

Exploring the implications of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on Police

Jordan Grebenc

Introduction

To date, extensive research demonstrates a correlation exists between a critical incident by police officers and post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a significant issue as police officers are inherently exposed to critical incidents throughout their work duties, placing them at an increased risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder. According to Fox et al., (2012), approximately 24% of the police officers have some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder in their United States survey.

Background

Critical incident stress can develop into various psychological issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Martin, Marchand, Boyer, & Martin, 2009). The Canadian Mental Health association defines post-traumatic stress disorder as “a mental illness. It often involves exposure to trauma from single events that involve death or the threat of injury” (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016).

Hartley (2013) found that critical incident exposure could cause poor sleep quality, alcohol abuse and mental health problems (Hartley et al., 2013). These conditions require some varying degree of medical services or work related costs. The subject of post-traumatic stress disorder is very important to public safety because police officers are those who are tasked with keeping the public safe.

Methods

Secondary research was conducted through multiple sources, no primary data was collected for this project.

Firstly, the Search Me! Database at the Justice Institute of British Columbia. This search produced 1,189 academic articles. The search used the subject terms of police, police stress, post-traumatic and stress disorder. Results were further narrowed through the use of the following criteria: scholarly (peer reviewed), full text, date (2006-2017), and by using a source type of academic journals.

A secondary search of google was conducted in order to gain articles that were not indexed in the SearchMe! Database to supplement the academic findings. A handful of articles were chosen using this method. The google search engine also provided non scholarly information such as websites. Information from websites was used to supplement the information from academic journals to gain a more complete view of the topic area.

After this process only 8 articles remained. The chosen articles underwent a thematic analysis in order to identify common themes and produce a literature review.

Results/Findings

Three themes were consistent throughout the literature after a thematic analysis was completed on the remaining academic articles.

The literature showed that exposure to critical or traumatic incidents can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder can have an impact on an individual’s health and work performance.

There are various definitions of post traumatic stress disorder throughout the literature but they all include the common element of exposure to a critical incident or trauma.

Discussion

Due to the link between exposure to critical incidents and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder many police departments have responded with the creation of some form of critical incident stress management team. The role of such a team is to provide immediate support from other officers following their involvement in a critical incident. Programs like this are effective because they are generally run by fellow officers. Mental health professionals are brought in later to assess any possible symptoms of mental health issues as well as to address any physical symptoms that an officer may display.

There are a number of ways for a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder to be made but the process will generally include a physical examination and a psychological evaluation used in conjunction with the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders.

The current methods of screening for PTSD have inherent limitations (Gates et al., 2012). Self-reporting scales may be susceptible to bias from the individual as well as researchers (Gates et al., 2012). There are also concerns of positive and negative screening results that may cause over or under reporting of symptoms (Gates et al., 2012). Furthermore, the reliance of a single measure or assessment tool can lead to a diagnosis that is inaccurate (Gates et al., 2012).

A problem when collecting the data that occurred was that a significant portion of articles were relating PTSD were amongst first responders rather than specifically police. This caused several articles to not be selected. Although, the chosen articles did have the same themes as the excluded articles. Therefore, minimal data was excluded from the research.

Conclusions or Recommendations

Educating officers on the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is a strong step forward in limiting the impact that it can have on the individual’s personal and professional life. Catching the symptoms early can also have significant cost savings for the department they work for and the healthcare system. This is the most important recommendation.

Early intervention is essential to prevent the disorder from progressing and becoming increasingly intrusive in the officer’s life (Gates et al., 2012). If a problem becomes intrusive it can have a negative impact on other aspects of their life and lead to other issues such as sleeping disorders, which will impact their job performance (Fox et al., 2012). Furthermore, Hartley (2012) found that critical incident exposure could also lead to alcohol abuse. The impact of alcohol abuse is another potential cost in the long run to the individual and their health.

Access to mental health services should be increased. Fox (2012) found that only 47% of officers surveyed had used mental health services for the fear that it could negatively impact their career. In order to increase the access to these services departments must eliminate the stigma, or perceived stigma, of their members regarding the mental health services.

A thematic analysis was conducted on all the and they revealed three general trends. The statistical differences across the studies are minute and thus, leads to the conclusion that post-traumatic stress disorder is a significant issue among police officers and can occur after critical incident exposure among officers. Many independent studies lead to this same conclusion. This form of triangulation strengthens the validity of their findings.

References

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Introductory Overview. *The impact of stress on officers and the OPP response*

Figure 1



Figure 1
Retrieved from
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/181973641169042214/>

Figure 2



Figure 2
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https://www.google.ca/search?q=ptsd+police&espv=2&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwju7rjdzujsAhUL_WMKHQZXBSAQ_AUIBigB&biw=1920&bih=974#imgrc=nZwxqdPMfIECeM: