**SUPPORTING PERSONS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES DURING POLICE INTERACTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICE SERVICES TO ADDRESS THE NEED OF VULNERABLE PERSONS IN ONTARIO, CANADA**

**Lisa Whittingham**

**Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON**

**Objectives:** Research has demonstrated that persons with developmental disabilities (DD) are more likely to encounter the police as suspects, victims, and persons in need of assistance (Rava et al., 2017). During these interactions, these individuals are often considered vulnerable due to inherent characteristics such as cognitive impairments and/or limitations in communication. The current study provides the first systematic examination of the different programs promoted by police services on their websites to address the needs of vulnerable persons in their communities.

**Methods:** The data collected for this project came from a content analysis of publicly available information on fifty-six (56) official police websites in Ontario, Canada. Data included the content of the webpages and any relevant, accessible PDF documents (e.g., FAQs, forms) associated with the programs intended for vulnerable persons. The data was collected and coded for each website based on the types of programs offered, the description and examples of vulnerability provided, the accessibility and quality of information on the police website, and the rationale for the program. The analysis of the collected data examined a) the characteristics of the programs provided for vulnerable persons by police services and b) the description of vulnerability and vulnerable persons that qualified them for the programs.

**Results:** Nearly all police services in Ontario have at least one program for vulnerable persons. They included Vulnerable Person Registries, MedicAlert™ programs, and Project Lifesaver™. The quality of the information provided on the webpages about the programs varied greatly across police services and varied in accessibility (e.g., providing an alternative to online reporting). While several of the programs suggested that they were relevant to a wide range of vulnerable persons, analysis of the web pages and materials suggested that there was a focus on addressing the needs of children and seniors, persons who wander away from or abscond from supervision, and have limited ability to verbally communicate with police. Descriptions of vulnerability were linked to inherent characteristics of the individual rather than social or structural characteristics that have also been suggested in the literature (e.g., Bartkowiak-Theron & Asquith, 2021) as contributing to vulnerability.

**Discussion/Conclusions:** Police services have implemented an array of programs to address the needs of vulnerable persons in their communities, including persons with DD. While these services are suggested to meet the needs of a variety of individuals and address a range of incidents that may bring a vulnerable person to the attention of police, the current programs offered by police services appear to focus on a small group of individuals with specific needs. Further investigation is needed to understand how these programs are incorporated into police practice and the impact on vulnerable persons themselves.

**Correspondence:**

Lisa Whittingham, MA, BCBA

Brock University

1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way

St. Catharines, ON

lw99ai@brocku.ca

**References**

Bartkowiak-Theron, I. & Asquith, N. (2021). *Policing vulnerability*. SpringerLink.

Rava, J., Shattuck, P., Rast, J., & Roux, A. (2017). The prevalence and correlates of involvement in the criminal justice system among youth on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *47*(2), 340-346. DOI 10.1007/s10803-016-2958-3