

# **POLICE TRAUMA**



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## **Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat**

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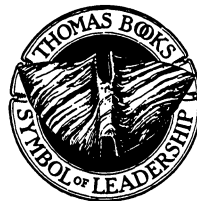
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## PREFACE

**T**he police fight a different kind of war. It does not take place on the battlefield of a foreign land, but instead on the streets of their nation. The enemy is the police officer's own civilian population: those who engage in crime, social indignity, and inhumane treatment of others. The result for the police officer is both physical and psychological battering, occasionally culminating in the officer sacrificing his or her life to protect others.

This book focuses on the psychological impact of police civilian combat. During a police career, the men and women of our police agencies are exposed to distressing events that go far beyond the experience of the ordinary citizen. There is an increased need today to help police officers deal with these traumatic experiences. As police work becomes increasingly complex, this need will grow. Mental health and other professionals need to be made aware of the conditions and precipitants and trauma stress among the police. A goal of this book is to provide such important information.

Our perspective in this book is based on the idea that trauma stress does not necessarily occur within the vacuum of the individual. Instead, trauma is a product of the rather complex interaction of person, place, situation, support mechanisms, and interventions. To effectively communicate this to the reader, we included some new conceptual and methodological considerations, essays on special cases and groups in policing, and innovative ideas on recovery and treatment of trauma. Our hope is that this information will be used to prevent or minimize trauma stress in police officers and, if this is not possible, that it be used to help in establishing improved support and therapeutic measures for police officers.

John M. Violanti  
Douglas Paton



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# **POLICE TRAUMA**



# **INTRODUCTION**



## Chapter 1

# POLICE TRAUMA: PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF CIVILIAN COMBAT

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### INTRODUCTION

The title of this book is drawn from the similarity between military combat and civilian police work that led Williams (1987) to describe police officers as being involved in peacetime combat: “for cops, the war never ends . . . they are out there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to protect and serve, to fight the criminal . . . our peacetime enemy. The police officer is expected to be combat-ready at all times while remaining normal and socially adaptive when away from the job. The psychological toll for many is great, unexpected, and not well understood” (p. 267).

While police officers are not in military combat, they experience similar conditions: a continual sense of danger from an unknown enemy; witnessing violence and death; depersonalization of emotion; and lack of public support exert harmful psychological and social consequences, including increased risk of suicide, substance abuse, and disrupted family life (Farberow, Kang, & Bullman, 1990; Laufer, Gallops, & Frey-Wouters, 1984). However, while the Vietnam veteran was at war for a minimum of nine months, police officers alternate between the violence of the street (e.g., shootings, witnessing death and mutilation, dealing with abused children) and the normalcy of civilian life on a daily basis (Violanti, 1996). Just like their Vietnam veteran counterparts, traumatic stress, and even PTSD, can be a reality for officers dealing with civilian combat.

### THE GOALS AND CONTENT OF THIS BOOK

This book is about the psychological impact of what we choose to call “police civilian combat.” We have gathered contributions from professionals who work with police officers, and in some cases, those who are or have

been police officers, to provide the reader with different perspectives on policing. These contributions define what we currently know, what we need to find out, and provide a resource for those who manage stress and trauma in policing. Chapters are grouped into three sections: conceptual and methodological issues, special police groups, and recovery and treatment.

## **Section I: Conceptual and Methodological Issues**

Understanding and managing psychological trauma in policing requires a sound conceptual and methodological base. In Chapter 2, Paton and Smith discuss the construct of duty-related traumatic stress and its implications for assessment. They discuss police stress phenomena within a hazard-risk management model. This affords opportunities to examine both positive and negative outcomes, and to appreciate how psychological processes interact with environmental and organizational factors to affect risk status.

Social cognitive theories have proved beneficial in promoting understanding of victimization processes. In Chapter 3, MacLeod and Paton explore the use of constructs such as perceived control, likelihood of event recurrence, and counterfactual thinking to understand police officers' experience of criminal victimization from repeatedly witnessing violent criminal episodes and/or the emotional costs incurred in supporting victims of violence. They discuss how this perspective helps understand the effectiveness of police agencies and attitudes towards victims and the criminal justice system.

Figley introduces his model of "police compassion fatigue" in Chapter 4. This model suggests that if police officers are empathic, have sufficient concern for others, and are exposed to traumatized people on a continuous basis, they may develop a debilitating psychological fatigue. Figley suggests methods to help officers deal with compassion fatigue and provides a measure for this concept.

Alexander, in Chapter 5, discusses job burnout and its implications for well-being and for precipitating the onset of trauma. He focuses on the role organizational stressors (e.g., administrative support, involvement in decision making) in this context. The last section of the chapter discusses burnout and trauma in policing from the author's (a former police officer) perspective.

In Chapter 6, Stephens, Long, and Flett discuss the impact of previous life trauma for those entering police work. Police recruits who have already suffered traumatic stress are, following exposure to subsequent distressing experiences, at increased risk of mental health problems and more likely to retire from police service early. This is a double loss: of psychological health for the officer, and of a highly trained officer to the department. This theme is continued in Chapter 7 with Paton, Violanti, and Schmuckler's discussion

of the long-term implications and after-effects of repetitive exposure to high risk and duty-related traumatic incidents. Here they explore its implications for behavioral addiction and separation from active police duties.

Section I ends with Violanti proposing a model describing the relationship between psychological trauma, coping, and the police role. This model suggests that, through occupational socialization, the police role comes to serve as a primary coping resource for officers exposed to traumatic events. Reliance on the rigidly defined police role can limit cognitive style in solving problems and the use of other more flexible life roles in coping with trauma and, in turn, increase the risk of PTSD.

## **Section II: Special Police Groups**

Section II focuses on special police groups and commences, in Chapter 9, with Kopel and Friedman's case study of trauma in South African police. This study was undertaken to establish whether the conditions under which South African police operate resulted in a particular type of traumatic symptom constellation. They confirmed that exposure to violence is predictive of intrusive symptoms. Symptoms of intrusion were correlated with those of avoidance, providing tentative support for avoidance being a defensive response to intrusive phenomena which are direct effects of exposure to violence.

In Chapter 10, Solomon and Mastin (a former ATF Agent) give an inside view of psychological trauma at the Waco, Texas incident. While being the worst tragedy in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms history, the fact there has been only one medical retirement among agents involved points to the resiliency and strength of the agents. They also discuss how organizational activities (e.g., critical incident program, leadership, peer support) contributed to emotional recovery.

While much has been written about the impact of critical incidents on line police officers, police incident commanders have been surprisingly neglected. Paton, Flin, and Violanti redress this imbalance in Chapter 11 and discuss response and recovery management issues from an incident command perspective.

In Chapter 12, Violanti discusses the psychological impact on survivors of police duty-related death. While the loss of a police officer to a community is serious, the sudden and often violent death of a loved one is emotionally devastating to family, friends, and other officers. For them, such deaths are a reminder of the dangers that officers face each day. Violanti provides measures of psychological symptomatology, trauma, and the impact of support factors on police spouse survivors.

Children of law enforcement officers who have died in duty-related