



# Individuals with Spectrum Disorders:

Concerns from Law Enforcement Officers  
and Parents

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# Research Goals of Autism and Policing Project



Gain an understanding of concerns from parents and caregivers regarding potential law enforcement contact



Ascertain how police officers' interpret behaviors and actions of individuals with ASD



Identify training and methods in which law enforcement is aware of the behaviors, indicators and responses of individuals with ASD



Identify training opportunities to more readily inform officers of ASD behaviors and formulate responses



Formulate partnerships with advocacy organizations to bridge gaps in training and understanding for law enforcement

# Autism and Policing Project

## Surveys with Parents

- N = 375
- Survey aimed at understanding
  - who has had contact with the police,
  - how often,
  - how did that contact go,
  - and if parents/guardians/professionals are concerned about contact.

## Interviews with Police Officers

- Interviewed 20 police officers in various agencies across the US
- Still collecting data
- Anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour.
- Discussed:
  - An interaction with someone with ASD
  - Training experiences
  - Personal experiences



# Interviews with Law Enforcement

Interviews with 20 officers in patrol or  
schools



## In our interviews with police officers, we found...

- There is **little to no formal training** for officers on appropriate responses to individuals with ASD.
  - If training is happening, it's on a local level.
- Informal training happens from actors outside of law enforcement or through personal experience
- Failed interactions with persons with autism when officers do not have the experience/inclination to understand how to interact

# (Informal) Knowledge Share among Officers

**”So...if you ever run into this, this is where they live, this is what he does.”**

If you're new, you still get bumped around so it very well that you may never work there, and then someone will call in sick for that area and then you're stuck up there, and then you have no idea what's going on. (D01)



# He loves the mechanics of sprinklers...

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...It was probably 1:00 AM ... I saw a kid... just very timid, no eye contact, very soft spoken.

...do you know where you live? [Child] I don't know my address.

**"Okay, can you show me where you live?"**

**"Yeah, I can show you"**

...he got restless at home. Everybody was asleep and **he got bored. So, he left the house without telling anybody."** (D04)



# Judging suspicion and basing actions on lived experience

“That's a really hard one to put into words...**it's experience based...**

**...it's in the manner in which they're not communicating or not communicating at all ...**

...as a police officer is **starting to think, okay do we have a mental illness on board here** or do we have someone that's about ready to beat feet because they know they're not supposed to.

**...more experience based that about how they're not doing what you would expect a normal person to do.”**(D06)



# Formal Knowledge

**“...what their doing with their hands, their  
concealing them where we can't see.”** (D03)

# What does suspicious behavior look like to you?

“Because you know the first thing that's gonna happen...officer will think that they're **under...the influence of drugs** just because they deal with it every day now.” (D12)



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# The balance of interview findings

- Bad things
- Good things
- Not a single officer acknowledged that they were well equipped by their agency to handle interactions with persons with ASD, they just manage for "best" results
  - Close the results section Gap in training/CIT to really give the tools

# Results of Survey of Parents

- Nearly 60% of respondents reported being fearful of future police contact.
- Respondents characterized their fear in the following ways:
  - Communication issues:
    - With partially- or non-verbal individuals
    - Police officers misinterpreting communication difficulties as non-compliance
  - Police officers misunderstanding the “typical” behaviors of autism (30%)
  - Emergence of aggressive/externalizing behaviors during contact.

## Misunderstanding

“She get very flustered, stutters, can't answer very simple question. Anxiety level rises and panic sets in. *I worry this could be interpreted as aggression towards the police officer.*”

“Not understanding that noncompliance isn't done purposefully and his *inability to respond to commands may cause rash action.*”

“Taking longer than usual to answer simple question for the *purpose of processing the question may make officer more suspicious or impatient.*”

## Communication

“Concerned if a nonverbal autistic person [would] *not be helped properly* by police officers.”

“... [have] access to such communication devices with multiple programs... *if [my son] was without his device, he would not be able to speak and answer questions.*”

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“...[B]ecause my sons have a delay in verbal communication (both in receiving and giving) I am concerned that *they won't process commands fast enough and get seriously injured or have someone around them seriously injured.*”

## Aggression

*“Because he is a high functioning 18 year old large black male and it seems that if he were stopped by the police and **didn't comply quickly enough** police are more likely to shoot first and ask questions later.”*

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*“He is nonverbal and will run and resist being touched so **if for some reason he were to be detained or arrested he would definitely resist and become aggressive.**”*



# Ask...and you shall receive



“[Child I] started to kick at [the officer], he says, “Go ahead and kick me.”



I don't know why he said it, but [Child I] kicked him.



