

Growth Through Opportunity Research Report

Paula Echeverria

Monmouth University

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## Abstract

This study examines law enforcement perspectives on the Growth Through Opportunity (GTO) Program, which was implemented within four police municipalities and the prosecutor's office in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The program aimed to provide individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) the opportunity to partake in a 16-week internship program with the goal of gaining practical professional work experience. The study analyzed law enforcement officials' perceptions of GTO program outcomes, including an increase in program participants' personal and professional skills, a sense of belonging within an organization, and social skills, as well as interactions law enforcement officials had with the ID community.

## **Introduction**

Founded in Virginia, the Growth Through Opportunity (GTO) program empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities by providing them with real-world experiences and skills essential for finding gainful employment in the workforce. The program has been credited with enabling Virginians with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to hone their life and career skills, while also providing law enforcement officials the opportunity to work with individuals with intellectual disabilities (Virginia's Growth Through Opportunity, 2019). In the fall of 2019, Monmouth County, New Jersey adopted and implemented the GTO program within four police municipalities and the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office. Cadets selected for this 16-week program were individuals who had been diagnosed with various intellectual and developmental disabilities and who demonstrated an interest in working alongside law enforcement and first responders. Throughout the 16 weeks, cadets learned essential job, life, and social skills while working alongside law enforcement personnel. In February of 2020, all five selected cadets completed their internship, with some gaining employment opportunities within their respective departments.

Using qualitative interviews with law enforcement personal, this study examined the outcomes of the GTO program in Monmouth County, to determine how the program impacted interactions between law enforcement officials and those with disabilities, and how that, in turn, the program affects community relations with law enforcement holistically. Additionally, this study analyzed how the program allowed individuals with intellectual disabilities to attain vocational skills, as well as a heightened sense of independence and community acceptance.

## Literature Review

In recent years, researchers have explored how the care of individuals with intellectual disabilities has shifted from institutionally based to community based. Historical ideologies have shifted within the past 50 years as governmental policies have started to modify from a “philosophy of segregation” to ones that outline and emphasize inclusion (Jones, 219). Past research on social inclusion, which is defined as the process of improving the terms by which individuals take part in society, finds a clear distinction between the feeling of merely being “in their communities” and being “of their communities,” indicating that while individuals may physically reside within a community, true feelings of belonging stem from the imperative exercise of formulating “meaningful relationships” with a varying number of community members (Amando, Stancliffe, McCarron, & McCallion, 2013, 360).

The cultural shift that has occurred within the past few decades has greatly altered the way individuals with intellectual disabilities are assimilated into communities. This cultural shift has prompted community organizations to reflect on and amend how the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities are addressed within the community (Villiers, 2015). Perhaps the most pivotal shift that has occurred, in terms of the treatment of individuals with intellectual disabilities has been deinstitutionalization, which has allowed for a more community-inclusive movement. Including a distinctive group into the community that had once been marginalized inevitably reshapes and alters preconceived attitudes and perceptions. Research suggests that while, “attitudes of inclusion may exist in the upper echelons of an organization’s administration, it is the attitudes of frontline staff which determine the successful implementation of inclusive policies and directly affect the lives of individuals with ID” (Jones, Ouellette-Kuntz, Vilela, & Brown, 2008, 219). In turn this perspective highlights the importance of holistic community involvement and support.

While research on the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities has shifted from physical inclusion to social inclusion, the reality of evident social barriers has surfaced. As a result, services and support from initiatives such as “inclusive classrooms and schools; institutional closures; the Americans with Disabilities Act; [and] the Olmstead Supreme Court decision,” have all been paramount in expanding the idea of inclusion for community members and inspiring organizations and governmental bodies to recognize the importance and holistic benefits of social inclusion across all community levels (Amando, Stancliffe, McCarron, & McCallion, 2013, 360).

Further studies have confirmed that inclusive work environments play a pivotal role in the successful social integration of individuals with intellectual disabilities. These studies point to the great success of community-integrated employment that first surfaced during the 1980s and provided innovative opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to contribute to the workforce and provide for themselves financially. While simply entering the workforce does not yield individuals with ID the same benefits and opportunities for career advancement as those without ID, there are still many benefits to this type of societal inclusion.

