

Suicide by Cop – The ultimate “trap”

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"She drove by in the hospital parking lot as I was getting into my patrol car. After parking her car she approached me. The polite and attractive young woman told me she wanted to talk to me and then was silent. I then began to feel that something was bothering her.

"I asked, 'Is there something I can do for you?' She then pulled a revolver out of her purse and aimed it at my chest. We were standing about 6 feet apart.. I thought, 'Is this some kind of a joke?' But the look in her eyes told me it wasn't. I drew my weapon, aimed and fired. She fell to the pavement. I rushed to her - trying to stem the bleeding.

"We were in the parking lot of the emergency room. I knew she would get immediate care. I watched as the doctors worked on her. An hour and a half later, she was dead. In her car was a note: *'Please forgive me. My intention was never to hurt anyone. This was just a sad and sick ruse to get someone to shoot me. I'm so very sorry for pulling innocent people into this. I just didn't have the nerve to pull the trigger myself.'* She left her name and address and the names of her parents adding, *'I am very sorry for this.'*"

This is the story of Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Glenn Vincent, who, on his 29th birthday, shot a 30-year-old woman who, family members said, suffered from debilitating headaches and depression. She had made a number of suicide attempts in the past.

"Every year after on my birthday, I would be reminded of the shooting from the pain I had inside. I didn't feel like John Wayne or Dirty Harry. This was not a movie. I continued to hurt inside. I am no RoboCop, " states the deputy.

Introduction

Suicidal individuals, in their desperation to escape their emotional pain, will use a variety of instruments such as guns, ropes, pills, knives, etc... to fulfill their suicidal wish. In some cases, the "instrument" is an unsuspecting law enforcement officer.

According to recent studies, police-assisted suicide or "suicide by cop" occurs in 10-15% of officer-involved shootings. Studies by Dr. Karl Harris, former Deputy Medical Examiner of Los Angeles County, Richard Brian Parent of Simon Fraser University and Dr. H. Range Huston of Harvard University School of Medicine show similar results.

- Dr. Harris' 1983 study of 99 shootings by police in Los Angeles County revealed that approximately 10% of officer-involved shootings involved suicide attempts. The method of suicide was to entice a police officer, in a self-defensive action, to shoot the decedent. *It was later discovered that often the weapon used by the subject was unloaded or non-functioning.* Dr. Harris believes that another 5% of the subjects he studied may have used the same method, but not enough evidence could be gathered to be conclusive in those cases.
- Constable Rick Parent, M.A. of the Delta, British Columbia Police Department, a Doctoral Student at Simon Fraser University, showed similar results in his 1996 research of municipal police and Royal Canadian Mounted Police. In roughly half the cases, the police reacted with deadly force to despondent individuals suffering from suicidal

tendencies, mental illness or extreme substance abuse acting in a manner to elicit such force. He found that 10-15% of these cases could be considered pre-meditated suicides. ¹

- The most recent study to date, published in 1998 in the "Annals of Emergency Medicine" ² covered officer-involved shootings investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department between 1987 and 1997. Out of the 437 shootings studied, 46 events (11%) were classified as "suicide by cop."

In 1997, the last year of the Los Angeles County study, the percentage of shootings identified as "suicide by cop" jumped to 25%. No one knows if this rise in identified incidents represents a bona fide increase in this form of death as a means of suicide or improved investigative techniques and documentation by the law enforcement agencies involved.

Profile

The results of the above study, further extrapolated by Dr. Barry Perrou, forensic psychologist and former commander of the LA County Sheriff's Hostage Negotiations Unit, showed:

- 96% of the perpetrators were male
- Ages ranged from 18-54
- Weapons ranged from firearms (46%), stabbing instruments (46%) and firearm replicas (8%)
- 58% asked to be killed by police
- 58% had a psychiatric history

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- 38% had previously attempted suicide
- 50% were intoxicated
- 42% had a history of domestic violence
- 38% had a criminal history .³

Another study performed in 1998 analyzed 15 shooting deaths of suicidal persons by law enforcement personnel in Oregon (Marion County) and Florida (Dade County).⁴

- All but one of the victims were male
- All possessed an apparent handgun or other weapon and threatened to kill the officers with these weapons. 60% of the suspects USED their weapons
- 40% were intoxicated
- 50% had made previous suicide attempts
- 40% had a history of mental illness with 60% showing compelling evidence of depression.