**What do you expect?**



**OUTCOME:** Child charged with assaulting an officer (felony), unknown court results

# What's Next

- Still in the needs assessment phase
  - Understanding who has training in LEAs,
  - What is the training:
    - Topics
    - Strategies
    - Parental needs?
    - Behavioral health providers need?
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- What is the role of parents?
    - Stigma
    - Resources
    - Strain
  - What is the role of behavioral health?
    - Crisis planning for families and individuals

# Thank you

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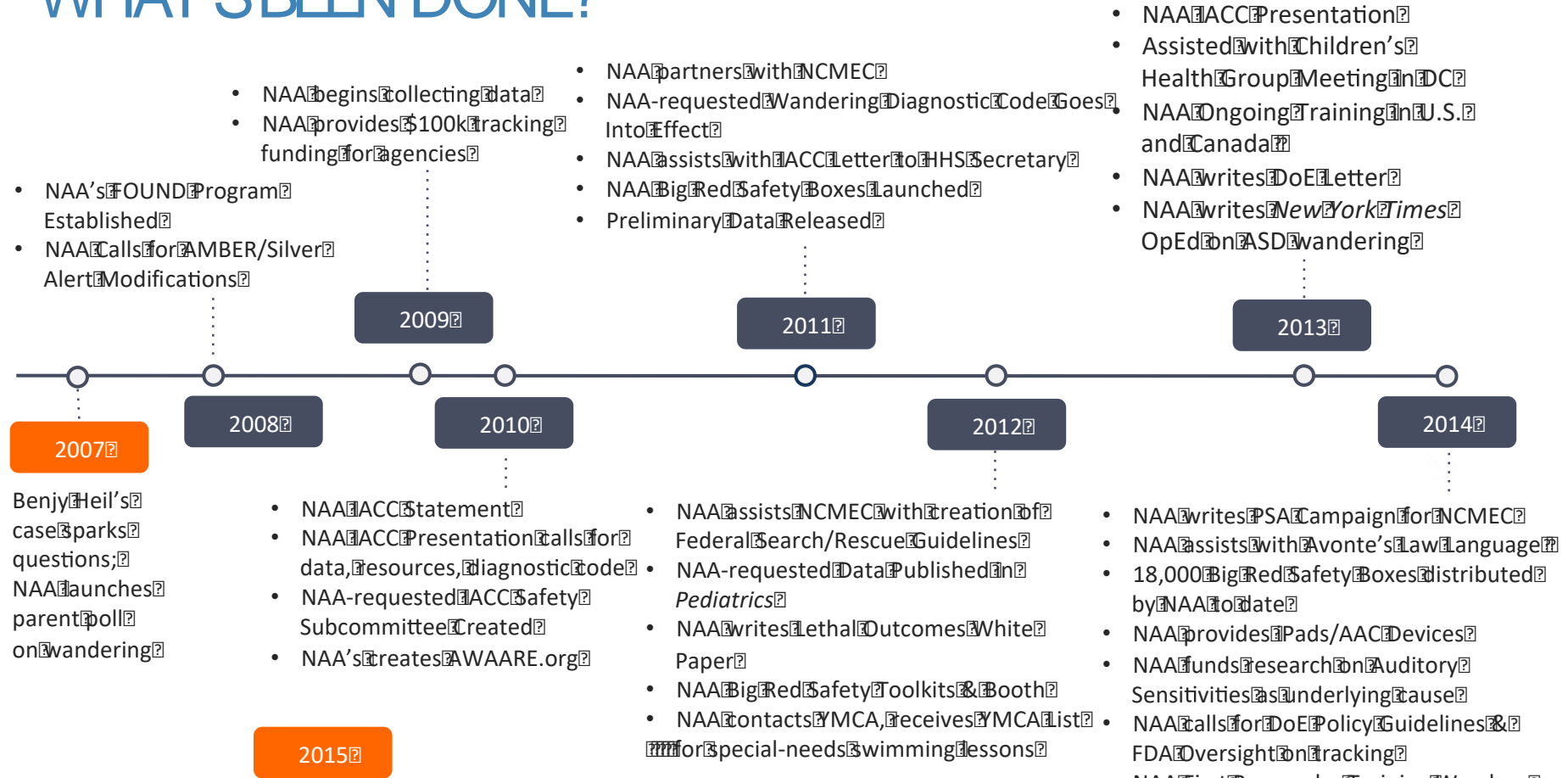
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## WHAT'S BEEN DONE?



Call for  
outreach  
and  
education



## WHAT'S STILL NEEDED?



Outreach. We need to reach law enforcement agencies with resources. We also need to reach families, schools, clinicians, and the public. We need programs directed at increasing personal safety and survival skills, and training and emergency protocols for school administrators, staff, and families. We need widespread response tools for law enforcement and search-and-rescue agencies.



# Research Phases

