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Richard C. Lumb

The College at Brockport, rlumb@gmail.com

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A Kaleidoscope View of Urban and Rural Policing: How Misunderstanding and Uncaring May Impact on Police Officers

By

Richard C. Lumb, Ph.D.

The State University of New York at Brockport, Emeritus

We honor members of our United States military for their service, combat encounters and dedication to this nation. Our respect and honor of their commitment is sincere and stipulates a reminder never to forget. At the same time, our society's civilian law enforcement peacekeepers whose duty, commitment, and engagement equate to an equally high exposure of dangerous and threatening behavior, as hostile at times as a foreign enemy is to our military members. The risk of potential harm and death permeates every shift of America's police officer response and engagement with people. I refer to a criminal element whose willingness to kill police officers seem unequaled in today's society.

A single duty shift for a police officer represents a diversity of calls for service, representing the culmination of what is seen, heard, tasted, smelled and imprinted as mental experiences that the officer encounters throughout his or her career. In honor of all of today's police and first responders, I present this commentary, as a way to put forth a compilation of events that repeat themselves over and over for an entire career, the accumulated residue of this exposure, which may eventually be harmful. The truth behind the rationale of this exposure often remains obscured, either by choice or misinformation and therein lays the travesty of it all. Accumulated stress, adversity and trauma (ASAT) can be as harmful to the civilian officer and first responder as the PTSD military members might acquire.

When viewed as interconnected threads representing the tens of thousands of calls an officer or first responder engages in during a career, we can better understand the long-term effects on psychological, physiological, emotional and social manifestations of constant encounter with dysfunctional behaviors by members of society.

Effects of Stress on People include:

- ✚ Psychological
- ✚ Emotional
- ✚ Physiological
- ✚ Social

As early as 1923, Abram Kardiner (1941) [1], created a theory of war neuroses based on WWI veterans. He noted, *"Those who suffer from traumatic neuroses develop an enduring vigilance for and sensitivity to environmental threat."* Many police officers experience "place and situational" environments that may elicit feelings of being

uncomfortable, resulting in bouts of hyper-vigilance.

Critics with no similar experience expect perfection with every call for service response, while they bear no responsibility for social problems. It speaks to a common flaw that we so often create for ourselves. For all they see and encounter, our police and first responders endure what others cannot imagine. Therefore, we must equate their contribution as above the norm in a society seemingly assembled along a line of random chaos.

We can compare twelve “outcome effects” that are common to daily engagement by police and first responders with the public’s request for assistance. The impact varies with the intensity of the call, the events that unfold during the call, and the residual effects that may or may not linger in detrimental ways, once the call is completed.

Est. 25,000 to 150,000+ Individual Police Responses in 25 years of Service.

Includes:

- #1. Traffic Encounters.
- #2. Arrival at Call for Service.
- #3. Acceptance of Police Action.
- #4. Personal Motivation of the Public.
- #5. Injury to Officers.
- #6. The Shock of Event Severity.
- #7. The pursuit of Individuals.
- #8. The danger of Traffic Stops.
- #9. Humanity is Strife.
- #10. Trauma.
- # 11. Traffic Accident.
- #12. Inhuman Behavior.

Totals vary by location, social conditions, and hours of work, types of calls, and other variables.

#1. Traffic Encounters. When the call to respond is received, the officer immediately turns toward that location. Depending on the type of call, the officer may or may not use the blue lights and siren to assist in safely arriving. The response is the first encountered peril, driving in traffic where distraction by other drivers is real, some of whom cannot see or hear at safe levels and who may turn or do something that suddenly results in an elevated crash. Avoiding the collision allows continuation to the call, or if absolute, potential injury or death of the officer.

#2. Arrival at Call for Service. Arriving at the location of the complaint, the officer is working from severely limited information and must rapidly expand his or her awareness to what is occurring. A 360-degree picture must be quickly taken to determine what and who might be linked to the call. What is seen and heard? Are there unusual smells? What appears normal or what might indicate something is wrong? For

example, the absence of noise, when some would be expected, is also a sign to use caution as further investigation is ongoing. The announcement that a police officer is present is given to alert people that an officer of the law has arrived on the scene. This statement also serves to warn people to behave properly, hopefully encouraging appropriate behavior, and the rule of a civilized society. As we know, this may be ineffective.

#3. Acceptance of Police Action. Some individuals will not or cannot accept information other than what appeases their bias. Reading a post-event newspaper article and the numerous personal opinions posted by readers, many of which contain negative and often off-topic comments, we may be astounded at the discrepancy between truth and facts. A standard response by the user includes intense emotional and unsubstantiated information and lack of detail or knowledge of a situation. We must, however, consider the training and protocols that direct police response. Police officers do not operate entirely on their volition; they follow rote responses outlined in training, policy, procedure and protocol based on best practices and legal opinions. Society remains challenged or unwilling to accept the broader picture of police reality.

#4. Personal Motivation of the Public. Individual reaction to the arrival of the police cannot be accurately projected. Officers seek to treat everyone in the same manner, gather information and by what is known, and make appropriate decisions of action to be taken. Actions include in-custody safety, thereby diminishing the individual's ability to take aggressive action that could harm the officer or others. People can go from calm to aggressive in micro-seconds. They appear calm and within a single breath may attack the officer with a ferocity that seeks to overwhelm him or her. If you have not personally encountered that level of attack, it may be difficult to understand how natural response increase as awareness of danger or harm is realized. These changes affect your breathing, heart rate, an increase of adrenaline released into one's bloodstream, elevation in hearing acuteness; muscle tension in preparation to respond to attack, and a laser-like focus on immediate danger.

