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Suicide by Cop: Defining a Devastating Dilemma

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What is suicide by cop? Why is it so difficult to measure the extent of this tragic problem on a national basis? What can the law enforcement profession do to reduce occurrences and safeguard its members, as well as the public?

To help answer these questions, an examination of law enforcement crime reporting practices prior to the development of the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program can provide a starting point. In 1927, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) established the UCR Program to enable the law enforcement community to understand and quantify the nature and extent of crime in the United States. For example, what one state reported as an automobile burglary, another recorded as a larceny from an automobile. To remedy this, the IACP developed a system that included standardized definitions of offenses for law enforcement agencies to use when reporting crime statistics. Today, the UCR Program functions under the management of the FBI with support from the IACP and the National Sheriff's Association.

Collection Conundrum

Suicide by cop is not the first phenomenon to arise requiring an amendment to this national reporting process. In the 1980s, law enforcement agencies throughout the United States began to collect information regarding crimes motivated by hate or bias. Once again, the definition of a hate- or bias-motivated crime lacked uniformity when varying jurisdictions attempted to measure the frequency of these acts. In 1990, the UCR Program expanded to include the category of hate crimes. A standardized definition of a hate crime came about through the cooperation of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, along with various human interest groups. A model policy then developed that included recommendations for law enforcement agencies to consider when investigating hate crime and submitting statistics to the UCR Program, which began compiling and

distributing the data to law enforcement via an annual publication. This marked the first time that the program asked law enforcement agencies to examine offenders' motivations for committing a crime.

Although the UCR Program does not capture information on suicides, such reports usually exist at the local law enforcement level. The American Association of Suicidology provides statistics regarding suicidal behavior on a national level. Its most recent publication revealed that 30,622 people committed suicide in 2001.¹ This equates to one person committing suicide every 17 minutes. Males kill themselves four times more frequently than females. Suicide ranks 11th as the cause of death in the United States, while homicide ranks 13th. Because of no official national data on suicide attempts, the association has developed a formula indicating that 25 attempts occur for every suicide death in the nation. Applying this formula revealed the staggering statistic of over 765,550 attempted suicides in 2001.

A 1998 report by the American College of Emergency Physicians examined all deputy involved shootings that occurred in the Los Angeles County, California, Sheriff's Department.² The findings revealed that suicide-by-cop incidents accounted for 11 percent of all deputy-involved shootings and 13 percent of all deputy-involved justifiable homicides. The report concluded that suicide by cop constitutes an actual form of suicide and defined it as "an incident where a suicidal individual intentionally engages in life-threatening and criminal behavior with a lethal weapon or what appears to be a lethal weapon toward law enforcement officers or civilians specifically to provoke officers to shoot the suicidal individual in self-defense or to protect civilians."

A strong relationship may exist between incidents where subjects killed or seriously assaulted law enforcement officers and those where offenders actually intended to commit suicide by deliberately compelling officers to use deadly force.

Although complete statistics are unavailable, the limited ones that do exist beg further study. UCR data show that from 1991 to 2000, 62 offenders who feloniously killed a law enforcement officer committed suicide during the same incident. However, no national statistics have been collected on the number of individuals who committed suicide subsequent to an incident where an officer was killed or assaulted. And, of the 62 cases noted, no data existed that conclusively determined if any of the offenders attacked the officers in an attempt to commit suicide by cop.

Additionally, UCR statistics revealed that law enforcement officers justifiably killed 339 offenders in 2002.³ The program defines justifiable homicide by a law enforcement

officer as “the killing of a felon in the line of duty.”⁴ In these 339 cases, did any of the individuals have the intention of using the officer as a means of committing suicide?

Uniform Definition

Before 1990, the term suicide by cop was not commonly used by the public or the media in reporting law enforcement incidents involving the use of deadly force. Today, however, law enforcement personnel, the media, and the general public frequently employ it. The media has publicized these occurrences, and numerous articles have appeared about them. But, a clear and uniformly accepted definition has yet to surface. Therefore, just as with hate crime, the adoption of a national definition of suicide by cop, criteria to determine what constitutes such acts, and a reporting mechanism to record these incidents must occur to enable the law enforcement community to effectively address the devastation brought about by this phenomenon.

If an offender points an unloaded firearm at a law enforcement officer who, in turn, kills that person, what facts and circumstances must be present and reported to enable agencies to determine the death as a suicide by cop? Did the offender deliberately point a firearm at an officer knowing it was not loaded? Or, was it merely an oversight and the offender meant to kill the officer? Obviously, a situation of this nature needs a thorough investigation to arrive at an accurate determination. To respond effectively to inquiries by the general public and the media, law enforcement administrators must have the tools for defining and measuring the frequency of suicide-by-cop incidents.

For over 15 years, the authors have researched law enforcement’s use of deadly force. A portion of this research examined cases that possessed similar elements indicating a possible suicide-by-cop incident. From their research, the authors have developed a definition of suicide by cop based on UCR guidelines. They also have established the criteria for recognizing and reporting these incidents. Their definition of suicide by cop is “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.” In addition, to better understand the magnitude of the suicide-by-cop phenomenon, law enforcement agencies must examine, investigate, and collect data regarding attempted suicide-by-cop incidents. Therefore, the authors have defined an attempt as “an act motivated in whole or in part by the offender’s desire to commit suicide that was intended to result in the death of the offender, but did not. This includes both the use of deadly force and the use of less lethal force by law enforcement.”

Investigative Procedures

As with any other serious crime, law enforcement agencies must thoroughly investigate incidents suspected of meeting the criteria for a suicide by cop or attempted suicide by cop. A two-tier procedure can help agencies identify and investigate these incidents.

1) Reporting Procedure: The officer on the scene of an apparent suicide-by-cop or attempted suicide-by-cop incident forms an initial determination that the motive of suicide is suspected and notes this on the original report.

2) Classifying Procedure: An officer or unit with expertise in the use of deadly force incidents renders the final determination of whether a suicide-by-cop or attempted suicide-by-cop incident has occurred only after a full investigation is completed and the facts and circumstances have revealed the probable motivation of the offender.

Responding Officer's Responsibilities

In addition to complying with established department directives regarding the use of deadly force by law enforcement personnel, the responding officer should include in the initial offense report specific elements possibly present at the scene. These involve

- statements made by the offender, including the names of witnesses to the statements;
- type of weapon possessed by the offender;
- offender's specific actions that resulted in the use of deadly force;
- conduct that the officer deemed bizarre or inappropriate on the part of the offender; and
- circumstances indicating that the offender's motivation may have been suicide.

In many cases, the offender's motivation may not be readily apparent in the initial reporting of the incident, thereby requiring follow-up investigation. Most important, some crime scenes may not contain any of these elements, and the motivation of the offender will remain unknown.

Devastating Consequences of Suicide by Cop

Unknown to the officer at the time of the shooting, the offender brandished an unloaded handgun. The officer saw the weapon and commanded the offender to drop it. The offender turned in the direction of the officer and drew his arm up from his side, pointing the weapon at the officer. Faced with this dangerous threat, the officer fired two shots

from his weapon. The rounds took effect, and the offender fell to the ground and died. On-scene witnesses supported all of the actions by the offender and the officer.

When the media reported the incident, the stories stressed only the offender's weapon being unloaded and failed to describe the offender's behavior that made him appear to the officer as a clear and immediate danger. During the extended investigation and numerous media articles, the officer stated that he felt "let down by his department and 'villainized' by the media."

A complete, detailed, and expedient investigation of this case may have resulted in a more timely and accurate account. Most important, it may have prevented the inappropriate and harmful effects experienced by the officer.

