

Suicide-by-Cop

Donna Holland Barnes, Ph.D.
Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, TX

Suicide-by-Cop is also known as law-enforcement-assisted suicide. The term is defined as an incident in which a subject or lawbreaker, who may appear to be suicidal, confronts a police officer and actively challenges the officer to use deadly force. Force is escalated by the police officer in response to the subject's actions which are typically life threatening. This method of suicide was first defined in 1983, when Los Angeles Medical Examiner Karl B. Harris, realized that many victims shot and killed by police officers may have precipitated their own death (Burke 1999). Victim precipitation is the term coined by Marvin Wolfgang in 1950 (Hutson 1998), for incidents that occur when the victim initiates an event that will lead to his or her death. There is, however, a slight difference between the two terms. One can precipitate one's own death when acting irresponsibly because of the influence of drugs or alcohol or mental illness. Alternatively, one can provoke an officer to kill him or her through meticulously maneuvered events, such as purposely disobeying the commands of the officer to lay down a weapon or threatening to shoot the officer. The latter is considered suicide while the former is not.

DETERMINATION OF SUICIDE

There are several criteria that must be met before a fatal shooting by a police officer can be determined a suicide. A study of police shootings by Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputies was conducted by Dr. H. Range Hutson who found that out of 437 incidents between 1987 and 1997, 11% met four criteria. First, there was a suicidal intent. This is often determined by discovering a note left behind by the victim or an indication of a wish to die expressed to family or friends prior to the incident. The second criterion is an apparent wish to be shot; some victims simply ask police officers to shoot them. Third, the victims generally appear to be dangerous by overtly showing possession of a lethal weapon or what, in few cases, may appear to be a lethal weapon and is actually not. And finally,

the victim intentionally escalates the encounter by provoking the officer to make a choice. Usually, the police officer is not aware that he or she is being used in this manner. A suicidal person who is determined to end his or her life and is uncertain about exactly how, may find that it can be done quickly by provoking someone who legally carries a gun and, when forced, will use it (Hutson et al. 1998).

Other characteristics have also been observed. Richard Parent of the Delta Police Department in British Columbia, Canada, examined 58 police shootings in British Columbia between 1980 and 1994. Parent found that in a large number of the cases viewed as suicide-by-cop, there was a history of alcohol and drug abuse. Parent found that these cases were very similar to traditional suicide victims who had feelings of hopelessness, suffered from depression, experienced social rejection, and had feelings of isolation coupled with being upset over a recent event that usually is traumatic (Parent 1998). Though such cases were similar to traditional suicides, classifying them as suicide is often problematic.

A PROBLEM WITH CERTIFICATION

In accordance with the common definition of suicide as the act of intentionally taking one's own life, suicide-by-cop is rarely certified as a suicide. For instance, when there is no note left behind, the death of a victim of a police shooting is most often classified as "justifiable homicide." The Uniform Crime Reports defines justifiable homicide as the killing of a felon by a peace officer in the line of duty or the killing during the commission of a felony of a felon by a private citizen. The most common occurrence for justifiable homicide is in the realm of self-defense when protecting one's life or property (Alvarez 1992). To declare a fatal police shooting of a victim suicide is a complicated and political process. One of the first rulings occurred in the State of Colorado in the summer of 1999, when Douglas County Coroner Mark Stover ruled the police

shooting of Simon Gonzales a suicide. Gonzales had fired his weapon into the front window of the Castle Rock Police station. Police officers responded by firing their weapons, but repeatedly asked Gonzalez to put his gun down. Gonzales continued to move toward the officers firing a 9mm pistol with one hand, and he was shot in the chest (Blevins 1999). The ruling is appropriate because of the circumstances that surrounded the incident; however, it does not meet the literal definition of suicide. However, when a note is left behind, as in the case of Moshe Pergament, certifying the death as a suicide is much simpler. In November of 1997, Pergament, a 19-year-old college student from Long Island, New York, provoked police officers into shooting and killing him, after leaving a note addressed to "Officer" that apologized for getting the officer involved in his plan to die. Without a note that self-identifies the death as a suicide, problems may arise because family members may take issue with the certification of suicide. However, research indicates that when an individual is intent on dying, people surrounding that individual are usually aware of it in some way. The message is conveyed either verbally or through highly risky behavior.

