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**Suicide by Cop:
The Victimization of the Officer Involved**

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**An Administrative Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

One of the many issues facing today's police officer is the subject regarding a phenomenon known as "Suicide by Cop" and the "victimization" of any officer who is involved in an incident of this type. Officers involved in this type of incident generally find that they are left to deal with the psychological effects by themselves and are repeatedly treated like they have done something wrong by their departments, family, media, and society as a whole. The author hopes to gain a better understanding of the root of this problem through personal interviews and the distribution of a questionnaire. From the research, the author found that most departments address the issue of officer involved shootings, but do not address or recognize the difference between them and Suicide by Cop. The author also gained a proper perspective on what departments should do to assist their officers in these situations by interviewing a mental health professional and an officer who was involved in an incident of this type. If departments are not prepared to deal with this issue, then it can create a situation where a police officer could no longer be fit for duty. An officer might have trouble performing his/her job because of the psychological stress and emotions that can result because someone decides to use the officer as a tool for their own demise.

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 1997, nineteen-year-old, Moshe Pergament was spotted by a police officer from Nassau County, New York, driving erratically and was stopped. As the officer approached the vehicle, Pergament exits his car with what appears to be a firearm. Despite repeated orders from the officer to drop the weapon, Pergament continues to advance. The officer has no choice but to fire his weapon to stop Pergament who is struck by three bullets and dies at the scene. Only later does the officer learn that the weapon brandished by Pergament was a toy gun. When detectives arrived on the scene they found an envelope on the front seat addressed "To the officer who shot me." Inside the envelope on a Hallmark card was a written note: "Officer, it was a plan. I'm sorry to get you involved. I just needed to die. Please remember that this was all my doing. You had no way of knowing." Every time an incident such as this happens, there are victims on both sides of the gun. Suicide by Cop is a growing problem in law enforcement and causes adverse psychological effects on the officer involved. This can adversely affect the officer's future in law enforcement and therefore is of great concern and relevance. The purpose of this research paper will be to examine the effects this incident can have on the officer involved and examine what his/her department does to assist in this stressful situation. The research method chosen for this subject will include interviews with psychologists and officers involved with shootings. The intended outcome of this research is to better formulate an understanding of what the officer goes through after this type of incident and consider what police departments can do to assist in the mental and physical health of an officer after a Suicide by Cop incident occurs. The hypothesis is that departments are not prepared to deal with an incident of Suicide by Cop and they have not set appropriate guidelines for dealing with the problem. The research will further demonstrate that often the department will simply

deal with this situation by taking the officer's firearm for evidence purposes and send him/her home to deal with this problem by themselves. A licensed psychologist will be able to describe some of the issues that the officer has to deal with including: depression, divorce, suicide, and job loss. The research will benefit law enforcement by establishing the psychological effects that Suicide by Cop can have on the officer involved and determine what guidelines a department should follow to assist their officer and department after this event.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A majority of the literature located by the author on this subject outlines the varied events of this type that have happened over the years. However, the author was unable to locate literature that addresses the issues that affect the victim officer after a Suicide by Cop induced encounter. Clinton R. Van Zandt (Supervisory Special Agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation), gives a brief overview of the fatal situations that were caused by 38 year old William Griffin (1981), 24 year old Randy Kutej (1985) and Keith Haigler and his wife Kate Haigler (1982). A review of this information does appear to show a rudimentary profile of the type of person that might resort to this type of behavior. Van Zandt (no date) states that the individuals usually come from a low social and economic background, and they have been shown to use aggression to solve their problems. It is also suggested that there is a general history of depression that could have resulted in previous unsuccessful suicide attempts. Robert Parent (1999), of the Delta Police Department, states that individuals predisposed to suicide have, in many situations, chosen to confront police with imaginary, inferior, or real weapons in order to facilitate their own death. Parent (1999) further states that it appears that alcohol, substance abuse, mental disorders and suicidal tendencies have also added to or aided this issue. An article by Louise Pyers (no date) addresses the affects this type of incident could have on the

officer who is involved. Pyers discusses that the officers could display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which could adversely affect the officer's ability to perform their job duties. Some officers could experience hypervigilance, fear, anger, inability to sleep, and depression. Second guessing on the part of the officer is extremely common. J. Nick Marzella (1999) submitted a paper to the Suicide and Law Enforcement Conference in 1999 that addresses the short and long term affects that "suicide by cop" could have on the officer involved. Marzella also addresses the impact this has on the officer's sense of self, family life, relationships and job functions. In one of the incidents discussed in this paper an officer talks about how he did not want anyone around him for the first couple of days following the incident and during this time he experienced flashbacks of the incident. The officer further discusses how he became more paranoid as the weeks and months passed to the extent that he always had to check and make sure the doors were locked and he had a security system installed at his residence. The officer also discusses how he "felt like a spring wound tightly ready to explode" and further discusses how his increasing irritability culminated in him making an inappropriate comment to his twelve year old son out of anger. Inability to sleep also plagued this officer to the point that for the first couple of weeks after the incident he was only able to get two or three hours of sleep, six months after the event he was up to four of five hours of sleep, but he used to get at least seven hours per night. In another case study, the officer talks about having flashbacks when he drives by the scene of the incident and feeling anger towards the subject with the thought of "why did you do this to me; why did you choose us." This officer also noted that since the incident he is more cautious on the job, especially when he is unable to see a suspect's hands. This officer's family was also affected by the incident and for a long time refused to discuss it out of fear of him becoming upset. They were also afraid of a repeat of this type of

