

STRESS & TRAUMA WITHIN THE CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DEPARTMENT: THE PARTICULAR CASE OF THE VICE SQUAD INSPECTORS

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INTRODUCTION



Sexual violence is now widely recognized as a serious human rights abuse, and increasingly as an important public health problem with significant consequences for victim's physical and mental health. This phenomenon is complex, and its statistics, based on the number of complaints recorded, are far from reflecting reality. According to a recent study¹, about 20% of Belgian women have been victims of rape in their lifetime. Their situation is made precarious by extreme unease and a reduction in their self-esteem. Psychotraumatic symptoms appear which do not allow them to seek help and/or file a complaint.

When primary care workers are easily identifiable and trained, victims can feel supported and assisted. The Sexual Violence Care Centres (CPVS)² provide day and night care for victims, including medical and psychological care, and police assistance in filing a complaint. Despite their rigorous and varied professional practice, police inspectors, by the nature of their work, constitute a population at high risk of exposure to potentially traumatic events. In this case, they may develop symptoms of secondary traumatic stress due to their emotional proximity to victims. This stress is reflected in emotional fatigue, reduced job satisfaction, altered moods, use of less effective coping strategies, etc.



AIM

The risk factors are numerous and require police officers to develop coping strategies to deal with these daily demands but also to have the necessary professional resources. However, these strategies or resources are not always adapted and may therefore lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In order to determine whether police inspectors' professional practice with CPVS victims increases the risk of developing secondary traumatic stress, a longitudinal study was conducted.