Second-Tier Responsibilities

Whether an agency classifies an offense as a suicide by cop or attempted suicide by cop rests with the second tier of the investigative process, the final decision-making body. Therefore, those making the ultimate determination must have special training in deadly force matters and suicidal behaviors. Whereas the responding officer identifies any indications that the offense was motivated by the offender's desire to commit suicide, the second-tier investigating officer or unit must sift carefully through the facts and circumstances using stringent criteria to determine if the incident probably was motivated by the offender's will to commit suicide, including, but not limited to, such items as

- notes or recent correspondence, such as e-mails and other computer files, left at the scene, in the residence of the offender, or at any other place the offender frequented;
- detailed and verbatim statements from family members, friends, and associates, as well as follow-up statements of witnesses;
- other pertinent investigative facts or evidence, including that from in-car or security cameras;
- forensic evidence pertinent to the investigation (e.g., If the offender used a firearm, was it loaded with proper ammunition or capable of firing ammunition?); and
- personal history of the offender, including medical and psychiatric information, credit reports; insurance policies; employment records; history of significant relationships; prior suicides of family members, prior attempted suicides, particularly attempts that involved confrontations with law enforcement officers; and criminal history, including sentencing information, presentence reports, psychiatric evaluations, and prison records. In addition

to recording specific acts committed by the offender, second-tier investigations also should focus on the subject's motivation for committing them. The listed criteria include indicators that can help establish motivations and behavior patterns of the offender.

Stress and depression often are precursors to suicide. Their causes can vary from person to person; however, stress and depression frequently relate to work, financial issues, changes in relationships, and patterns of living. With this in mind, second-tier investigating officers should include a full retrospective of the offender's background and behavior, as well as information obtained from relatives, friends, associates, coworkers, neighbors, and police records. Each possesses unique perspectives and different information that may shed some light on the potential motive of the offender. Information should include potentially relevant statements made by the offender, such as "I can't stand it anymore"; "You'll be better off without me"; "I won't see you anymore"; "I want to die"; "I want to be with (a deceased loved one)"; and "I can't live without drugs." Other potential indicators include additional verbalized intentions indicating an interest in self-destruction; longings or interest in death; prior attempted suicides; prior medical or psychiatric care; death of a spouse, significant other, or friend; substantial loss of funds or outstanding and pressing debts; divorce; pending or actual loss of a job, including retirement; imminent arrest of the individual or of a close friend or associate; and health problems. Because individuals sometimes commit suicide on or around anniversary dates, officers also should review what transpired in the offender's life the year before the incident. Finally, they should ask all interviewees, "What else should I have asked you to better understand the individual?"

In some instances, insufficient facts and circumstances will fail to conclusively corroborate or refute the suicidal motivation of the offender, thereby not substantiating a motivation of suicide as the cause for the offender's death. In these cases, second-tier investigating officers should consider the incident as unsubstantiated and not classify it as a suicide by cop or attempted suicide by cop. No single behavior or piece of physical evidence usually will suffice to establish the motive of the offender. Instead, investigating officers must take into account the totality of the physical evidence and behavioral indicators collectively to obtain an accurate assessment.

Potential Indicators of Suicide

- Verbalized intentions of self-destruction
- Longings or interest in death
- Prior attempted suicides

- Prior medical or psychiatric care
- Death of a spouse, significant other, or friend
- Substantial loss of funds or outstanding and pressing debts
- Divorce
- Pending or actual loss of a job, including retirement
- Imminent arrest of the individual or a close friend/associate
- Health problems

Case Studies

In a previous study by the authors, 12 offenders reported making an attempt to commit suicide prior to their assaulting or attempting to assault a law enforcement officer. In their current study, 21 offenders indicated that they had contemplated suicide, and 10 offenders advised that they actually had attempted suicide prior to the incident.⁶ Six offenders reported that they had attempted to force a law enforcement officer to kill them at some point during the incident. A thorough review of the facts and circumstances surrounding three of these alleged attempted suicide-by-cop cases follows wherein the offender survived. This examination should provide a better understanding of these acts as seen through the eyes of the offender, as well as the officer. Each discloses specific behaviors exhibited by the offender and the interpretation of them by the officer. The cases also include the facts and circumstances provided by the second-tier or follow-up investigation, along with the determinations made regarding their classification as attempted suicide-by-cop incidents.

