

## **Victim-Precipitated Homicide: Police Use Of Deadly Force**

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The term victim-precipitated homicide refers to those killings in which the victim is a direct, positive precipitator of the incident. Victim-precipitated homicide is, therefore, an act of suicide and the term refers to those incidents in which an individual, determined on self-destruction, engages in a **calculated** life-threatening criminal incident in order to **force** a police officer or another individual to kill him or her self.

One of the most startling findings of a recent study (Parent, 1996) concerns the frequency and degree of victim-precipitated acts that have constituted lethal-threats to police officers within British Columbia. The characteristics associated with victim-precipitated homicide, appear to be a significant factor in roughly half (48%) of the 58 cases that were analysed.

In 28 separate cases, the victim caused or contributed to the lethal-threat of a police officer by intentionally or unintentionally provoking the officer to use deadly force. In the majority of these cases, the individual's statements and actions clearly reflect their intent to commit suicide.

In a smaller number of cases the individual did not make a suicidal statement. In these cases, the conclusion is drawn that the individual was suicidal, on the basis of analyzing his or her actions and bizarre behaviour. The actions and behaviour documented within the case studies is consistent with the behaviour and characteristics most frequently associated with suicide.

Also noteworthy is the fact that, in several of the 28 cases examined, the perpetrator of a lethal threat had a documented history of mental illness and or suicidal tendencies. In addition, documentation in several of the cases indicate that the victim had a high blood-alcohol reading at the time of his or her death. In some instances, alcohol, substance abuse and mental illness were added to the complex picture of suicidal tendencies.

Based upon these findings, this study suggests that the phenomenon of "suicide by cop" is a significant factor in the police use of deadly force and potential deadly force within British Columbia. Individuals predisposed to suicide, have in many instances, confronted armed police in an attempt to escalate the situation in which they have placed themselves.

### **Deadly Force In British Columbia**

There have been over 40 separate shooting incidents that resulted in death by legal intervention within the province of British Columbia since 1980. The province of British Columbia has a population base of roughly 4 million people. Policing in large urban areas such as Vancouver and Victoria is primarily conducted by municipal police agencies while suburban and rural areas contract the services of the federally based Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

In the past 19 years, municipal police departments were responsible for over 15 shooting deaths. Members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were responsible for the remainder of the fatal shootings. An analysis of 15 fatal municipal police shooting incidents revealed that, in roughly half of these cases, characteristics consistent with that of victim-precipitated homicide were displayed by the deceased prior to being shot and killed. The following excerpt from one of the documented cases illustrates the complexities and rapid sequence of events that can occur as police officers arrive at a call.

(Case Three)

Police officers were summoned to attend a residence in which there was a telephone report of a male who had stabbed himself with a knife. The caller had advised the police that the individual in question was a "psychiatric case" and everyone inside the residence was "freaking out".

Two uniformed police officers arrived at the residence, simultaneously, in separate police vehicles. As the two officers approached the doorway of the residence, they were beckoned in by a woman. Before they could enter, a 23-year-old man suddenly left the residence with a large butcher-type knife in his left hand. The knife was held in a threatening position, approximately at ear-level. Upon seeing the individual and his act of aggression, the police officers separated in the yard and drew their firearms. The subject was ordered to drop his knife by both officers. In response to their commands, the individual continued to hold the knife in an upright striking motion, stating, "Shoot me, go ahead . . . shoot me" to the two officers.

Upon stating "Shoot me, go ahead . . . shoot me", the individual then began to advance towards one of the police officers, his knife still raised in a striking motion. Once again, he was instructed to drop the knife; however, he refused and continued to advance upon the officer. When he was within approximately six feet of the officer, both police officers discharged their firearms. The bullets struck the individual and he collapsed to the ground and died. A total of 21 seconds had elapsed from the time that the two police officers had initially arrived at the scene until the shots were fired (and an ambulance requested).

One of the two police officers stated:

"I was on the stand in Coroner's court [giving evidence] for five and a half hours on something that happened in 21 seconds."

During the Coroner's Inquest, it was learned that the deceased individual was depressed, suicidal and extremely agitated moments before his death. He had been drinking for almost 12 hours prior to his death. It was revealed that at the time of the incident, he possessed a blood-alcohol reading of .238 per cent, almost three times the legal impairment limit.

