

CASE REPORT

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Police Officers who Commit Suicide by Cop: A Clinical Study with Analysis

ABSTRACT: Suicide by cop has become a familiar topic among members of law enforcement, mental health professionals, and the general public. This paper presents two cases where police officers chose to commit suicide by getting other police officers to kill them. The two police officers studied, by examination of closed case files, were found to be similar to civilians who committed suicide by cop on several demographic (gender, age, history of mental illness, and suicide attempts), and situational (stress factors, trigger) variables. The cases help us to understand possible motives and management for individuals who choose to end their life in this manner.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, suicide by cop, police-assisted suicide, victim-precipitated homicide, suicide, police

Suicide by cop is a phenomenon which has received increasing attention in the past decade. Wolfgang (1) was the first to describe instances of victim precipitated homicide; however, it was Geberth (2) who first reported cases of individuals who committed suicide by getting a police officer to shoot them. Several definitions of suicide by cop have been offered, each emphasizing different aspects of the incident (2–5). The most recent explication was provided by Pinizzotto et al. (6) who defined suicide by cop as “an act motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s desire to commit suicide that results in a justifiable homicide by a law enforcement officer” (p. 10). Central to all definitions, however, are two major components: (i) the victim provoked a police officer to shoot him/her; and (ii) there is evidence that the subject had suicidal intent. Because of the implications for a police officer following the use of deadly force against a civilian, suicide by cop is a topic considered extremely important in police training (7).

Several studies have analyzed the prevalence and demographic characteristics of persons who commit suicide by cop. For example, Kennedy et al. (8) found that 97% of the victims in their sample were male, 68% were between the ages of 16 and 35, and that the most common immediate trigger for the shooting was the victim pointing or firing a weapon at an officer. In another study, Hutson et al. (3) examined stress factors precipitating suicide by cop incidents. In 39% of their cases, there was evidence of domestic violence, in 20% the victim was despondent over the termination of a relationship, 9% were facing imminent incarceration, and 4% were upset because of loss of employment. In another sample of suicide by cop incidents (9), 22% of the victims had a documented history of mental illness, while other researchers (4) found that 24% had made a prior suicide attempt, 58% had prior suicidal ideation, and 50% showed signs of suicide planning.

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Although there has been a recent increase in research and study on the topic of suicide by cop, there have not been any reports of police officers attempting or committing suicide in this manner. The purpose of this clinical study is to describe two cases in which police officers—one active duty and one retired—committed suicide by cop, and to compare these two individuals to nonpolice officers who choose to die in this manner.

Case Descriptions

Case 1—Active Duty Police Officer

A 36-year-old Caucasian male (A.A.) drove into a local convenience store to obtain gas for his car. He put \$11.75 worth of gasoline in his vehicle and drove off without paying. A civilian followed A.A. and persuaded him to return to pay for the stolen gas. Police officers had already been called to the scene and upon A.A.’s return to the store, they approached him while he was still in his car. He refused to speak to the officers, backed his vehicle up, nearly striking two other officers, and began what turned into a high speed chase. During the chase, A.A. drove recklessly, reaching speeds up to 100 mph, and several times turned off his headlights and turned on a blue strobe light. Deputies attempted to block the vehicle several times, but A.A. managed to elude the roadblocks. The chase ended after about 10 min. When the officer’s approach A.A.’s car, he exited his vehicle with a thermos in one hand and a 0.45 caliber semi-automatic handgun in the other. After he pointed his weapon at an officer, he was fatally shot. It was later determined that A.A.’s gun was not loaded. Inside the thermos were several bags of cocaine which police believed were stolen from the police evidence room.

A.A. had previously served as a sheriff’s deputy for 13 years, but at the time of the incident—and for the prior 5 years—he was an identification and evidence technician for the local police department. On the day of the incident, he was off-duty and was driving a police department van with the police decals removed. It is not clear whether he was the one who removed the decals. The van and A.A.’s use of the blue strobe light led officers to believe that the suspect they were chasing was indeed a police officer. Of

importance is that all local police officers were allowed to get free gas directly across the street from where A.A. stole it, which suggests his motivation for creating the incident.

In the months preceding the deadly encounter, A.A. spoke with his supervisor about his financial hardships: mounting bills, growing debt that was covered with borrowed money, maxed out credit cards, and a re-mortgaged home. Approximately 2 weeks prior to the incident, A.A. told his supervisor that his wife had incurred even more debt and he felt increasingly depressed over the situation. Other police officers who were in contact with A.A. on the day before the shooting did not observe anything remarkable. He had no psychiatric history and had always been in good standing with the police department. Although a toxicology report was positive for cocaine and amphetamines at the time of his death, A.A. had never failed a drug test with the department.

Case 2—Retired Police Officer

B.B.'s wife called the police because she was concerned about the behavior of her 42-year-old husband. The owner of a local pawn shop, B.B. was inside his store drinking heavily and threatening suicide with a gun. Approximately 1 h prior to his wife's calling the police, B.B. called a friend and told him "no one loves me" and threatened to kill himself. When the police arrived at the scene, B.B. was visibly agitated, and was firing a 9 mm pistol at various objects in the store (television, walls, telephone). Several times B.B. placed the gun in his mouth and pointed it at his head. Police entered the shop and began a conversation with B.B., asking him repeatedly to drop the gun. The subject continued to shoot around the store making statements such as, "No one loves an ex-cop"; "Let the cops line up in front of my window and take shots at me"; "Shoot me, please shoot me, I just want to end all of the pain." When B.B. eventually exited the store, he shot the glass out of the front window of the building. He placed the pistol in his mouth, but then pointed the gun at the officers outside the store, wherein he was fatally shot by the police.