incident and attempted to get him to retire. His interpersonal relationships with people outside of law enforcement were also affected because he thought that all they would want to talk about was the incident in spite of his reluctance to do so. The available literature was similar in the idea that this issue appears to be a growing problem in the law enforcement community. Dean Scoville (1998) discusses that taking another person's life can be a debilitating psychological event to some officers. Scoville (1998) discusses an officer who was involved in a shooting that developed an excessive interest in suicide. The article entitled "Suicide by Cop" (in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin), discusses some of the concerns dealing with police stress. The article suggests that an awareness of this type of police shooting remains critical for officers and police psychologists, in order to aid in dealing with the stress associated if forced to deal with this important situation. This article also briefly discusses the civil litigation that will accompany such an event and that terming it "suicide by cop" can sometimes look like a self-serving attempt to excuse the shooting and could cause negative feelings in the community. In an article Larry Brubaker (2002) advises that most officers felt that they were well trained to deal with the situation that occurred, but most officers also stated that they were unprepared for the psychological impact the incident had on them. Most of the officers also felt their fellow officers supported them after the shooting, but they were upset with the administration and their departments. They felt that the administration was more concerned about the image of the department than they were about the well-being of the victimized officer. Hal Brown (1998) asserts that no matter how reassuring your department is after the incident, he believes that the officer should see some type of counselor that specializes in stress. Brown states that "suicide by cop" is a critical incident and should be debriefed as such. Many officers try not to include their families in their job related troubles. Instead, they try to spare them which can cause them to be

distressed at home and this can become unhealthy for the familial relationship. Officers can also develop disturbing thoughts, feelings and even vivid dreams about the encounter. Ralph Rickgarn (1999) wrote "Victim-Precipitated Homicide: Incident and Aftermath", in which he reports that most departments have policies to deal with incidents of deadly force and the incident will be handled in a routine manner, even though it is not a routine situation. In many cases, this means that the officer will be placed on leave or suspension, which means that the officer will not be allowed to come to the police department or to have any contact with his fellow officers during the investigation. Rickgarn (1999) advises that the best approach might be to give the officer some type of administrative position in order for the victim officer to be able to return to work and feel like part of the department again. Rickgarn also talks about the officer developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and having other feelings about the incident which can include: resentment, disbelief, nightmares, anxiety, hyper vigilance, diminished self-confidence, social avoidance, change in eating patterns, depression, feeling of loss of control, and memory difficulties. One of the victim officers in Rickgarn's article is quoted as saying, "There was a lot of anger toward the subject for his actions. I remember the terror during the incident and the agitation afterwards. I experienced so many emotions, but the most prevalent was anger. I was angry with the woman for forcing me into this situation." Rickgarn further warns that even when the officer has been cleared of the incident, he still has to cope with the emotional reactions for having used deadly force. Most of the articles located used the same results of previous academic studies of the occurrence of this problem. It is also apparent that two people can review the same data on this type of incident and unless the subject states that he wants the police to take his life and holds an empty firearm, then they have a different judgment on if the subjects motives are suicidal. There also appears to be several differences in the affects

that this type of incident will have on the officer involved. They all appear to be adversely affected, but some to a greater extent than others. These documents do not provide a “blueprint” of the mental and physical problems that an officer will undergo in his attempt to deal with this issue.

METHODOLOGY

The question that the author proposes to answer considers what affects an incident of “suicide by cop” has on the officer since he is repeatedly “victimized” throughout the entire process. The author’s hypothesis is that departments are not prepared to deal with an incident of this type and they have not set appropriate guidelines or policies for dealing with this issue. The department’s inability to create these policies further aides in consenting to the officer’s continued victimization. The author’s methods of inquiry will involve the personal interview of Lieutenant Keith Humphrey of the Arlington Police Department, who was involved in an incident of “suicide by cop” on June 23, 1999. The author also will conduct an interview with Dr. Linda Rubin, Licensed Psychologist and Associate Professor at Texas Woman’s University. Dr. Rubin specializes in trauma and her insight into the affects of trauma on different individuals should be invaluable to this research. Additionally, the author will distribute a questionnaire as a measuring instrument to evaluate the current officer involved shooting policy at local police departments. This review of policies will include references regarding the issue of “suicide by cop” to ascertain if this is an identified potential problem in these departments. The size of the survey sample will include all of the police agencies in Galveston County and a small portion of Harris County police agencies.

