences when those in positions of power within the districts used the terms interchangeably. Statistical results of this current study indicate a lack of knowledge regarding the basic characteristics of those with intellectual disabilities. This could indicate that specific training about intellectual disabilities for police officers continues to be severely lacking. If conducted, such trainings, which should include specific information about the difficulties individuals with intellectual disabilities encounter when interacting with the criminal justice system, need to be developed and systematically implemented with assistance from stakeholders, including people with intellectual disabilities, their family members, and advocates.

Furthermore, Davis of Arc (2005) recommends that for individuals with intellectual disabilities to be treated fairly, cross training for school personnel, police officers, community agencies, and the courts is crucial; especially when individuals with intellectual disabilities encounter the criminal justice system, both as victims, and suspects.

Future studies

One of the major limitations in this study represents the demographics of the departments it surveyed; the majority of the respondents were white males. Only 11.7 percent of those studied were female and only 9.6 percent were non-white. This study should be duplicated with a larger sample size or by non-representative sampling methods whereby 50 percent of the respondents are female and 50 percent are non-white to see if the results mirror those found in this study. Additionally, it remains unclear if the demographics of the officers surveyed matches those of the agencies in which they were employed. Therefore, the resulting generalizability may be selective and should be addressed in future research on this topic. While this study included a qualitative aspect, in the form of short answer responses to survey questions, more in-depth interviews with police officers need to be conducted to probe how the misconceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities held by police officers can best be addressed through training. Also, innovative, technology enhanced, professional development strategies, such as the use of virtual case scenarios depicting interactions between police officers and individuals with intellectual disabilities, should be pilot tested to ascertain the effectiveness of such interventions for helping police officers consider multiple perspectives and encourage problem solving. An additional limitation is that a measure for social desirability was not included in this study and

this domain is recommended as an additional aspect for a follow-up study. Finally, the idea that there may be another factor such as the influence of media that could better explain police officers' attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities should be explored. Investigating and comparing police officer attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities vs other disabilities (like autism) or developmental disabilities vs mental illness would offer additional interesting results that could be used in redesigning existing trainings and procedures.

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