Building on these findings, the researchers are now conducting one of the first large-scale investigations on how the stress of police work affects an officer’s physical and mental health. The study, which measures the impact of stress on police officer health and performance, is funded by a $1.75 million grant from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). An additional $750,000 grant from the National Institute of Justice was awarded to study the effects of shift work and fatigue on police officers.

John M. Violanti, PhD ’81, research associate professor in the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine in the UB School of Public Health and Health Professions, is principal researcher of the study, called the Buffalo Cardiometabolic Occupational Police Stress (BCOPS) study.

Violanti knows something about police work. Drafted into the Army at 19 during the Vietnam War, he scored high enough on the military’s “aptitude” test to be placed in the 57th Military Police Company, which, as luck would have it, was assigned to patrol the grounds of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Although he was spared Vietnam combat, Violanti was not removed from its human suffering. One of the duties of West Point’s military police is to conduct military funerals. “We had two to three soldiers coming back in coffins every week from Vietnam,” he says. “It really got depressing after a while, but that was our job.”

Stress was a way of life then for West Point cadets, not only because the future officers knew they too might return to the academy’s parade grounds in a flag-draped coffin, but because intense haz ing was standard procedure at that time. Violanti observed it all, including an innocent-sounding exercise called a “sweat shower.” Cadets were commanded to stand at attention in the sun in full dress until they were drenched sufficiently in perspiration to please the upperclassmen. Some stood for hours, and the distress of those young cadets is something Violanti never forgot.

LIFE AS A STATE TROOPER
Policing turned out to be a good fit for Violanti, a native of Buffalo. He took the New York State Police exam while still in the Army, scored high once again, and reported to the state police academy outside Albany hours after his Army discharge. Twenty-four weeks of training later, he reported to his first troop in Poughkeepsie. Subsequent assignments sent him to state police headquarters in Fulton and Fredonia and finally Buffalo, where he spent 15 years patrolling the New York State Thruway from Grand Island to Rochester, chasing down speeders and responding to accidents.
Violiants and colleagues are using measures of cortisol, known as the “stress hormone,” to determine if stress is associated with physiological risk factors that can lead to serious health problems, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. “When cortisol becomes dysregulated due to chronic stress, it opens a person to disease,” says Violanti. “The body becomes physiologically unbalanced, organs are attacked and the immune system is compromised as well. It’s unfortunate, but that’s what stress does to us.”

The investigation’s two most recent studies report on (1) the effects of shift work on stress and suicide risk in police officers, and on (2) male/female differences in stress and possible signs of cardiovascular disease. Results of the shift-work pilot study—published online in the October 2008 issue of the American Journal of Industrial Medicine—involved 115 randomly selected officers. Overall, the data showed that 23 percent of male officers and 25 percent of female officers reported more suicidal thoughts than the general population (13.5 percent). In a previous study, suicide rates were three times higher in police than in other municipal workers, Violanti found. The researchers were surprised to discover that women officers working day shifts were more likely to experience depression and suicidal ideation, while men working the afternoon or night shift experienced PTSD and depression. “We thought both men and women officers would be negatively affected by midnight shifts,” explains Violanti.

“It’s possible women may feel more uneasy and stressed in a daytime shift; it’s possible men working the afternoon or night shift would be more negatively affected by day shifts,” says Violanti. “That was why we were interested in studying the police ever since. “Intervention is necessary to help officers deal with this difficult and stressful occupation. We want to inform them on how to survive 25 years of police work. They need to learn how to relax, how to think differently about things they experience as a cop.” —John M. Violanti, PhD ’81

For conflict and a negative environment, he says, “There’s also the problem of physiological disruption of circadian rhythms. Being awake all night while one should be sleeping can affect judgment and decision-making. The combination of these two has a double-barreled stress effect.”

Results of the study that looked at male-female differences in stress and possible signs of cardiovascular disease in other municipal workers, Violanti found. The investigation’s two most recent studies report on (1) the effects of shift work on stress and suicide risk in police officers, and on (2) male/female differences in stress and possible signs of cardiovascular disease.

“Intervention is necessary to help officers deal with this difficult and stressful occupation,” he says. “We want to inform them on how to survive 25 years of police work. They need to learn how to relax, how to think differently about things they experience as a cop.”

There is such a thing as post-traumatic growth. People can grow in a positive way and be better cops and persons after they survive the trauma of police work. That is an important message.”

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Jean M. Violanti, PhD ’81, with ultrasound technician Vivian Roberts and patient, in the laboratory of Joan Dorr, PhD.