Case #1: The Officer's Perspective

Two officers were dispatched to an apartment building in response to a woman yelling for help. Upon arriving at the location, they observed a female standing on the front steps. She waved them inside and then entered the apartment, leaving the door open behind her. As the officers approached the doorway, they could hear a man yelling and then saw him standing in the kitchen area. As the male observed the officers enter the apartment, he produced a large butcher knife. He held the blade of the knife firmly against his stomach with both hands and appeared highly intoxicated, agitated, and angry. The officers drew their service weapons and ordered the man to put down the knife. The offender responded by stating, “[Expletive] you, kill me!” The officers gave several more verbal commands, which the man ignored. He turned toward the kitchen counter, put the handle of the knife against it with the blade touching his stomach, and grabbed the counter with both hands

as if to thrust himself fully onto the knife. The officers attempted to talk with the offender who responded by turning around and slicing himself severely on his forearm, bleeding profusely. The officers repeatedly asked him to drop the knife. One officer aimed his service weapon at the offender while the other pointed a chemical mace container at him. Still armed with the knife, the offender advanced closer to the officers. This caused the officers to retreat to a position where they attempted to use the kitchen door frame as cover.

As this was occurring, a backup unit arrived on the scene. The offender repeatedly told the officers to shoot him while continually ignoring commands to drop the knife. From a distance of approximately 12 feet, he raised the knife in a threatening manner and charged the officers. One officer fired two .45-caliber rounds from his service weapon. Both struck the offender in the chest but seemed not to have any effect, except to make him angrier. The officer then fired two more rounds, at which point his service weapon jammed. One of these rounds struck the offender in his hand, passing through it and lodging in his groin. The second round hit him in the chest. The offender continued to charge both officers as they retreated down the hallway and out the front door. As the offender arrived at the front door, he received another .45-caliber gunshot wound to the groin fired by the second officer. He dropped the knife and backed up against a wall inside the doorway, but remained on his feet. The officers entered the premises, removed the knife, took the offender into custody, and called for an ambulance. The offender was transported to the hospital and survived the incident. The officer who fired the initial four rounds stated, "It was my life or his, and it became his. I was upset that this guy put us in a position where I had to do something like this. I was upset with the fact that this guy kept pushing the issue and had made the decision himself, where I didn't have a decision."

Case #1: The Offender's Perspective

In the morning, the offender had a serious argument with his wife, one that would only escalate if he remained in the apartment. The previous day he had a disagreement with several friends that resulted in a fistfight. He stated that "the argument with my wife increased the pressure on me." He left the apartment and went to several bars. He drank liquor for approximately 7 hours and got extremely intoxicated. A relative helped him home where he and his wife continued to argue.

While standing in the kitchen, he observed two police officers enter the apartment. The mere presence of the officers further enraged him. When asked later if he wanted the officers to end his life for him, the offender said, "Quickly, I figured when they seen the

knife that would have been enough. It would have been all over. But, it didn't end up that way." When asked about specific thoughts during the confrontation with the officers, the offender stated, "I never thought about suicide. Never in my wildest years. I'd take a beating before I'd commit suicide. But, at the time and at that point, the pressure was so great; the common reality wasn't there anymore. It was gone. I didn't care. I didn't care about nothing that was standing before me. I just wanted out." After advancing on the police officers, he was shot five times. Three bullets struck him in the chest, one in the groin, and one passed through his hand and struck him in the groin. The offender stated that the first several rounds that struck him "felt like bee stings" and only tended to enrage him. But, by the time he reached the front door of the apartment building, he became incapacitated. While being transported to the hospital, the offender told emergency medical technicians, "Let me die; don't try to save me." He pled guilty to several counts of assault on a police officer while armed and was sentenced to a short prison term.