Dr. Vivian Lord of the University of North Carolina - Charlotte conducted a study of 54 cases in which people attempted "suicide by cop" in North Carolina between 1992 and 1997.⁵

- 94% were male
- 63% were armed with guns, 24% had knives, 3 had other objects ; 3 were unarmed
- More than 50% were under the influence of alcohol
- 45% were experiencing family problems or the end of a relationship
- Almost 40% talked about homicide and suicide with officers involved
- In 46% of the cases, the incidents began as a domestic argument
- Two-thirds appeared unplanned.

Aftermath

Police officers reacting to the aftermath of "suicide by cop" will often display symptoms of post-traumatic stress which can potentially affect their ability to perform their duties. Police officers are also victims in these cases. Among the many symptoms reported are hypervigilance, fear, anger, sleeplessness, recurrent nightmares and depression.

In many instances, the timing, speed at which the encounter escalated and officer's perception of immediate danger to self or others left him or her with no choice but to use deadly force. Yet, second-guessing on the part of the officer is common. One officer wrote:

"I hope you find some solution to this problem. As a police officer with 30 years experience, I had never heard the phrase, until it happened to me. Left me with mixed emotions. It was a family feud that had been going on for months...I only went there this time to remove small children. I was met at the front door by subject with a semi-automatic SKS rifle...When told to put the gun down numerous times, he refused and pointed the weapon at my partner and me. We both fired our weapons at the same time from less than three feet.

An investigation by an outside agency turned up the fact the suspect wanted to commit suicide...I think if I had been aware of this situation, I could have handled it different[ly] as senior officer on scene. I am not trying to second-guess this situation. I just feel that with some type of preparation or schooling, I might have handled the situation differently.

"I am glad that someone is trying to address this situation, as I feel it will get to be a larger problem as time goes on. Thanks again for seeing this need, and bringing it out in the open."

Suicide-by-cop or decedent-precipitated-homicide?

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department study used all of the following criteria as a means of identifying "suicide by cop" incidents.

1. Evidence of suicidal intent
 - written note stating a wish to die,
 - recent verbal communication of a desire to die to friends or family and at times to officers
 - Suicidal characteristics or behavior indicating suicidal intent (i.e. holding a firearm to one's head.)
2. Evidence that suicidal individuals specifically wanted officers to shoot them
 - Outright statements by the precipitators indicating they wanted officers to shoot them
 - Written or verbal communication to family or friends stating they wanted officers to shoot them
 - Refusal to drop their weapon when advised by officers to do so and then aiming their weapon at officers or civilians.
3. Evidence the precipitator possessed a lethal weapon or what appeared to be a lethal weapon
4. Evidence the precipitator intentionally escalated the encounter and provoked officers to shoot them in self-defense or to protect civilians.

In the Oregon/Florida study, cases identified as law enforcement assisted suicide or suicide by cop must demonstrate, with reasonable probability, that the victim provoked a police officer to shoot at the victim and that the victim had suicidal intent. Decedents were

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excluded if acute cocaine intoxication was a precipitating factor because the possibility of cocaine psychosis or delirium may complicate the ability to evaluate suicidal intent.

Amphetamine-related incidents were not excluded because psychosis and delirium are not typically associated with amphetamine use. Toxicological testing was performed on all decedents.

Richard Parent states that "victim-precipitated homicide" is not necessarily "suicide by cop." They are similar in that the decedent's behavior did cause the use of deadly force by law enforcement in a defensive action. And while one might describe the subject's actions as "suicidal," the intent of the decedent may remain unclear.

For example, someone's judgement might be so impaired by alcohol or mental illness that he or she fails to understand that an officer will use deadly force if the officer perceives he or she or those in the vicinity are in mortal danger.

Officer Gary Bush writes, "I take us back to a cold December night when Christmas was on our minds and our lives were happy and warm. A call comes at 10:25 PM and my colleague who was supposed to take the call was still doing paperwork. I take the call so she can finish up in time for the Christmas party at 11 PM.

"It amazes me how fate comes in and knocks the breath out of you. Robbie and I take the call and remark on the way that we are going to have to arrest this guy and we will be late for the party. When we arrive, a white male in his thirties exits the house and says that his uncle has been pointing a gun at him and his family all night and threatening to kill the whole family and himself. He states that he is drunk and has gone to the garage apartment in the back.

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"Rob and I walk down the alley towards the garage and a man comes up behind us and says that the guy in the apartment is his cousin and maybe he can talk to him. I stated that he had a gun and as soon as we secured the scene he could talk to him. We go to the door and I stand on the left side while Rob stands on the right. We take our guns out and I knock on the door with my left hand. At this time, I notice that the door has a latch, not a door knob. The door is pushed but not fully closed. I knock again with my left hand and again get no answer. I push the door open and step inside.

