

Guns aren't the only things killing cops

April 11 2014, by Pat Donovan



A new book by John Violanti looks at the unusual health risks of being a police officer.

The public does not realize—in fact, police themselves may not realize—that the dangers police officers are exposed to on a daily basis are far worse than anything on "Law and Order."

"Police officers are exposed to danger from so many different elements—many of them unexpected—that they are dying not just on the job, but for the job," says University at Buffalo epidemiologist John Violanti, PhD, an expert on police culture, psychological stress, illness and mortality. And they are dying younger than the rest of us. A previous Violanti study found that on average, the life expectancy of [police](#)

[officers](#) was significantly lower than the U.S. male population—a result, he suggests, of the exceptionally high and protracted degree of job-related stress.

In Violanti's latest book, "Dying for the Job: Police Work Exposure and Health" (Charles C. Thomas Pub. Ltd, 2014), he and several other authors from the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, Centers for Disease Control, explore these unusual health risks. It's not a pretty picture.

Violanti begins by considering the alarming number of environmental hazards to which police officers are exposed, things such as clandestine methamphetamine labs, dead bodies, lead exposure from firearms, noise, radar, blood-borne pathogens, even fingerprint powder, which has produced occupational lung disease.

"These threats are compounded by the high levels of job stress in police work," he says, "which manifest as higher-than-average rates of anxiety, obesity, PTSD, high blood pressure, metabolic disorder, cardiovascular disease and suicide.

"I think that the police themselves, their families and the communities they serve should have a better understanding of the information presented here," Violanti says.

"They should be aware of the hidden risks of this job. The hours are long, the pay is frequently low and a range of stressors provoke physical and psychological damage that can be severe. The police themselves, along with the public, are paying for that damage and should be aware of programs and practices that can alleviate and even prevent the consequences described here."

A research professor in the Department of Epidemiology and

Environmental Health in the UB School of Public Health and Health Professions, Violanti is an internationally recognized scholar who has published extensively on police culture, stress, working conditions and health. He worked for the New York State Police for 23 years as a trooper, criminal investigator and, later, as a coordinator of the state police's Psychological Assistance Program.

Here he contributes to several chapters on such issues as sources of stress in police work and how police health is measured. He and fellow authors compare police work with other occupations using such variables as smoking and depression, sleep deprivation, obesity, hypertension and metabolic syndrome, and more. The figures are disturbing.

They point out, too, that police subgroups distinguished by gender, ethnicity and military experience are at even greater risk of ill health than their peers.

One chapter looks at the high level of cancer incidence and mortality among police officers, and the role occupational stress may play in the development of cancer. In another, Franklin H. Zimmerman, MD, senior attending cardiologist and director of critical care at Phelps Memorial Hospital in New York's Westchester County, discusses the growing risk of cardiovascular disease among police. Zimmerman says it is worth noting that most fatal heart attacks among police strike at younger ages than they do in the general working population.

Also included in the book are the health consequences of shift work in policing, stressors and associated [health](#) effects for women police officers, police suicide as an outcome of psychological work exposures, vulnerability to work-related post-traumatic stress, PTSD symptoms, psychobiology and coexisting disorders in [police](#) officers. There is also an evaluation of several methods used to treat trauma in law enforcement.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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