Case #1: Second-Tier Investigation

The facts and circumstances of the incident were corroborated by interviewing the offender, witnesses, and family members. The investigation revealed the following points:

- The offender possessed a weapon capable of inflicting serious bodily injury or death.
- He used the weapon to seriously injure himself. • He attacked the officers with the weapon.
- During the attack, he demanded that the officers kill him.
- He told emergency medical technicians that he wanted to die.
- Interviewed by investigators at a later date, he confirmed that he was attempting to commit suicide. Investigation of this incident demonstrated that the elements of an attempted suicide by cop were present. Therefore, the case would merit the appropriate classification as an attempted suicide by cop.

Case #2: The Officer's Perspective

An officer learned that an offender wanted on a misdemeanor warrant for writing bad checks was at the storage lot of a private towing company. The officer responded to the location, properly identified the offender, and placed him under arrest. As the officer attempted to handcuff the offender, a struggle ensued. The offender gained possession of the officer's service weapon and immediately fired one round, which struck the officer in

the chest. The officer attempted to flee the area, but the offender fired four more times, wounding him in the thigh, arm, leg, and back. The officer fell to the ground.

The offender ran to the front of the premises where he previously had parked a motor vehicle occupied by his girlfriend and her small child. As the offender neared the vehicle, a second police officer, with his service weapon drawn, came around the corner of the building. The officer repeatedly told the offender to drop his gun. The offender responded by placing it in his mouth. Shortly thereafter, the offender removed the gun from his mouth and pointed it at the officer who continued to repeat his earlier commands. Upon hearing numerous sirens converging on the crime scene, the offender dropped the handgun and was arrested without further incident. The first officer was transported to the hospital and eventually recovered from his wounds.

Case #2: The Offender's Perspective

The offender went to the storage lot to retrieve his motor vehicle when he was approached by the officer. He felt relieved when the officer advised him that his arrest concerned a misdemeanor because he believed that authorities in another jurisdiction wanted him for a felony parole violation. He willingly went along with the officer because he assumed that he could post bond for the lesser offense. He stated that he had no intention of harming the officer, but, when he asked the officer to let him go to the front of the premises and tell his girlfriend where he would be taken, the officer refused. This made him angry because he had been under a lot of pressure. He recently had lost his job and had fallen behind on his bills. As a result, he had moved out of his apartment and in with a friend. He had incurred a lot of debt, and his car had been repossessed. Further, he had violated his probation by leaving the jurisdiction where he had been convicted. He left the area believing that his parole was going to be revoked for failing to make restitution as ordered by the court. His financial problems had created a "snowball effect," and he felt like he was in a "no-win" situation. He said that the arresting officer seemed "not to care about me," which caused him to become very angry.

After taking the officer's weapon and shooting him five times, the offender attempted to flee. He intended to escape the shooting scene, but encountered the second officer who pointed a handgun in his direction and began yelling commands. The offender ignored the officer's command to drop the weapon, describing the confrontation as a "stand off" and stating that he felt the officer would shoot him if he complied. At that point, the offender knew that he could not escape the scene. He was very confused and later said, "I knew the officer out back was going to die. I thought I have nothing to live for now. I don't want to spend the rest of my life in jail or the death penalty. I've thrown everything

away that I've tried so hard to build, and I put the gun in my mouth. And, I was going to commit suicide at that point." The offender realized that his girlfriend's small child could see him. The child and her mother were both crying and asking him not to commit suicide. The offender stated that he could not bring himself to do it with a small child looking on. The offender removed the gun from his mouth and pointed it at the police officer who still was telling him to drop the weapon. The offender said, "I was convinced that as soon as I went to do that, I would be shot. But, to this day, he didn't shoot me, and I don't know why." The offender started walking backward when he heard numerous sirens closing in on the scene. He stated that he felt an escape would be impossible so he laid his handgun on the ground and surrendered.

