

# **TRAUMATIC STRESS IN POLICE OFFICERS**



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**A Career-Length Assessment from  
Recruitment to Retirement**

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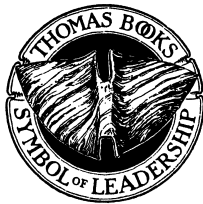
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## PREFACE

If a comprehensive understanding of the nature and effectiveness of the police role in dealing with adverse trauma events is to be developed, it is necessary to empirically integrate such events into the police career path. At present, there is no comprehensive resource to address this issue. There is a growing recognition that stress risk can in some cases begin prior to police work and extend after retirement from police work. It thus becomes necessary to incorporate pre-employment and the retirement period into accounts of the psychological impact of policing. Similarly, the implications of the changing gender balance in police agencies needs to be accommodated. To date, these issues have not been explored systematically within a framework that embraces the whole career of police officers. Such an approach is essential if we are better able to understand the complex and changing interactions that affect the psychological well-being of police officers. This approach is based on the premises that:

- officers can experience both positive and negative outcomes as a result of confronting highly challenging events which may coexist
- these outcomes are influenced by different resilience and vulnerability mechanisms
- the organizational environment and practices, the family environment, and the societal environment introduce significant and independent influences on these outcomes
- changes in factors such as gender and ethnic composition contribute to issues that influence the nature of the organizational environment
- posttrauma outcomes are influenced by the interaction between individual, team and organizational levels of analysis
- positive and negative posttrauma outcomes are also influenced by factors that, over the course of officers' careers, commence prior to their employment and persist beyond the point at which they retire or disengage from police work

We propose with this book to develop a viable resource to explore interactive issues of trauma over the entire police career course. The book will draw upon empirical research to provide an evidence-based approach to traumatic stress risk management. We will start with police officer pre-employment experiences and conclude with a discussion of the implications of disengagement or retirement from the police role.

The contents of the proposed text will include:

- Incorporation of police trauma into a life-career course perspective
- Changing context and nature of police work (e.g., sources of trauma and uncertainty, community relations)
- Recruitment, selection, and socialization in the context of critical incident and terrorist work (e.g., pre-employment experiences, organizational influences on capacity to confront uncertainty, developing resilience within an organizational context)
- Changing gender balance in policing
- Training and development in uncertain times
- Managing risk, resilience, vulnerability, and adversarial growth
- Organizational context (e.g., management systems, organizational culture)
- Family dynamics and issues
- Team: inter and intraorganizational
- Health and mental health
- Consequences of long-term exposure to hazards
- Disengagement and retirement

We feel that this book is unique in two ways. First, the majority of volumes on police psychological issues do not differentiate with regard to career stage. Second, very few books reflect complex patterns of interaction between vulnerability and resilience characteristics that occur at individual, team, group, and organizational levels, as well as involving interaction between these levels. This book will be one of the first to pull these various threads together and provide a comprehensive account of the impact of trauma throughout the police career. This work will provide a framework that police agencies can use to develop their officers and their organizations in ways that enhance their capability to confront an increasingly uncertain future. It will also be useful as a teaching tool for police officers, mental health professionals, and supportive organizations.

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# **TRAUMATIC STRESS IN POLICE OFFICERS**



## **Chapter 1**

# **CONCEPTUALIZATION: THE POLICE CAREER COURSE AND TRAUMA STRESS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**T**he average career length of a police officer in the United States is approximately 20–25 years. Most officers complete their career paths for that period of time and then retire to civilian life. During this time, serving officers face the prospect of repeated exposure to potentially traumatic or critical events. Understandably, this aspect of police work has attracted considerable interest. However, most of the research into traumatic stress phenomena in police officers has focused on the consequences of specific events that are located at a single point in an officer's career. While informative, such brief snapshots (from a whole of career perspective) can provide only limited insights into a reality that will extend over decades and in which the events and the context in which events are experienced is evolving. Adopting a career-length perspective provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding how the implications of repeated traumatic or critical experiences and events unfold over time in the context of changing organizational and societal circumstances.