In addition, research on individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities has concluded that interactions between these individuals and law enforcement are quite common. This suggests that members of the law enforcement community should be educated on and familiar with the different behaviors and commonalities present within individuals who may have a form of developmental or intellectual disability. This is especially important given the fact that individuals with developmental disabilities may exhibit symptoms such as, “lack of eye contact, poor communication skills, and repetitive behaviors law enforcement could mistake as a lack of cooperation” (Copenhaver, 2019, 310). Therefore, it is imperative to identify approaches that will aid law enforcement in having positive interactions with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

The ability for law enforcement to quickly and effectively identify the behaviors of individuals with ID and address them accordingly is essential for community inclusion and strong police-community relations.

As individuals with intellectual disabilities are offered more opportunities for social integration, the rising awareness of their susceptibility for mistreatment due to misunderstanding by law enforcement and members of the criminal justice system have surfaced. Research has found that individuals with disabilities are more likely to have interactions with law enforcement than individuals without any form of intellectual disability. Therefore, the importance for law enforcement to “recognize, understand, and provide support for individuals with disabilities” is imperative because limited knowledge can lead to “misunderstanding and differential treatment” (Eadens, Cranston-Gingras, Dupoux, & Eadens, 223)

In conclusion, the ideals of social inclusion and acceptance as discussed within the literature hold a direct correlation to the aim of the GTO program implemented in Monmouth County, New Jersey. Through allowing young adults with intellectual disabilities to intern in various law enforcement agencies, officers can address and rectify any preconceived perceptions of the intellectual disability community and in place create positive interactions based on compassion and camaraderie. Equally, individuals with intellectual disabilities are given the opportunity to gain valuable work experiences that will build upon their confidence, social skills, and future employment marketability.

### **Research Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the GTO programs successfully bridged social barriers among individuals with intellectual disabilities and members of local law enforcement agencies. Specifically, the study examined whether the GTO program facilitated

interactions with law enforcement and those with disabilities, and how that, in turn, affected community relations with law enforcement holistically. In addition, this study examines the perceptions of law enforcement officials on how this program allowed individuals with intellectual disabilities to attain gainful vocational skills, as well as a heightened sense of independence and community acceptance.

### *Data Collection*

This study interviewed four police chiefs from participating townships in Monmouth County New Jersey, and the Monmouth County Prosecutor. All participants were asked a series of questions about their individual experiences working directly with GTO program cadets over the course of their 16-week internship program. The participants in the study were selected due to the role they played in establishing the GTO Program in Monmouth County. Study participants were contacted via email and interviews were conducted using Zoom. Each participant had the opportunity to answer pre-determined questions regarding their role in the GTO program.

Questions that were asked of the study participants included:

- What first inspired you to become involved with the Growth Through Opportunity program and work alongside local law enforcement to implement the program throughout the county?
- How would you describe the goals and objectives of the program?
- What do you think the GTO participants have acquired from participating in the program?
- How has being a part of the program changed the way your department interacts with people with intellectual disabilities in the future?
- Have you seen a difference in the way cadets viewed themselves within their communities?
- Can you describe any previous training or programs that you have participated in that involved interactions with individuals with intellectual disabilities? If so, how has the GTO been different?
- Has this program impacted community relations among law enforcement and individuals with intellectual disabilities?
- Have you had any interactions on the job that you felt you were better able to handle because of your involvement in the cadet program?