#5. Injury to Officers. If hit with a fist, a weapon of some type, stabbed, or shooting occurs, the individual's primal survival mode automatically engages and self-defense rises to its highest level, elevated by increased Adrenalin. The post-event examination and comments via a newspaper or newscast article often ask, "Why didn't the police officer simply wound the individual? Why must they shoot to kill? The real question is why the person, who by law is supposed to comply with lawful orders, did not refrain from attacking a human being with intent to kill, did not? When people engage in such behavior and events as described occur, justification to survive the encounter, to overcome and control the aggressive person, becomes paramount. It is no less than anyone facing such a situation would do, trained law enforcement officer or not.

#6. The Shock of Event Severity. Law enforcement response to 911 calls often subjects an officer to events and situations that are shocking to the general public. A domestic violence call might present a deceased individual, or a person battered and injured, or heart attack or other life-threatening situation. A condition that seems to worsen over time is suicide by cop when a distraught person threatens the officer with a weapon and

in turn is shot in self-protection. It may well include terrorized children who witnessed the event or may have been involved themselves while seeing law enforcement officers engaged in taking someone into custody.

#7. The pursuit of Individuals. The pursuit of a person refusing to stop when found involved in unlawful behavior, or perhaps when the officer responds to a call from a concerned neighbor, the officer has no way of knowing the outcome. In a similar case, the police chased a fleeing individual through a shed where a dead sheep lie, motor vehicle parts lay scattered, and trash littered the way. Entering the house, where the internal room temperature is just above freezing, the officer observes two children improperly dressed for the extreme cold and barefoot, huddled together and crying in fear. Ignoring that for the moment, where did the pursued person go? Continuing, the officer hears noise in a room, enters what is a bedroom and sees the man emerging from a closet with a rifle in his hand. Mere seconds elapsed from the officer's arrival to this critical moment.

#8. The danger of Traffic Stops. At a traffic stop, the officer radios to dispatch the location, the vehicle license plate number and then steps out of the cruiser. Dispatch is running the license plate and gets an immediate reply that the car is stolen. A radio call is placed to the Officer, who just seconds ago exited his cruiser and was approaching the stopped vehicle when someone jumps out of the passenger side with a handgun, shoots the officer five times in the face, neck, and chest. The stopped vehicle speeds off. Dispatch, receiving no response from the police officer, sends other units to the location, where they find their fellow officer lying dead in the road.

#9. Humanity is Strife. Days, weeks months and decades of witnessing humanities violence, insensitive actions, loud and disgusting threats and the like made against the officer are stressful. The resistance by people who are illegal drug users, those with disease and open sores, whose breath is atrocious, who may have defecated or urinated in their pants, and many who tried to plunge a knife into you, shoot you, bash in your head to kill you, also trying when confronted. As an example, the EMT that removed the body of a baby from a microwave that caused the child's death left a depth of trauma prohibiting his ability to continue in that career.

#10. Trauma. Not all calls result in injury, but certain few carry the weight of leaving residue from the stress and adversity accompanying the officers' encounter with people and situations. A family shot to death for no apparent reason, now the work of investigators. Serial killers, rapists, child molesters, and a list of other deviant behavior that is shocking in the outcome.

11. Traffic Accident. The collision in which three of four members of a family are dead at the scene, and the drunk driver who crossed the center line and struck them head-on, is cursing and pacing because his truck is damaged. Another accident where three of four teenagers lie dead, the driver arrested for drunk driving. There was substantial beer present and in the hand of one of the deceased as well as lying throughout the interior of the vehicle.

#12. Inhuman Behavior. Witness the murder, brutality, and other inhuman actions by people whose presence in society is a constant threat to law enforcement and citizens alike. The deviant who sexually abuses a child, and you, as the officer responding to the call, have to look in the eyes of that child and witness the raw fear, hurt, and terror that will remain throughout his or her lifetime. The events that police witness are never encountered by the majority of citizens. However, that segment of society that behave as just described and who contribute little, take much and pose a constant threat to citizens and police alike, and many of them are among us. One hardens to what is seen, touched, smelled and dealt with, and yet to those with an agenda to criticize or the citizen who never encountered this alter reality, often blame the officer. Still, the mission of law enforcement goes on despite society's dysfunctional side, while remaining under constant threat. The critics of law enforcement are naive, they are careless as well, as no one else stands between them and those who would harm, steal, and commit some atrocity or kill them - - unless they call 911, a citizens hotline for help.

The Residual Effects of Stress on Our Police, Fire, EMTs and other First Responders.

As with the military, we have urban and rural police officers, sheriff deputies, other law enforcement and first responders whose accumulated exposure to humanity's darker side, behaviors and thoughts, pose a threat to others. The stress, adversity, and trauma encountered leave some residue with each call. For our civilian law enforcement, which deals with career-long exposure to urban combat, the accumulated stress, adversity and trauma (ASAT), they too may demonstrate the same symptoms of PTSD as found with some of our military personnel.

We ask many things of our local, county, state and federal law enforcement; as they encounter people and events that the citizen does not wish even to acknowledge exists. The violence, often perpetrated on the innocent and helpless, must be confronted, and the mental health, substance abuse and other drivers of dysfunction dealt with. Some officers return home following a duty shift injured, bruised, scratched, bitten, and others may spend time in the hospital recovering from injuries at the hand of those who have no control over their compulsive and deviant behavior. Moreover, still others rest in their grave, survived by family and friends who grieve, even while protests against police go on in a country whose freedom protects these rights; a right that would be challenged by others were it not for the officers who stand firm to protect and serve. The decent and socially well-balanced deserve no less.

[1] Kardiner, A. (1941). *The traumatic neuroses of war*. New York: Hoeber.

[1] 2011 Files/Blog/Linkedin Posts.../04.16.16 describing Urban and Rural Policing.