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS

Officers are trained to maintain and restore order, protect citizens, and defend themselves when necessary. Having very little time to assess a situation to determine a person's intent is characteristic of police work. This lack of time can impinge on an officer when being provoked by someone. If submission through intimidation does not work, police officers may be forced to decide whether to use deadly force. Suicidal individuals know that this method of suicide is effective and that it will appear as a police homicide, enabling them to avoid the stigma of suicide. Dying a hero rather than "giving up" may encourage law-enforcement-assisted suicide. Fear of taking one's own life and religious forbiddance are also motives for suicide-by-cop.

While there are no firm statistics on the frequency of such incidents, those who have studied this phenomenon estimate that 10% to 20% of the approximately 500-600 police shootings in this country annually are suicide by cop. Suicide-by-cop is not usually an act of rage but a calculated attempt to force police officers to shoot to kill. These cases are generally carefully examined, according to Clinton R. Van Zandt, a former chief negotiator for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. One third of the cases leave suicide notes or notes apologizing to the police as in the Moshe Pergament case. Grand jury inquests, according to Van Zandt (1993), often find that the victim announced to their family or friends their intent to die. But in most of the cases, investigators must rely on psychological autopsies to determine suicidal motives, frequently leaving questions unanswered. Van Zandt developed a

profile of a typical case of suicide-by-cop and argues that in most cases the victim is depressed, has a need to punish society, barricades himself, refuses to negotiate, demands to be killed by police, and in many cases, has just committed a murder—usually of a significant other (1993).

Law-enforcement-assisted suicide has potentially severe consequences for the officer involved in the shooting. Suspension while being investigated commonly occurs, or the officer is put on desk duty until further notice. Officers have been known to suffer from the emotional complexities of the event by asking themselves what they could have done to prevent it. Discovering that they have been manipulated into carrying out a suicide wish, can be emotionally exhausting for officers, and there is the added worry of wrongful death lawsuits that can result from any shootings. An understanding of the dynamics of suicide-by-cop helps court systems determine whether or not the use of force by an officer was a rational decision (Kennedy, Homant, and Hupp 1998).

CONCLUSION

Suicide-by-cop is not new—only the term is of recent origin. It is suspected that law-enforcement-assisted suicide has occurred for decades, but it has not been studied until recently. Suicide researchers have shown little interest in studying this method of suicide. Most of the research on suicide-by-cop has been conducted by those who work in law enforcement and are directly affected by it. The number one method of suicide is use of a firearm, according to the Center for Disease Control. It is fast and effective. Other methods, such as hanging and drowning, vary in which order they are placed. Suicide-by-cop is now a closely watched phenomenon because it involves not only the suicidal individual but also the police officer who is forced to kill.

REFERENCES

- Aharez, Alexander. 1992. "Trends and Patterns of Justifiable Homicide." *Violence and Victims* 7:4.
- Blevins, Jason. 1999. "Suicide by Cop on Rise: Police often Have No Choice but to Kill People Set on Dying." *The Denver Post* August 15, Sunday 2nd edit: A-1.
- Burke, Tod and Rhonda Rigsby. 1999. "Investigations: Suicide by Cop Revisited." *Law and Order* 47(6):97-102.
- Hutson, H. Range, Deidre Anglin, John Yarbrough, Kimberley Hardey, Marie Russell, Jared Strote, Michael Center, and Bennett Blum. 1998. "Suicide by Cop." *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 32:6.
- Kennedy, Daniel B., Robert J. Homant, and R. Thomas Hupp. 1998. "Suicide by Cop." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 67(8):21-27.
- Parent, Richard B. 1998. "Suicide by Cop." *The Police Chief* 65(10):111-114.
- Van Zandt, Clinton R. 1993. "Suicide by Cop." *The Police Chief* 60(7):24-30.