

Chapter 5

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Among Police Officers is a Public Health and Safety Crisis

Grace McGrath

Marymount University, USA

Darrell Norman Burrell

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4675-9544>

Marymount University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among police officers is a public health and safety crisis. Given the prevalence of PTSD among police officers and its potential impact on their lives, police organizations and supervisors must implement measures to support officers struggling with the disorder. It is also essential for supervisors and co-workers to be aware of the signs and symptoms of PTSD, as this can help them to identify officers who are at risk and provide them with the necessary support and resources. This chapter explores emerging and proven interventions to help those in law enforcement facing PTSD.

INTRODUCTION

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has emerged as a significant public health crisis, particularly among police officers who daily navigate the complex landscapes of crime, violence, and trauma. The well-being of law enforcement personnel is not only a matter of individual health but also a critical societal crisis. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among police officers represents a crisis that demands renewed attention, engagement, and active interventions. The nature of policing exposes officers to traumatic events and high-stress situations, often resulting in long-lasting psychological consequences. However, within this crisis lies the potential for innovations and new approaches to address the mental health and well-being of those who serve and protect our communities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-9522-3.ch005

Police officers are frequently exposed to traumatic incidents such as violent crimes, accidents, and life-threatening situations. These experiences can lead to the development of PTSD, a debilitating condition characterized by intrusive memories, hyperarousal, and emotional numbing. The toll of trauma on officers extends beyond their well-being, as their mental health directly affects their decision-making, performance, and interactions with the public. Therefore, understanding PTSD among police officers as a public health crisis necessitates a broader perspective that accounts for its implications.

The well-being of police officers directly influences the safety and trust of the communities they serve. Officers grappling with untreated or unrecognized PTSD may experience impaired judgment, decreased situational awareness, and an elevated risk of use of force incidents. Moreover, unaddressed mental health challenges can lead to strained relationships between law enforcement and the public, exacerbating tensions and diminishing community cooperation. The societal implications of this crisis are further underscored by potential increases in absenteeism, early retirements, and the loss of experienced officers who leave the force due to mental health issues. The ensuing gaps in expertise could jeopardize public safety and hinder law enforcement agencies' ability to respond to emergencies effectively.

Law enforcement personnel face many unique stressors in the workplace. The very nature of the job can create an atmosphere of stress and pressure, leading to various physical and psychological health issues. Law enforcement personnel are tasked with the difficult job of protecting and serving the public. This often requires making decisions in dangerous and uncertain situations (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Decisions must be made quickly and often with limited information, leading to heightened stress and pressure (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019).

The job's physical demands can also contribute to the stress and pressure law enforcement personnel face (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Law enforcement personnel are often required to engage in physical activity or confront dangerous situations, leading to physical fatigue and further stress (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Furthermore, officers may be required to work long hours, leading to exhaustion and further stress (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019).

The emotional demands of law enforcement can also contribute to stress and pressure (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Law enforcement personnel often face difficult situations that can lead to emotional distress (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Additionally, officers may be exposed to traumatic events, leading to psychological trauma (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016; Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019).

Excessive stress and pressure can lead to various physical and psychological health issues for law enforcement personnel (Rosemond, 2018; Pickens, 2011). Physical health issues may include an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, and other diseases (Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Additionally, excessive stress can decrease job performance and satisfaction (Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). Psychological health issues may include depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These issues can lead to decreased job performance, decreased job satisfaction, and increased absenteeism (Gersons, 1989; Lees et al., 2019). These psychological issues can also lead to decreased quality of life, increased suicide risk, and increased risk of substance abuse (Pickens, 2011; Parker, 2016). Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a traumatic event or workplace stress. It is characterized by intrusive memories, flashbacks, and avoidance of situations that may trigger the trauma. Symptoms of PTSD include nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event, hyperarousal, negative thoughts and feelings, and dissociation (American Psychiatric

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