

Fatal Police Shootings In Vancouver

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For law enforcement personnel, the decision to utilize deadly force is of such significance that the appropriateness of the action will always be questioned. In contemporary society, police use of potentially lethal force can only occur in those rare situations in which no other reasonable option is available. The use of deadly force is dependent upon both the unique circumstances of the incident and the particular decision-making strategies of the individual officer.

It is within this setting that roughly 300 individuals are shot and killed by U.S. law enforcement personnel each year (U.C.R.,1997). In Canada, there have been roughly 250 incidents since 1980 where Canadian police have shot and killed an individual. These wilful killings are classified as justifiable, based upon the results of law enforcement investigations and coroner inquests.

In the province of British Columbia, there have been 47 recorded incidents of police use of deadly force during the period from January 01, 1980 through to and including December 31, 2002. In addition, there have been documented incidents within the province where police personnel have discharged a firearm but death did not result. In roughly 100 of these incidents the wounding of an individual occurred.

Of the 47 recorded incidents of police use of deadly force in the province of B.C., 14 incidents have occurred in the City of Vancouver. In municipalities served by municipal police agencies there have been five fatal shooting incidents: Delta (1982 – Robbery incident), Saanich (1984 – Domestic / Suicide), New Westminster (1990 – Hostage Incident), Port Moody (1990 – Police Personnel Disarmed), West Vancouver (1992 – Perceived Rifle).

The remaining 28 fatal shooting incidents have occurred in areas policed by the R.C.M.P. with many of these shootings occurring in remote rural areas within the province. However, within the lower mainland, there have been fatal police shootings in

Chilliwack, Maple Ridge, Coquitlam, Langley, Surrey, Burnaby and one incident involving the R.C.M.P. Drug Section within the City of Vancouver.

Vancouver Incidents

Interestingly, over half of the 14 fatal shootings in the City of Vancouver involved some form of mental illness or depression on the part of the decedent. In most of these instances, members of VPD responded to a request to deal with a “disturbance” or an overt display of “irrational behaviour”. Once on the scene, the member(s) were frequently faced by a male armed with a knife that would suddenly attack the officer(s) upon their intervention. In many of these instances, schizophrenia was cited as the deceased’s documented history of mental illness.

In July 1988, Vancouver police officers were dispatched to a report of a ‘man with a knife’ complaint. A woman had just reported that a male brandishing a large knife had chased her down the street. In an attempt to locate the suspected individual, two plain clothed police officers enter the common hallway of a large rooming house. As they stand shoulder to shoulder inside the narrow hallway they note that one single door is open. Suddenly, a male who steps from the open doorway with a blood stained 8” butcher knife in his left hand confronts the two officers. The two officers identify themselves as police officers and immediately point their weapons at the individual. In response the subject disappears into the apartment residence and cannot be seen by the two police officers.

All of a sudden the male suspect re-appears in the doorway, clutching his bloodied knife in a downward position. The suspect then comes out of the door towards the two police officers and states: “Go

ahead, shoot me, shoot me, shoot me.” Upon stating these words to the two officers the individual then turns his knife upwards into the air, in a striking motion, and points it towards the police. The two police officers once again command the individual to drop his knife. The individual is silent and does nothing but remain poised at a distance of approximately three feet away from two officers. Both of the officers are literally shoulder-to-shoulder in the narrow hallway allowing no room for movement nor retreat should the individual strike with his knife. Both are within imminent danger as they are within easy striking distance of the knife. Fearing for their lives, one officer fires four rounds from his revolver and the suspect collapses to the ground. The entire incident, from the initial confrontation to the firing of the police officers revolver occurs in less than one minute.

After fatally shooting the suspect, the two police officers check the inside of his residence. Inside the suspect’s residence the police officers find a dead body. A subsequent police investigation revealed that just prior to confronting the two police officers, the suspect had fatally stabbed another individual inside his room. This was the same room that suspect had initially appeared from while in possession of his bloodied knife.

During the Coroner’s Inquest it was also learned that the suspect was suffering from some unknown form of mental illness that caused him to be violent at times. Two days prior to the police shooting, the suspect had been admitted to a nearby hospital due to his violent behaviour. However on the day before the shooting, the suspect had walked away from the hospital, against medical advice.

Also during the Coroner’s Inquest, expert witnesses testified that within a 30-foot radius, a police officer is in imminent danger from a person

in possession of a knife. Within this radius, an individual in possession of a knife can seriously wound or kill. The Coroner stated that as the police officers were only three feet away from the suspect (when he confronted them with his knife) they were in "grave danger from the outset" of being approached by the assailant. (Parent 1996)

In a smaller number of incidents, members of VPD responded to a crime in progress typically involving a firearm or, a simulated firearm. In these instances, the decedent would typically point or, fire their weapon at the officer, posing a lethal threat to the officer(s) at the scene. In one instance a member was wounded. In another instance, a member was killed.

In the majority of these cases, members of the public had been victimized and had requested that the police attend to deal with the perpetrator of the crime. On occasion, the suspected individual(s) had completed their crime and were fleeing from the scene when police officers arrived. However, upon recognizing the interveners as police officers, the suspect(s) reacted with a lethal-threat to the officer(s) or innocent bystanders.

During one incident in 1984 and in another incident in 1988, uniformed Vancouver police officers were routinely patrolling their respective areas when they were suddenly dispatched to a reported crime in progress. Shortly after arriving at the dispatched location, the officers were facing a perceived lethal-threat. Upon suddenly being confronted by the police, during the commission of a crime, the suspect(s) responded by threatening the lives of the police officers or an innocent bystander. During both of these incidents, the suspect(s) were in possession of

loaded handguns while committing their crimes of robbery. Parent
(1996)

Finally, it must be emphasized that there are also countless incidents of lethal threats to members that are resolved each year, *without the discharge of a firearm*. During these instances, the officer was able to utilize alternate tactics or less-lethal compliance tools such as pepper spray, to subdue the individual who was posing a lethal threat. Often, this method of resolution has occurred with an increased risk to the police officer.

This increased risk to police officers has at times resulted in their death. Due to the very nature of their day-to-day duties, operational police personnel routinely face the real possibility of being assaulted or murdered on the job. Since 1980, three police officers in British Columbia have been murdered in the line of duty. In addition, several police officers have been killed accidentally while on duty due to occupational mishaps such as automobile accidents.

Conclusion

Upon examining the 14 fatal police shooting incidents in the city of Vancouver it remains unclear why certain individuals have deliberately confronted police with a lethal or perceived lethal threat. In some instances alcohol, substance abuse, mental disorder and suicidal tendencies were added to a complex picture of irrational behaviour. *Individuals acting in a bizarre or irrational manner have confronted armed police with either inferior or imaginary weaponry resulting in their death.*

In other instances, individuals were clearly involved in the commission of an indictable offence. In these cases the individual was typically armed with a firearm with the intent to kill or cause grievous bodily harm to police personnel attempting to intervene during their "crime in progress".

Regardless of the subject's motivation or mind-set, it remains that these individuals chose to pose a perceived lethal threat to law enforcement personnel. In this regard, the so-called *victim* must share some of the responsibility during a police shooting, as it is *their actions* that often precipitate the final outcome of the incident.

These findings illustrate the complexities that surround lethal threats to police personnel and how individual officers are often given seconds to decide how to resolve a potentially lethal conflict. In many instances, police officers will have no other option but to resort to the use of deadly force.

Source: Parent, Richard B. (2003) *Police Use of Deadly Force In North America*. Unpublished Doctorial Thesis. Simon Fraser University.