

LEGACY SPECIAL REPORTS

When autism and law enforcement meet

BY SPECTRUM

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Autistic people may find eye contact uncomfortable. They may rock back and forth or flap their hands, particularly when they feel anxious. And they sometimes have trouble answering questions — all traits that can confuse and alarm law-enforcement officers, firefighters and ambulance crews who **aren't trained** to recognize autism. Add sensory sensitivities, a tendency to wander and higher rates of **psychiatric problems** to the mix and it's easy to see how encounters with first responders can be difficult — and even dangerous — for autistic people.

As many headlines attest, these brushes become fraught far too often, leading to violence and lasting trauma. In this special report, we explore what research tells us about these interactions.

Spectrum contacted **30 major police departments** two years ago about their autism training efforts — and resurveyed 20 of them this year. We found that although growing numbers of departments provide autism-specific training, it varies widely in format and duration. And because of a lack of data, it is difficult to establish **what constitutes effective training**: Few police departments track details about calls involving autistic people or the effects of their autism training on officers.

Some experts and autistic self-advocates say that minimizing interactions with police and other first responders — relying on resources such as neighbors and **mental health professionals** instead — might be the only way to reduce the risk of violence against autistic people in a crisis. No training, no matter how good, is enough, they say.

Of course, interactions with the police are sometimes unavoidable. Although there is no evidence that autistic people are more likely to **commit crimes** than non-autistic people, this special report also includes articles on what happens when autistic people enter the **criminal justice system** and wind up **behind bars**. In these scenarios, too, a lack of knowledge about autism can lead to misunderstandings and abuse. Finding alternative ways to reform autistic offenders, involving therapy and specialized housing units, may offer a better solution.