Case #2: Second-Tier Investigation

The facts and circumstances of the incident were corroborated by interviewing the offender and witnesses. The investigation revealed the following information:

- The offender possessed a deadly weapon capable of inflicting serious bodily injury or death.
- He used the weapon to attempt to kill a police officer and flee the scene.
- While attempting to flee, the offender was confronted by another police officer.
- The offender stated that he wanted to end his life. He placed the gun in his mouth, but, before he could squeeze the trigger, his girlfriend convinced him not to commit the act.
- He reported that he was unable to take his own life in the presence of the child and opted to point a loaded handgun at the police officer. These actions were consistent with an individual who wanted to commit suicide.
- When questioned, the offender said that he wanted the police officer to kill him at that moment. This was a very quick decision made by the offender when his hopes of effecting an escape had decreased greatly.
- When the offender's chance of escape further diminished by the approach of additional police units, he just as quickly changed his mind and decided that he wanted to live. He then surrendered. Evidence of ambivalence often occurs in both completed and attempted suicides. "Hesitation cuts," surface wounds, and ingesting insufficient volumes of medication or poison all commonly occur. In this case, both the offender's decision to commit suicide by cop and his desire to live took place within an extremely brief period of time, each triggered by the circumstances of a quickly unfolding series of events.

This represented a complex case. The offender initially considered only fleeing from the first officer. However, when escape became impossible, he wanted to end his life. Without statements from both the offender and his girlfriend, investigators could not have determined or even recognized that this would constitute a properly classified attempted suicide-by-cop incident.

Case #3: The Officer's Perspective

Two officers effected a traffic stop of an offender speeding and operating a vehicle in a reckless manner. One of the officers knew the offender as he had arrested him several months before on another traffic violation. An NCIC check revealed that the offender was wanted on a felony warrant in another jurisdiction. The officers searched the offender, handcuffed him behind his back, and placed him in a transport car equipped with a cage. While in the prisoner compartment, the offender managed to slip one leg through the handcuffs and was straddling them with one hand in front of his body and the other in the rear. Having kept the offender under direct observation, the arresting officer called for a patrol wagon.

Upon arrival of the wagon, officers placed leg shackles on the offender and once again handcuffed him behind his back. They transported him to a central cell block facility where numerous other transport vehicles and police officers were present. After securing his gun belt containing his service weapon in the trunk of his police vehicle as required by regulation, the arresting officer opened the rear door of the patrol wagon. The offender asked the officer a question regarding extradition procedures. As the officer finished answering the question, the offender produced a .22-caliber revolver. The offender immediately fired the weapon, which struck the officer between the eyes. The officer managed to maintain his balance and attempted to wrestle the handgun away from the offender. During the struggle, the offender shot the officer once more in the hand. The officer experienced difficulty seeing because blood from his forehead wound dripped into his eyes. As the officer attempted to retreat and seek cover, the offender fired an additional round, which struck him in the back. The officer became disoriented and fell to the pavement. The offender then exited the patrol wagon, and multiple police officers fired at him, with no rounds taking effect. The offender retreated to the wagon where he remained for several minutes. He eventually emerged, laid his weapon on the ground, and surrendered without further incident. The wounded officer was transported to the hospital and recovered from his injuries.

Case #3: The Offender's Perspective

On the night of the incident, the offender intended to commit suicide because he was depressed. The main cause for his depression was an abortion his girlfriend recently underwent. He believed that he was the father of the child, and the abortion made him feel like a murderer. After illegally obtaining a handgun, he drove to a public park to kill himself. On the way to the park, the officers stopped and arrested him. After being placed in the back of the cage car, he slipped his legs through the handcuffs. At that point, he intended to remove the handgun concealed in the front of his pants and kill himself. The arresting officer noticed the handcuff maneuver, advised the offender to stop, and continued to directly observe him until the police wagon arrived. When that happened, officers shackled his legs and handcuffed his hands behind his back. Then, they transported him to a central cell block facility where he was to be detained.