METHODS

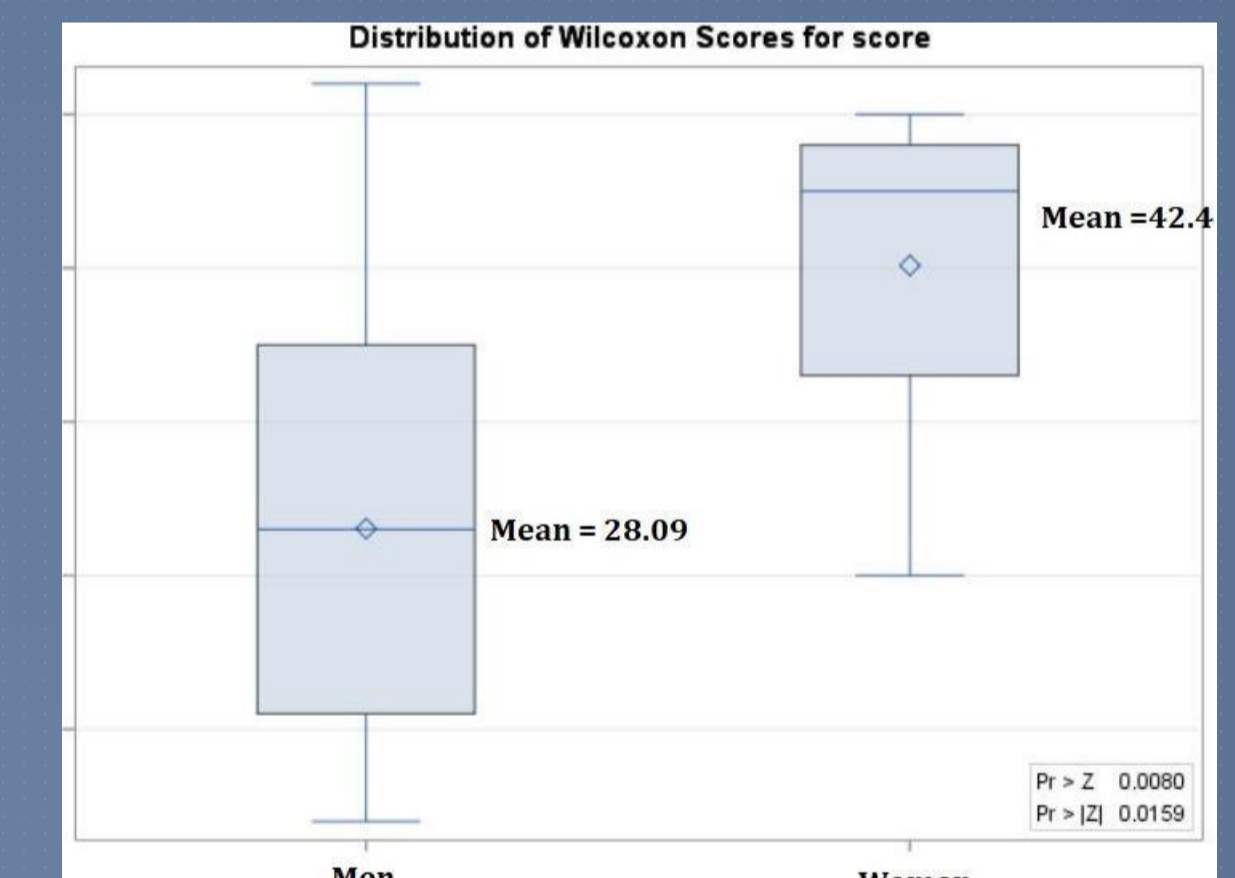
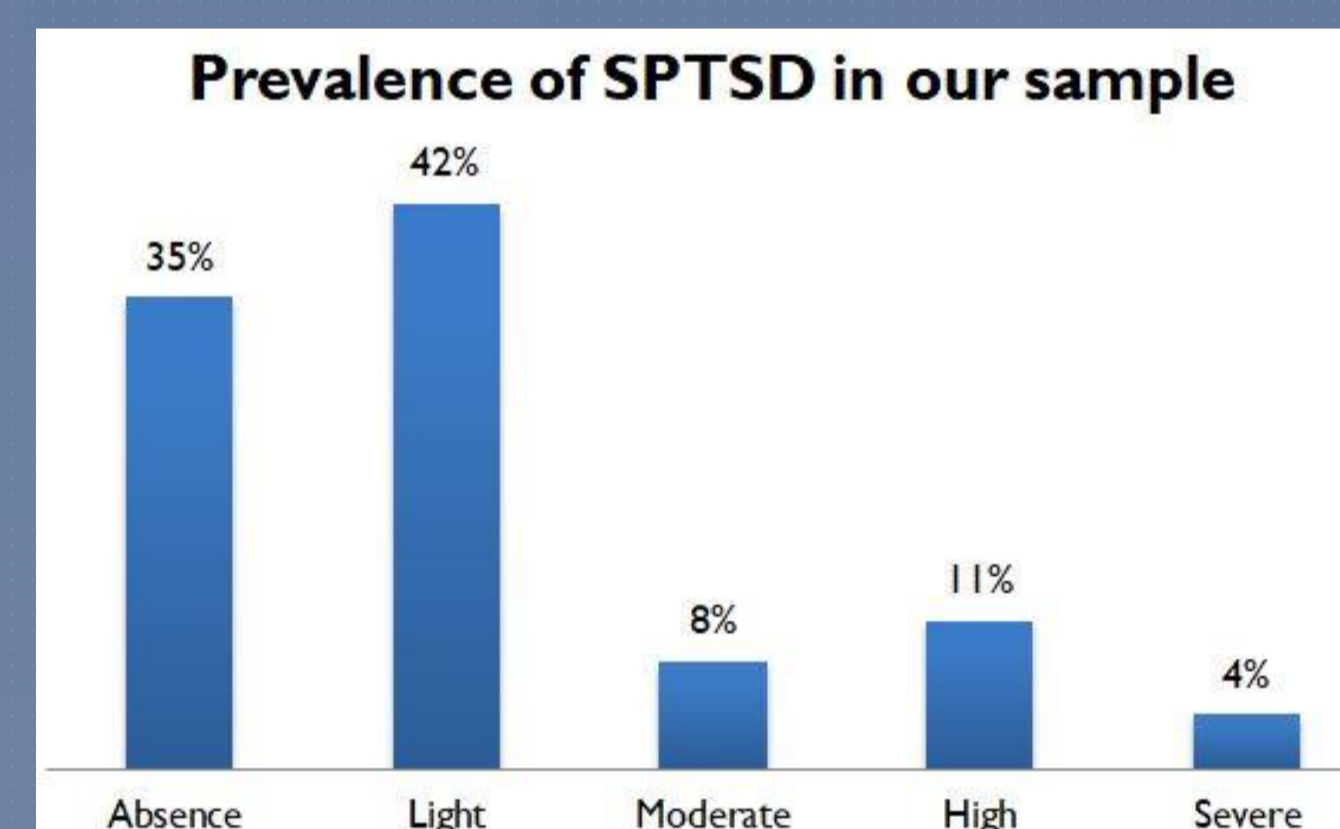
Twenty-six police inspectors from the vice squad were surveyed using questionnaires and structured clinical interview to assess professional satisfaction and compassion fatigue (**ProQOL**), coping strategies used preferentially (**WCC**), and the possible presence of secondary traumatic stress (**STSS**).

These men were examined twice for longitudinal data : two years after the opening of the CPVS (**T1**) and one year later (**T2**).

RESULTS

Findings showed that the majority of police inspectors generally adopt **appropriate coping strategies** in the course of their work.

However, despite this adequate personal functioning in the face of potentially traumatic work situations, **65% of the participants experienced secondary post-traumatic stress disorder (SPTSD)**. Women have significantly higher secondary traumatic stress scores than men.



This secondary traumatic stress is manifested by the **presence of burnout**, which is felt most intensely in contact with citizens, victims or perpetrators.

Finally, the results show no significant difference between the scores obtained in 2019 (T1) and the scores obtained in 2020 (T2).

DISCUSSION

The results show suffering and fatigue related to the working conditions of these vice squad inspectors. Therefore, it is essential to implement preventive interventions with this at-risk population. In addition to the general training offered to police inspectors involved in the CPVS, an introduction to the psychological care of victims of sexual violence (understanding, consequences) would enable police inspectors to become familiar with these potentially traumatic situations. On the other hand, supervision sessions would allow them to discuss difficult situations in order to release themselves emotionally.

Future programmes should promote the establishment of a favourable environment and help reduce the occurrence of stress reactions in order to better prevent the development and maintenance of post-traumatic stress disorder in police officers.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Amnesty International (2019). Etude des opinions et des comportements de la population belge en matière de violences sexuelles.
- ² There are currently three Centres in Liege, Brussels and Gent.

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