

Police Trauma: Psychological Aftermath of Civilian Combat

edited by John M. Violanti and Douglas Paton

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Reviewed by Noreen Tehrani

Violanti and Paton bring together an impressive group of co-authors in their book on traumatic stress in the police service. The book takes the perspective that the development of traumatic stress is not a simple process but rather a set of complex interactions between the person, the situation, training and other support provided, and the effectiveness of post-trauma interventions.

The book is in three sections. The first examines a range of conceptual and methodological issues and is packed with up-to-date references, a large number of which challenge positions that many writers on traumatic stress have adopted. The chapters on assessment, compassion fatigue, vulnerability and the use of psycho-social models to increase understanding are particularly interesting.

The second section is more descriptive, looking at examples of policing in South Africa and in the aftermath of the Waco disaster. While interesting, the aim of this section appears to be less well thought-out. The first two chapters are based on studies but are written in a style that is more narrative than scientific. The remainder of the section then looks at the impact of the traumatic event on those not directly involved.

The third section looks at prevention, recovery and treatment. The first chapter deals exclusively with trauma prevention in the army and only at the end of the chapter is any attempt made to link prevention measures in the army with those in the police. Was it not possible to find one police force able to describe their traumatic stress prevention strategy? The chapter on treatment provides a detailed outline of a treatment regime, though it would have been useful if some attempt had been made to indicate the effectiveness of the approach. The UK perspective on post-incident care makes it clear that the British police have little training, compared with their fellow officers in the US, in how to handle personal stress. The model of debriefing adopted by a number of police authorities is described, as is the current controversy surrounding debriefing. An alternative to debriefing is presented, aiming at the enhancement of officers' positive appraisal of their actions and attitudes. The final chapter considers the way forward, emphasizing the need to manage occupational and traumatic stress in the police force.

In summary, I believe that this is an important book; it is thought-provoking, and should provide researchers with endless areas to explore. It is a useful addition to the library of all those working with any of the emergency services, but is particularly relevant to the police. For me, it raised some important challenges for working to design organizational systems and interventions for dealing with disasters and other traumatic or stressful events.

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