While inside the residence, the deceased had inflicted approximately 12 knife wounds to the inside of his left wrist. Although these wounds were superficial, they demonstrated his state of mind immediately before the police had arrived. The occupants of the residence testified that they recognized that he required help but that they were not capable of providing the help that he needed. In response, the family members summoned the police.

Further evidence heard during the Coroner's Inquest included testimony from an expert witness who testified that an attacker with a knife enters a danger zone when he gets within 30 feet of an individual. It was stated that a person with a knife can travel 30 feet in 1.5 seconds but that it takes a police officer 1.5 to 3 seconds to respond to an attacker by drawing, and firing, a gun. The expert witness concluded that the two police officers should have fired their weapons sooner than they did.

### **Why Suicide By Cop?**

Committing suicide by "traditional methods" that include jumping from a high structure, crashing a speeding vehicle into a stationary object or by a self-inflicted wound requires a decision and commitment on the part of the victim. In victim-precipitated homicides that are born out of suicide, the difficult decision to end one's life is made by someone else.

Van Zandt (1993) states that the police are specifically singled out by suicidal individuals as they are the only community agency equipped with firearms and the training to react to potentially lifethreatening situations with accurate and deadly force. Van Zandt adds that, in most instances, the police are only a phone call away.

In addition, the stigma and social taboos associated with suicide can be *absolved* upon being terminated by an *external mechanism* such as the police. As agents of the state, the police officer truly represents a face-less means of ending one's life in a somewhat dignified manner.

Gerberth (1993) elaborates on this position by asserting that the police can symbolically represent the social conscience. Gerberth notes that, at times, suicidal individuals feel guilty about things that are real or imagined. Police officers traditionally and symbolically represent law and order within society. A guilt-ridden, suicidal individual may enter into an interaction with the police in an attempt to seek punishment that may include death.

In other instances, the suicidal individual may not have the determination to end his or her own life. In these cases, the suicidal individual cannot “pull the trigger” and, therefore, must seek assistance in accomplishing his or her death. Gerberth cites instances in which apparently armed individuals have confronted the police and were killed. The subsequent police investigations revealed that the assailants knowingly confronted the police with an unloaded or inoperable weapon.

Gerberth adds that suicidal individuals may use hostage-taking incidents to bring about their demise. In these situations, the suicidal individual will adopt a posture of confrontational negotiation with the police. They will often announce their intention to die or make biblical references, particularly to the Book of Revelations and the resurrection. In addition, these individuals may set a deadline for their own death or begin talking about people who are dead, as if they are still alive. In following this course of action the individual accomplishes his or her own self-destruction while going out in a “blaze of glory”. In some instances, this may serve to mitigate the actions of the suicidal individual while placing the police officer’s decision to use deadly force under scrutiny and possibly, public contempt.

## **Conclusion**

In today’s contemporary society, factors promoting suicide may include a general state of community demoralization or fragmentation, permissive social attitudes towards suicide and even media attention to celebrity suicides. Additional facilitating factors include isolation from a supportive network, the suicide of role models or peers (television and films icons), unemployment, and an environment that facilitates suicide such as the availability of firearms (Suicide,1994:12).

In this regard, the government and the media share a key role in shaping public attitudes and in facilitating public education. There is a need for further education regarding the pitfalls of substance abuse and a need to reduce the stigma attached to seeking treatment for depression and suicidal tendencies. This study has revealed that a significant portion of suicidal individuals had been under the influence of alcohol or drugs which likely further intensified their negative interaction with the police.

In addition, there must be a greater awareness placed upon the training of both police recruits and in-service personnel regarding those verbal and tactical skills associated with suicide intervention. Nonlethal compliance tools such as the net gun, glue gun and the bean-bag projectile should also be considered for deployment in field. Finally, police personnel must be made aware of the dynamics and frequency of victim-precipitated events and the phenomenon of suicide by cop.

Nonetheless, these findings illustrate the complexities that surround police use of deadly force and how individual officers are 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.

Sources: Parent, Richard B. (1996) *Aspects Of Police Use Of Deadly Force In British Columbia: The Phenomenon Of Victim-Precipitated Homicide*. Masters Thesis. Simon Fraser University.