

Passing the Torch in Rural America through Stories of Trauma, Resilience, and Service from First Responders

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Abstract

This study examines how trauma, resilience, and service-oriented identities are passed across generations of rural first responders. Data were drawn from the first dozen interviews in the ongoing *Trauma Survivors Turned Trauma-Informed First Responders Research Project*, funded by the American Psychological Foundation to the first author. Participants included 12 firefighters, paramedics, EMTs, and law enforcement officers from Southwest Virginia in the United States. Semi-structured interviews explored career motivations, early exposure to helping behaviors, family and community influences, and strategies for coping with the demands of high-stress work. Thematic analysis revealed that familial legacy, cultural expectations, and community norms play a central role in fostering a service-oriented identity and supporting resilience. Participants consistently described helping others as both a moral obligation and a source of personal meaning and emotional strength. By capturing these narratives, the study highlights how first responders “pass the torch” of service across generations and offers insights for policies, training, and support systems designed to sustain the well-being and commitment of individuals in high-stress, service-oriented professions.

Keywords: first responders, trauma, resilience, service-oriented identity, rural communities, trauma-informed practice