



SIEC ALERT

SIEC ALERT is a quick reference guide to some of the newest resources in the field of suicide prevention.

Contact us if you'd like to be added to our free mailing list, or if you have an idea for a future topic!
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SUICIDE BY COP

"Officer,

It was a plan. I'm sorry to get you involved. I just needed to die. Please send my letters and break the news slowly to my family and let them know that I had to do this. And I love them very much. I'm sorry for getting you involved. Please remember that this was all my doing. You had no way of knowing.

Moe Pergament" (Valencia-Stincelli, 1998: 1)

What is Suicide by Cop?

"Suicide by Cop" is a police colloquialism for a form of victim-precipitated homicide in which a suicidal individual engages in calculated, life-threatening and criminal behaviour in order to compel the police to use deadly force. In these killings, the initiator is a direct, positive precipitator of his or her own death (Parent, 1998: 22, 1998b: 4).

Usually, officers are responding to perceived threats to themselves. In some instances, however, the initiator will not actually put police officers in danger, but will place other people at risk by threatening to hurt them or by taking them hostage (20/20, 1998; Van Zandt, 1993; Lewan, 1998; and Geberth, 1993). The initiator will deliberately escalate the conflict to such an extent that the officers see no other choice but to hurt the victim. In some cases, these conflicts end in death.

Incidence

The occurrence of suicide by cop is a contentious issue. This is a relatively new area of research and there have been no national studies to substantiate this phenomenon. However, results from two regional studies have recently been published.

Hutson and colleagues reviewed all files of shootings involving police officers investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department from 1987-1997. 46 (11%) of 437 cases met the study definition of suicide by cop. The largest number of cases occurred in 1997. 39% of cases involved domestic violence. 70% of shootings occurred within 30 minutes of the arrival of police officers (Hutson et al, 1998: 667-668.)

In a Canadian study, Parent found, from 1980-1994, police and RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) officers in British Columbia were confronted by a potentially lethal threat on 58 different occasions. In twenty-seven of these cases, twenty-eight people were killed. Roughly half of these deaths were determined to be victim-precipitated homicides (Parent, 1998b: 2).

Characteristics of Initiators

- In the cases studied by Hutson et al, 98% of initiators were male (Hutson et al, 1998: 665).
- **Initiators put a lot of thought and preparation into their own deaths (Van Zandt, 1993; Power Phone Editor's Note, 1998).**
- A 1988 study by Harris showed initiators were:
 - ▲ Under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
 - ▲ Between the ages of 21 and 35 years.
 - ▲ In possession of handguns or knives.
 (Valencia-Stincelli, 1998: 3)

The literature shows that in nearly every case, the weapon used by the initiator was either not loaded or not working properly; or it was not even real. In a majority of cases, the subject used a toy gun, and thus had no real intention of hurting others - just themselves (Valencia-Stincelli, 1998: 1).

Why Suicide by Cop?

Some of the reasons that people engage in this behaviour include:

- Victims are apparently looking for a "manly" or "macho" way to die (Van Zandt, 1993).
- *Victims want to ensure their death. They single out police officers because not only are they equipped with firearms, but they also have extensive training to react to potentially life-threatening situations with accurate and deadly force (Lewan, 1998: 2).*
- By forcing the police to kill them, victims may avoid the stigma and social taboos associated with suicide (Geberth, 1993: 105).

SIEC thanks Laurence Marks, B.A., B.Ed. and Deana Franssen, M.Ed., Program Co-ordinator, Suicide Prevention Training Programs, for their work in compiling this issue of SIEC Alert.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

The Impact of Suicide by Cop Incidents

"I experienced so many emotions, but the most prevalent was anger. I was angry with the woman for forcing me into this situation. I was angry with the resident who knew she was armed, ... and still told me nothing."
(Valencia-Stincelli, 1998: 1)

The reactions police officers experience after a suicide by cop incident are closely related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Valencia-Stincelli, 1998: 2, Brown, 1998). Officers have reported PTSD symptoms ranging from:

- anger to depression
- resentment and disbelief
- preoccupation with the incident
- nightmares
- anxiety to hypersensitivity
- diminished self confidence
- changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- feeling a loss of control
- memory difficulties

An Example

■ On October 8, 1990, a 40 year-old male was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer, working part-time as a uniformed security officer. The subject had entered a closed restaurant, brandishing a handgun. Upon seeing the uniformed officer, he pointed his gun at him. The officer responded by drawing his firearm and subsequently killed the subject. It was later learned that the subject's gun was unloaded (Parent, 1998b: 12).

Suggested Interventions

Suicide by cop incidents can unfold very rapidly and it may seem that the use of deadly force is the only option. However, Parent and Van Zandt both suggest training and intervention strategies that can help defuse these situations, including:

- ▲ Awareness of the frequency and nature of suicide by cop (Parent, 1998b:13).
- ▲ Rigorous training of police officers in suicide prevention, especially training that will help them identify suicidal cues when dealing with an armed individual (Parent, 1998b: 13).
- ▲ Responding in a low-key and non-dramatic manner (Zandt, 1993: 29).
- ▲ Using the option of a tactical withdrawal. Such a withdrawal can help to neutralize the intentions of the suicidal individual and it can give police the time to formulate the best response plan (Parent, 1998b: 13).

Internet Sources:

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Lewan, Todd. (April 27, 1998). Suicide by cop: Two victims, one alive, one dead. *The Salt Lake Tribune*. pp. 1-5.
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'Suicide by cop' makes victims of both sides. (1998, June 8). *The Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, pp.1-9.
<http://lubbockonline.com/stories/060898/LB0664.shtml>

Valencia-Stincelli, Rebecca. (1998). Suicide by cop. *Interviews and Interrogations Institute*.
<http://iiiconfess.com/SBC.html>

Print Resources:

Photocopies are available from SIEC. (Cost per article: \$6.00 plus postage & handling. Prepayment is not necessary. Please use SIEC # when ordering)

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