"The room is well lit and rectangular in size. There is a bed at the end of the room perpendicular to the rectangle. The uncle is laying down with his head towards the left side of the room. As I step further into the room, he sits up on the bed with his feet on the floor. He stares at me for a couple of seconds and I am about to speak when he reaches to his right. As he reaches, I notice on the left side of the bed there is a rifle. He picks up the rifle and I remember thinking *I can't believe he's doing this*. He grabs the rifle and I bring my gun up and start to back out of the room. He starts to swing the rifle towards me and I tell him to drop the gun, drop the gun, drop the gun. He swings the rifle almost to his shoulder and I fire one shot.

"I didn't hear anything but I recall the shock I felt as the gun went off. I backed out of the doorway and stood to the left. Rob was on my right. I did a quick peek into the room and remember feeling that the last thing I wanted to do was go back into that room. I re-entered the room with my gun trained on Mr. Smith (name changed). He was still on the bed leaning to the right on his right elbow. The rifle was still in his right hand with his finger still on the trigger. As I approached him I again told him to drop the gun, drop the gun. I soon got close enough to grab the rifle, I handed it to Rob and told him to clear it.

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"I handcuffed Mr. Smith and flipped him back over so he was facing me. I wondered if I actually had hit him and looked at Rob and asked him if I had hit him. Rob said he didn't know. I stared at his chest and stomach and could not see any wound. I remember feeling relieved that I had shot at this man and had missed him. The threat was over and nobody got hurt. I started flipping through his layers of clothing and still could not see anything. I got down to his T-shirt and saw a small hole just below his chest. I turned to Rob and told him to holler at headquarters that shots have been fired, suspect down, we need back up, first responders and paramedics.

"At this time, the man in the alley started yelling to let him come into the room 'to pray with Frankie.' I knew from training that when you are in charge of a crime scene, you are not to let anyone into the area. I also knew that Mr. Smith was hit in a bad spot and there was a good chance that he would die. I told Rob to search him. He did and stated that he was clear. I told Rob to let him in. I took the handcuffs off Mr. Smith and held his left hand while the cousin held his right hand. We prayed. After we said 'amen,' I told his cousin to leave. Mr. Smith then looked at me and said 'why did you shoot me?' I said, 'I told you to drop the gun.' He answered, 'I wouldn't have shot you!'

"How was I supposed to know that? The man I killed that night pointed an *unloaded* 30.06 at my partner and I.

"Why?"

"Who knows?"

"I do know that there is hell on earth and I have been there. "

Mr. Smith's actions that night clearly looked suicidal (especially when he brandished an unloaded weapon at officers). However, his question to the officer "Why did you shoot

me?" brings the question of suicidal intent, at that time, into question. Was it a clear suicidal act or the actions of an individual who was so impaired by alcohol that he failed to anticipate the consequences of his actions? While he did express suicidal tendencies earlier with family members, he took the answer to the question to his grave. He leaves a police officer in anguish.

Conclusion

Studies on law enforcement assisted suicide continue around the U.S. Police departments are beginning to take notice of the long-range detrimental effects these dangerous incidents have on the police officers involved. In some cases, officers are placed in a no-win situation. The key to help unlock the secrets behind this phenomenon is in the sharing of information, training and raising awareness among police agencies.

Recent changes in state laws regarding treatment of mentally ill individuals have increased the likelihood that law enforcement officers will encounter more of these incidents in the future. The dearth of adequate community-based services for this population leaves both the mentally ill and law enforcement vulnerable.

To complicate matters further, no universal standard is currently used within law enforcement to define or officially record these incidents. There are many serious implications to this lack of knowledge, not the least of which can be how a case will be litigated. A death classified as homicide is very different than one classified as suicide. Proper recording, the sharing of information and training using varied scenarios can go a long way toward assisting law enforcement and the mental health community in assessment and prevention as well as helping police officers cope with the aftermath of the "suicide by cop" trap.

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*For more information on **training** please contact Dr. Barry Perrou of the Public Safety Research Institute at (818) 952-9800*

*You may also download the results of Richard Parent's study at
www3bc.sympatico.ca/parent*

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¹ Parent, Richard B., Ph.D. Candidate, "Victim Precipitated Homicide: Aspects of Police Use of Deadly Force in British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, July, 1996

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⁴ Wilson, Edward F., M.D., Davis, Joseph H., M.D., et al, "Homicide or Suicide: The Killing of Suicidal Persons by Law Enforcement Officers," Journal of Forensic Sciences, Vol. 43, No. 1, January, 1998, American Academy of Forensic Sciences

⁵ Lord, Vivian, Ph.D., University of North Carolina-Charlotte