

Effects of debriefing on police stress after a crisis

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Introduction

Policing, by nature, is a stressful occupation. Responding to a crisis or disaster situation not only magnifies basic occupational stress, but will often result in post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety for officers who serve as first responders to the event.

Members of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) who worked at the time of the Hurricane Katrina crisis were surveyed and interviewed to determine their levels of stress after the storm and their participation in support services since the event.

This project examines the relationship between participation in formal debriefing or counseling and police stress in the New Orleans Police Department after Hurricane Katrina.

Background

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the gulf region of the United States causing waterways to breach protective canals and flood the city of New Orleans. With 80% of the city under water, thousands of people were stranded and forced to live in squalid conditions for several days.



In the days that followed, looting and violence plagued the city; local police officers were not immune to the disaster and often had dual statuses as both first responders and victims—losing family, friends, and co-workers in addition to personal property.³



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Methods

A meta-analysis on the efficacy of debriefing, critical incident stress debriefing, and post-crisis counseling was performed to yield conflicting results; some studies reported no improvement in trauma symptoms after debriefing, while other research found it effective and some even concluded it was harmful.^{2,4,5,6}

This project seeks to add to the existing body of literature by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data to further investigate these issues.

Self-administered surveys generating quantitative and qualitative data were distributed to and completed by New Orleans Police Department officers from the summer of 2007 to October of that year. In December 2007, interviews with officers of various ranks were conducted in New Orleans to serve as supplementary qualitative data.

Objectives

This project is relevant to the research areas of Emergency Preparedness and Response and Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences as it closely follows the mission of the PACER center; it aims in determining how to best prepare first responders involved in a crisis for future crisis situations, as well as how to best alleviate the effects of a disaster on first responders.



For further information

For further information on this study, or the continued challenges faced by the New Orleans Police Department, please contact msturner@howard.edu.

More information on this and related projects can be obtained at www.pacercenter.org.