B.B. had previously served as an officer for the local sheriff's department for *c.* 16 years. He was injured on the job (sustaining neck and back injuries) and was placed on disability because of difficulty walking, standing, and sitting. Fellow officers and friends said that he became depressed after leaving the sheriff's department and began to drink heavily. B.B. felt helpless about his medical condition and stated to others that he was unable to cope with the chronic pain. Interestingly, the three officers who entered his shop on the day of the incident were friends of B.B. He made several direct demands for the police to shoot him and made statements of his desire to die. The victim had a history of suicidal behavior and several involuntary psychiatric hospitalizations following his injury and subsequent forced retirement. At the time of his death, he had a blood alcohol level of 0.22 in addition to traces of codeine and butalbital.

Discussion

Although suicide is a relatively common cause of death (10), suicide by cop is rare, and police officers engaging in this form of suicide are even more uncommon. The FBI Behavioral Science Unit provided the two cases from a national sample of suicide by cop incidents. The demographic characteristics of the two police officers who committed suicide by cop (see Table 1) are similar to those of nonpolice officers who commit suicide by cop in age (3,5,9), race and gender (3), display of weapons (3), length of incident (3), and psychopathology (9). In the case of A.A., there was no evidence that he had planned the suicide by cop incident and past research has found that 49% of suspects showed no evidence of planning (9). In the case of B.B., he made verbal communications to police officers of his desire to die during the confrontation, and previous research has found that 22% of suspects engage in this behavior (3). Neither of our subjects previously made an actual suicide attempt, behavior consistent with that of civilian suicide by cop subjects (4).

Analyses of these two cases reveal some additional similarities between the police officers and civilians who commit suicide by cop.

TABLE 1—Behavioral and demographic patterns.

Variables	Case 1	Case 2
Time of day	Evening (5 PM–11:59 PM)	Evening (5 PM–11:59 PM)
Law enforcement department	Sheriff's office	Sheriff's office
Number of officers present at scene	4	13
Number of officers that fired weapon at suspect	1	3
Total number of rounds fired	2	5
Incident time from start to end	19.8 min	15 min
Other people injured	No	No
Victim's age	36	42
Victim's gender	Male	Male
Victim's race	Caucasian	Caucasian
Victim's marital status	Married	Married
Negotiator present	No	Yes
Negotiated by whom		Multiple levels of negotiation
Location of start of incident	Gas station	Inside subject's place of business
Location of end of incident	Street	Outside subject's place of business
Location change	Yes	No
Distance of location change	3 miles	
Currently employed	Yes	Yes
Officers known to subject	No	Yes
Suicide note	No	No
Statement regarding desire to die	No	Yes
Statements ordering police to shoot	No	Yes
Statement regarding suicide by cop	No	Yes
Suicidal behavior during incident	No	Yes
Weapon on subject	Yes	Yes
Type of weapon	Unloaded firearm and used his vehicle as a weapon	Unloaded firearm

For example, both incidents took *c.* 17 min from start to finish, consistent with previous findings (3). Both subjects were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the incident (3,5); one study (3) found that 65% of civilians were under the influence during the suicide by cop incident while another study found the prevalence rate of substance use at the time of suicide to be 53% (5). Both subjects appeared to have had social support networks (including friends and/or family) also consistent with previous research which has shown that only 8% of the victims of a suicide by cop incident have no support group (4). These findings suggest that the presence of a social network does not function as a protective factor in this type of suicide as it might in other types of suicide (11,12). And like civilian cases (3,5,9) both of our subjects had weapons on them at the time of the incident; A.A. had an unloaded firearm (and used his vehicle as a weapon) while B.B. had a loaded handgun and had many unloaded firearms available in his store.

Possible motivations for suicide by cop have been proposed by Mohandie and Meloy (13) which include avoiding negative consequences, such as incarceration or a failed relationship, expressing rage and revenge, having an intense need to be in total control of their situation and losing that control, resolving feelings of hopelessness, and drawing attention to an important personal issue. Our two subjects also had these factors in their background. For example, A.A. felt hopeless and angry about his financial situation, while B.B. displayed both physical and psychological decline stemming from the injury he received while on duty. In fact, B.B. made many statements to friends over the years regarding his state of chronic pain and hopelessness, and about his feelings of shame over not being able to perform his duties as an officer.

Although both our subjects had major stress in their lives—as do most all individuals who commit suicide—the question still remains why they chose to commit suicide in this manner rather than taking their lives without third party involvement. Mohandie and Meloy (13) believe that some people may rationalize that while it may be immoral to commit suicide, being killed by someone else resolves the moral problem. We agree with this view, although we know of no major religion which endorses such a moral loophole.

This paper is the first to address the problem of police officers who commit suicide by cop. Police officers, as well as civilians, who commit suicide by cop appear to be similar on most of the characteristics and variables studied. However, none of the existing research is comparative (i.e., suicide by cop vs. use of lethal force

without suicide by cop) so that the specificity of our findings and those of prior studies must be considered. But from what we know at present, it is hard to justify changing any procedures in the prevention and management of suicide by cop incidents if the suicidal subject is a police officer.

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