## **Findings**

Overall, the study participants saw their involvement in the GTO program as a “novel and innovative” way to offer opportunity and experience to a specialized population of the community. An interview with the Monmouth County Prosecutor revealed that a key motivator for county-wide involvement in this newly pitched program within the state of New Jersey was the desire to “overcome the stigma and perception” surrounding the abilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Police chiefs and lieutenants revealed in statements that a main goal was to give cadets a sense of what it is like to work as a part of an organization in order to “give them a sense of belonging and a sense of being a part of a team.” The law-enforcement family philosophy was shown to be rich within the participating townships of the GTO program and the advantages of that transference to their cadets was shown through their growth in confidence and practical work skills. One supervising chief described the transformation as a “huge change” reinforcing the theme that societal inclusion, in conjunction with a structured routine can result in heightened self-confidence. The family aspect of leadership which was implemented purposefully by one municipal police chief resulted in his cadet demonstrating a more focused approach to his daily routine. The work environment was described as a comfortable atmosphere which allowed the cadet to hone his personal and professional skills under the guidance of officers who shared the same goals he did. The notion of a concrete “support structure” reinforced to participating cadets that they are not alone within their communities. Their work environments consisted of coworkers who applauded their achievements and “responded to them in a fashion that was genuine.” One police chief described the effects of this approach as one that the cadet would “feed off of” and would ultimately “make him want to work harder.” All officers interviewed in this study described growth in their cadets’ level of professional workplace capabilities and self-confidence.

As a result of participation in the GTO program, study participants believed that cadets were integrated within their communities, which aided in their overall growth within the program. Cadets were able to develop bonds that will remain with them as they continue to navigate their professional and personal lives at the conclusion of their participation with the GTO program. For one cadet this experience resulted in him getting hired by the agency that hosted him. His supervising captain explained that he excelled in every task that was given to him that the agency “just could not let that go.” This instance demonstrates that applicable temporary or permanent employment opportunities can result for some individuals. Additionally, participants across all townships demonstrated increased comfort when interacting with individuals within the community and aided other community members while working in their cadet capacity. The ability to provide these individuals with a skill set that would make them marketable for future employment was a fundamental goal. The Monmouth County Prosecutor stated that an objective for his office was to provide their cadet with “life skills that they can put to further services in these communities.” Interviews reinforced the notion that the work and life skills that cadets took from this program will make them better employees for a future employer and therefore better citizens.

The Growth Through Opportunity program proved to be more beneficial than standard “lecture-based” training due to the element of consistent daily interaction. Law enforcement officers revealed that what differed from their traditional training through participating with GTO was the daily interaction that prompted them to develop a more thorough understanding of each cadet’s personality and needs. This consistent interaction resulted in officers developing a new understanding of how they respond to individuals with intellectual disabilities. One lieutenant specifically described that while effective, there is only so much video and lecture methods of

training one can offer to members of law enforcement. Having a “person to interact with is much different.” Interviews across all municipalities revealed that officers found their participation in GTO offered more insight into how to respond to individuals with intellectual disabilities than their traditional training.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study support previous studies of the cultural shift in attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. The idea that this cultural shift has encouraged communities to reflect on ways they address the intellectual disabilities community is seen within the findings of this study. Study participants stated that implementing such a program was a way that they could support and foster the interests of this specific group of community members. One community official stated that this program was an opportunity to reinforce the county’s interest in providing an “inclusive and diverse” work environment. Interviews with law enforcement officials in Monmouth County revealed that participating townships in the GTO program held an understanding that intellectual disabilities exist on a spectrum and that there is importance in formulating “connections” with all members of the community. Accordingly, it was stated that cadets also displayed a heightened level of independence evidenced by the direct observations of law enforcement personnel. Study participants also stated that they saw growth in their cadet’s interpersonal skills as well as professional skills, including the ability of cadets to follow a structured daily schedule, articulate any difficulties they may have faced, and communicate effectively with others.

Study findings further indicated that law enforcement officials who had first-hand interactions with participants in the GTO programs witnessed the cadets foster practical professional and social skills that will make them more marketable to potential employers. Study

participants described the change in cadets as a “night and day difference.” The cadets displayed a new confidence and comfort within the work environment which resulted in “huge changes” among cadets. Additionally, participants found that these changes could be attributed to the law enforcement philosophy that sought to instill core values of the profession into cadets during their sixteen-week internship. Such values included comradery among co-workers, structured schedules, and adhering to given instructions. Having these values introduced into their daily routines resulted in a substantial increase in self-confidence and self-awareness.

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