While en route, the offender again slipped his legs through the handcuffs and positioned his hands in front of him. He removed the handgun from his pants and attempted to kill himself by placing the handgun under his chin and pulling the trigger. He pulled the trigger of the handgun three times and each time the handgun failed to fire. After arriving at the cell block facility, the arresting officer opened the rear door of the wagon. The offender raised the handgun and aimed for the officer's shoulder. He did this hoping the officer would shoot him. The officer moved as the weapon discharged, resulting in the round striking the officer in the forehead. The offender did not recall firing two additional shots. The officer fell to the pavement, and the offender approached him with a handkerchief in one hand and the handgun in the other. He intended to render aid to the officer. He stated, "Like I said, once I realized what was going on, I kind of snapped back into reality and when I realized this man was hurt, and I tried to render aid, I started coming to my senses more or less, and that's when I discovered that I was holding a handgun." Other officers began to fire multiple rounds at the offender, with none taking effect. He reentered the wagon for a brief period of time and then exited it, laid the handgun on the ground, and was taken into custody.

Case #3: Second-Tier Investigation

The facts and circumstances of the incident were corroborated by interviewing the offender, the officer, and witnesses. The investigation revealed the following aspects:

- At his trial, the offender's lawyers initially entered a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity. Subsequent examination of the offender by several psychiatrists determined that the offender was mentally competent to stand trial.

- The offender changed his plea to not guilty. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to a lengthy prison term.
- The offender did not take the witness stand in his own defense. A suicide-by-cop defense was not asserted.
- Several years after the conviction, the offender alleged an attempted suicide by cop had taken place.
- An examination of the forensic evidence reports indicated that the offender was armed with a 5-shot revolver. The report noted that the offender fired three rounds from the revolver that discharged. The offender then attempted to fire two additional rounds that failed to discharge. It was at that point that he surrendered the weapon.
- Subsequent investigation and examination of statements given by the offender to other inmates revealed the offender's true motive for his criminal acts. After shooting the officer, it was the offender's intent to commandeer a police vehicle and effect an escape. Other than the offender's claim that he was attempting to commit suicide, no facts or circumstances corroborated his assertion. This incident would not meet the necessary elements to be classified as an attempted suicide by cop.

Conclusion

Presently, the depth or breadth of the suicide-by-cop problem remains unknown. Two reasons for this exist:

- 1) the lack of both a clear definition and established reporting procedures and
- 2) the immediate removal of suicide attempts from the criminal process and placement within the mental health arena, causing the law enforcement investigation to cease and, thus, preventing an agency from identifying a potential threat to its officers, their families, or other members of the community. The recognition and proper classification of these incidents will raise the awareness of the law enforcement community to develop the necessary tools to deal appropriately with issues of training, response, media involvement, and officer safety.

As with all crime and incident data, this information can serve individual departments and agencies by clearly identifying these situations; reporting them to their local communities; and responding to the training, tactical, and emotional needs of the officers involved. Additionally, incorporating the data into the Uniform Crime Reporting Program would provide reliable statistics for use by law enforcement personnel, criminologists,

sociologists, mental health practitioners, legislators, municipal planners, members of the media, and the general public.

Suicide-by-cop incidents are painful and damaging experiences for the surviving families, the communities, and all law enforcement professionals. Accurate and timely reporting of the true facts of such incidents cannot alter the reality of the tragedies, but may lessen some degree of pain for the innocent survivors.

Endnotes

1. American Association of Suicidology, Suicide Data Page: 2001, prepared by John L. McIntosh, September 26, 2003; retrieved on August 27, 2004, from <http://www.suicidology.org/associations/1045/files/2001/datapg.pdf>
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5. Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *In the Line of Fire* (Washington, DC, 1997).
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This article is an excerpt from a 5-year study on officer safety that the authors recently completed. *Violent Encounters: Felonious Assaults on America's Law Enforcement Officers* will be available in the near future.