Adopting a career-length perspective makes it easier to appreciate a need to consider how traumatic experiences interact with one another over time and it increases awareness of the need to consider how changes in the nature of police work and the societal context in which officers and agencies operate over time can influence the kinds of incidents officers will have to contend with, their implications for well-being, and the need to develop interventions accordingly. For exam-

ple, increased recognition of the risk posed by terrorism has influenced how police agencies plan, how they deploy officers, and it has affected the resource and equipment needs required by officers. These changes, in turn, have influenced how officers interpret and respond to critical incidents and it has had significant implications for how officers and the police agency relate to society (see Chapters 8 and 9). The objective of this book is to demonstrate how adopting a career perspective can provide a more comprehensive conceptualization of traumatic stress processes as they apply to police officers and agencies and provide a framework that can be used to guide research and intervention agenda in ways that reflects the changes that can occur over the course of a police career that can span decades.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual basis for understanding the impact of trauma throughout the career course of police officers. We will first develop a conceptual perspective of the police career, borrowing from the rubric of life-course theory (Elder, 1996). Second, we will discuss how pre-employment traumatic experiences influence officer's experience of the critical incidents they encounter as serving officers throughout their careers. Third, officers' assimilation into the police "role" and the impact of trauma within that role will be discussed. Fourth, this chapter considers how demographic (e.g., gender) and societal (e.g., terrorism) factors introduce significant changes into the context of policing in ways that affect the traumatic stress risk faced by officers. Fifth, the perspectives arising from the preceding discussions are integrated into a conceptual model for managing critical incident stress risk. Finally, the spillover of residual trauma into police retirement will be discussed. This chapter will also introduce some conceptual issues that can inform understanding of a life-course perspective on traumatic stress in police officers. Discussion commences with an introduction to the conceptual perspective that life-course theory brings to understanding traumatic stress processes in police officers and agencies.

### **THE LIFE-COURSE MODEL**

The life-course perspective is an ideal conceptualization on which to base a police career model. In its simplest sense, the life course may be defined as the "duration of a person's existence" (Riley, 1986). (For



an excellent review of life course theory, see *Crime and the Life Course*, Michael L. Benson, Roxbury Publishing, 2001.) Elder (1985, 1996) a leading figure in life-course research, defines the life course as the interconnected trajectories that a person has as they go through life. A trajectory is a sequence of linked states within a conceptually defined range of behavior or experience. It is a pathway over the life span. As people move through this trajectory, they graduate from one level to another. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories, and the states that make up a trajectory are always linked to one another by transitions (Elder, 1996).

### **Life-Course Theory**

According to Elder (1985), the life-course perspective is based on four central premises, which can be summarized as the following:

- Aging and developmental change must be viewed as continuous processes that occur throughout life.
- Trajectories in different realms of life are interconnected and have reciprocal effects on one another.
- Human development is influenced by social and historical conditions.
- Efforts to optimize human development through preventive or corrective interventions will be most effective if they are sensitive to the developmental needs and capabilities of particular age periods in the life span.

The first premise is simple to understand—as persons go through life, they change from beginning to end. There is no such thing as a “static” life, and this holds true for biological, psychological, and social change.

According to the second premise of the life-course perspective, trajectories in these different life domains are intimately connected and have reciprocal effects on each other (Elder, 1985). Biological change can effect social change, and psychological disruption (such as trauma) can affect us biologically and socially. The third premise that life pathways are multidetermined and influenced by social and historical conditions and changes (Magnusson & Bergman, 1990) is interesting. Our individual lives are linked to the lives of others in the sense that

changes in the lives of persons around us can have an impact on our own trajectories (Elder, 1996).

A good example of the kind of interdependency envisaged by Elder concerns the ways in which families and other significant individuals help shape the life course. This issue is examined in more detail in Chapter 3, which introduces how family history of police work can influence officer's perceptions of their role even before they enter the profession. However, families represent only one source of influence on our lives.

Broader social conditions and changes also influence the life course. Our lives carry the imprint of what happens in our particular social worlds (Elder, 1992). If our social world undergoes rapid change, it can disrupt our lives and change the timing and direction of life. Events that involve trauma for example can disrupt life dramatically, visibly, and quickly. Just such a change occurred on September 11th 2001. The events of 9/11 represented a significant transition point, and one with far-reaching implications for understanding and managing traumatic stress processes in police officers (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Other social changes occur incrementally and work their effects more slowly, less visibly, but just as profoundly. Examples of the latter include, for example, entry into police work and officers' subsequent socialization into police life. These change processes are examined in Chapters 3 and 4, and again in Chapter 9, as officers' relationships with the society (and its members) they protect and serve develop over time. These relationships, in turn, influence how officers make sense of their world and respond to events.

The fourth premise of the life-course perspective simply alerts us to the fact that people are influenced by different things at different stages of life. The timing of events and interventions is crucial to their effect. What may be an effective intervention strategy for one may not work as well for other officers. Timing is important as it relates to the effects of both unplanned events and planned interventions that occur in the life course (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). This perspective has important implications for police officers who experience rigorous selection, training and socialization processes designed to facilitate their ability to exercise their role competently and with integrity.

The life-course perspective holds to the principle of contextualism, which argues that development cannot be separated from the context in which it occurs (Dannefer, 1984). Related to the principle of con-