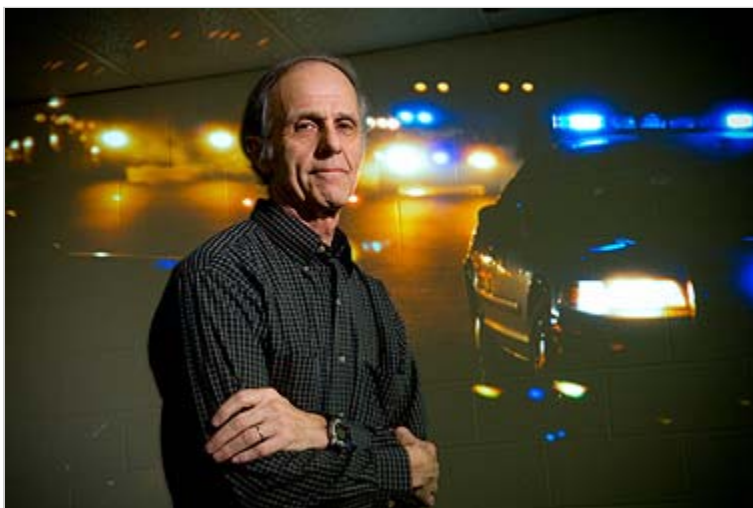


UB REPORTER

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CLOSE UP

The life and death of law enforcement



In recent years, John Violanti's work has shifted to the effects of stress on physical health. Photo: DOUGLAS LEVERE

By JIM BISCO

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John Violanti has seen first-hand the focus of his research. As a New York State trooper for 23 years—and before that, for three years with the military police in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam experience—he saw the stress and trauma that is part and parcel of a police officer's life. And he also saw the deadly effects.

Two years after he started with the state police, Violanti, now research associate professor in the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health and Health Professions, went back to school to get a psychology degree, juggling career and class, along with raising three children with his wife.

"I began to wonder what the psychological toll was on us police officers.

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"Not many people have to put on a bulletproof vest to go to work."

John Violanti
 Research Associate
 Professor, Department of
 Social and Preventive
 Medicine

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With my degree in psychology I tried to get a better understanding of what sort of processes happen that can hurt you in terms of exposure to these things," he says. "That's when I decided I want to look at stress and its effects, not only on the mental health of officers but, as I found out later, the health outcomes involved with stress."

Violanti received his B.A. in psychology from UB in 1973. The South Buffalo native, who went straight from high school to assembling transformers at the Westinghouse plant before being drafted by Uncle Sam in 1963, decided to continue his education at UB. He earned two master's degrees—in social sciences in 1975 and rehabilitation counseling in 1986—and a Ph.D. in sociology in 1981, all while working full time with the state police.

In 1984, Violanti became involved in research with John Vena, then an associate professor in the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, exploring mortality among police officers in Buffalo. "We found that on average they were dying much sooner from stress-related diseases and particularly high suicide rates as well—almost triple that of other municipal workers in the city. That started me on a long trek of looking at suicides," says Violanti.

While on the job, Violanti remembered at least four suicides that had taken place, one being a former patrol partner. "Why do you get to a point where you decide it's not worth living anymore and what factors influence that decision? My idea was that it was the exposure to the human misery every day, and the fear of being killed after you walk out the door in the morning. Not many people have to put on a bulletproof vest to go to work."

The high suicide rates were found to be consistent on a national and international scale as well. Higher rates of depression than the general population were also found, particularly among women officers. Contributing factors, according to Violanti, appeared to be the essentially male occupation and the added family responsibilities that made the job more difficult for them.

A prevalent problem seems to be that police officers typically are among those individuals who don't seek help for psychological difficulties. "There is this sort of police cultural ethos that officers are there to solve problems, not people who have problems. It's a problem we're working on to educate officers that going for help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of courage instead," Violanti says.

His unique insider stature has played a big role in the credibility and acceptance of the research, which is making an impact on those attitudes. "Departments like the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office, Dade Metro in Florida, and many others throughout the country are realizing that it's a psychological problem that's important to understand. They've established policies and have police psychologists available. It's almost mandatory to get the officer to get out his or her feelings. I think that's a great in-road. Mental health awareness training and suicidal awareness training is happening more now than ever."

In recent years, the researcher's work has shifted to the effects of stress

on physical health. More than 480 officers—about half of the Buffalo Police Department—were recruited for a study that finishes this fall. “We’re coming up with some interesting findings,” says Violanti. “How post-traumatic stress disorder can affect cardiovascular disease, for example. We’re also looking at artery health. We’re finding that high stress can impair the health of arteries among police officers.”

Violanti also is in the beginning stages of a study on the suicide rate for returning Iraqi veterans, which appears to be twice as high as the general population. “It’s a serious problem. When these veterans come back, it’s very similar to the police—they don’t want to admit that they have any problems.” He’s proposing a new way to assess suicide potential in these veterans, delving more into their subconscious responses.

The researcher is soft-spoken but adamant about the life-and-death nature of his work. “I like this part the best, doing research. It’s very much like being a detective,” says Violanti, who was in that branch of the state police when he retired to begin his new career of detection.

He and his wife, a retired IRS taxpayer representative, live in Depew and enjoy traveling, particular to the national parks. Their three children also have careers in education. In all, a very satisfying life, he says, “and I hope to contribute a lot more before my time.”

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