

Poor police training lets down disabled people, says new research on hate crime training

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Inadequate training has been blamed for a lack of confidence among

police officers dealing with hate crimes targeted at disabled people.

A new report from the University of Portsmouth calls for a more immersive [training](#) environment to provide better understanding of how to help disabled victims, as opposed to the "PowerPoint-heavy" and e-learning training packages that characterize many courses taken by police officers.

The small-scale study by the university's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice found some police officers reporting feelings of nervousness and intimidation when dealing with people with learning disabilities. Despite a desire "to get it right," there is concern among rank and file officers that they do not have the confidence or experience.

Study author Dr. Jemma Tyson, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, said, "The findings suggest that immersive police training is needed for police officers interviewing people with learning disabilities. Interacting with people who have a disability such as [autism](#) needs specialist training—it is not something that can be learned from a PowerPoint presentation. A collaborative approach would allow for officers to engage with people with learning disabilities and hear first-hand accounts of their experiences, rather than through the voice of someone else, such as a police trainer."

The research, which was carried out over a two-year period, overwhelmingly shows a desire by police officers for better training for dealing with disabled interviewees. To reach conclusions, a total of 230 hours observing day-to-day policing, 10 semi-structured interviews with police officers and four focus groups with individuals with learning disabilities were completed.

The criticism about the use of e-learning and passive learning environments was clear from a critical comment given by one

interviewee: "They're not interactive e-learning, they are PowerPoint slides that you have to click on. The quality of delivered training, where you attend and sit in front of someone, is repetitive. It has not really moved on in the time I've been going, you still sit back and listen, every now and again you'll get given one bit of paper and told to go out in groups and write down something, and then you come back everyone falls asleep while everyone else presents."

The lack of training on hate crime against [disabled people](#) was discussed in seven of the ten interviews. Within five of these, suggestions were made on how the training could be more useful and personal. One police officer said, "It needs to be more impactful; we need to get some of our victims of crime in. We need to get some learning from where things have gone wrong and contextualize it rather than spout out another bit of legislation—this person was a victim of crime and take them through their journey and how they felt they were dealt with."

Another commented, "I find it really intimidating, and I do not know if I should say that, but I find people with disabilities quite intimidating, because they're unpredictable."

The study, published in *Policing: An International Journal*, also explored the factors that hinder or help police officers when they engage with individuals with learning disabilities.

Familiarity with situations, workload pressures and the role of previous experiences were found to act as hindrances for some police officers when engaging with people with learning disabilities, often with feelings of nervousness and intimidation reported. For others, these were facilitators of positive engagements with people with learning disabilities, primarily due to experience gained from outside of policing. It was found that police officers cannot rely on the day-to-day policing experiences to enhance their knowledge, confidence and experience,

because they do not often engage with people with learning disabilities, or with "disablist" hate crime cases.

This research demonstrates the role police training can have in helping to address some of the issues identified by the respondents. In England, it is normal for police training to be delivered "in-house" by the police themselves. That means it is somewhat general in its approach, and even if there are occasional inputs of a specialist nature, they are still delivered by police officers.

Researchers found it is not common practice for outsiders to be asked to collaborate on training, resulting in only a few instances where people with learning difficulties are actually involved in helping to broaden understanding. Dr. Tyson said, "The findings of this paper tie in with the painful learning from high-profile criminal justice failures that have occurred within England and Wales in recent times, namely the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the deaths of Fiona Pilkington and Francesca Hardwick. These tragic cases highlighted the importance of the police acting in accordance with the needs of those they engage with.

"It is clear that there is much to be gained by police organizations in recognizing how the impact of attitudes and behaviors can affect the trust and confidence that people with learning [disabilities](#) have in the police. It is important that [police](#) officers are aware of how their demeanor can influence an interaction in ways that they may previously have not recognized or considered."

More information: Jemma Tyson, Stressors or facilitators? Exploring the factors that impact police officers' abilities to respond to disablist hate crime, *Policing: An International Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.1108/PIJPSM-10-2021-0145](https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-10-2021-0145)

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