The information obtained will be evaluated to determine the percentage of agencies that: provide ample support to the officer involved in a shooting, identify that “suicide by cop” can be

different and therefore sometimes requires special attention. Research will also be conducted examining what responses these agencies have in place to deal with the media and other special factors involved in “suicide by cop” incidents.

FINDINGS

Through the interview with Dr. Linda Rubin, the author was able to better understand the psychological mindset of an individual who resorts to “suicide by cop.” Dr. Rubin explained that an individual who contemplates suicide usually has a severe case of depression and is truly suffering. This individual is generally fearful that they will be unable to take their own life and see the police officer as simply an instrument of their own destruction. The author further questioned Dr. Rubin about the appropriate, immediate response that a department should take as a result of this tragedy. Dr. Rubin explained the biggest response should come in the form of support. However, Rubin stresses that it is important to understand the type of support that is needed after such an incident. The first reaction should not be support in the form of a mental evaluation. Instead, it should be a fellow officer that is available to simply be there and listen to the victim officer. This is not a time to trade “war stories”, but the support officer should allow and encourage the victim officer to talk about his feelings in relation to the incident that just occurred. Another issue to keep in mind is that if possible, this should not be done by a higher ranking officer so the victim officer does not feel that he is being interviewed or questioned about the incident. The victim officer needs to feel that this person is simply there to listen to their problems. Dr. Rubin stated that the victim officer can expect to feel extreme numbness immediately after the encounter as a way for the mind to protect itself. Additionally, the victim officer will feel very angry and this can be a defense against other feelings. Dr. Rubin expressed that males generally hide their feelings because this is a learned behavior from early childhood.

The day after the incident the victim officer can expect to feel guilty and a loss of ones self. The victim officer's family will also experience what Dr. Rubin called "secondary trauma" because they live in close proximity to someone who is experiencing this incident. The family could also be affected by Post-Traumatic Stress and the feeling that the victim officer is no longer the same person. The author addressed the expected timetable of the grieving process that the victim officer endures and Dr. Rubin advised that this depends on the officer involved. Some officers might be just fine to return to work in a couple of days, but others could develop a stress disorder. It would be best to provide the officer with a different duty assignment until they feel that they are ready to return to their normal duty assignment. It is also a good practice to provide a somewhat informal psychological evaluation prior to the victim officer returning to work. Throughout the entire process, it is important that psychological assistance be available and provided to the victim officer for as long as they feel it is necessary. The officer cannot be placed on a timetable because different people respond to traumatic incidents in different ways. Dr. Rubin also discussed the suspect's family and their reasoning when they generally file a lawsuit against the officer involved. She stated that the suspect's family is generally feeling some of the same emotions as the victim officer. The suspect's family is often feeling very angry and depressed about the incident and not only has a feeling of loss, but they may feel they have been wronged and want to hold someone accountable. The author asked Dr. Rubin if the victim officer has trouble because of the generally excessive timeframe between when the incident occurs and when the civil case might go to trial. Dr. Rubin explained that if the victim officer develops some type of stress disorder from the original incident then they would be inclined to have more trouble with this. The victim officer who quickly "bounces back" will have a much easier time dealing with this situation. Both types of officers will have a feeling of

closure at the conclusion of the court proceedings. Lastly, the author asked Dr. Rubin if the department should continue to provide an avenue to a mental health professional during the entire process to include whatever court cases that come up. She said that this is the absolute best approach for a department to take. The department needs to step-up during this situation and provide this service as well as handle all financial responsibilities that come with it (L. Rubin, personal communication, May 3, 2006).

The author then conducted an interview with Lieutenant Keith Humphrey of the Arlington Police Department. On June 23, 1999, Humphrey was working an extra job at a local Dillard's Department Store, which required him to wear civilian clothes. During his assigned duty, he was approached by regular security and told of a male and female who had attempted to steal a small electric razor. During this conversation, security had detained the female and she was presently resisting their attempts to apprehend her. Humphrey talked with her and got her to calm down. A couple of hours after this incident he received an unusual call from a female employee working in the "junior" department. Humphrey thought she sounded odd so he called her back as he responded to her location. She quickly told him that a male subject had jumped out of a pile of clothes and scared her and she provided a description of the male. Humphrey immediately realized that this was the same male from the earlier theft call that was never located. While responding to the call, Humphrey passed the suspect and commanded him to stop. They immediately began to struggle and Humphrey advised that he used every form of force available to him at this time, from open hand, to pepper spray, to a baton, but the suspect continued to fight. The suspect then broke away and Humphrey drew his weapon and commanded the suspect to stop. The suspect immediately went to his waistband with his hand. During this stage of the encounter the suspect repeatedly yelled that he was going to pull his gun

and kill Humphrey. When the suspect began to approach Humphrey he fired four rounds, striking the suspect three times. The suspect did not drop and continued to approach Humphrey; this caused him to fire another round that finally dropped the suspect. A patrol unit was in the area and immediately came to Humphrey's aid. Even though the suspect had been shot four times, he continued to fight as he was being taken into custody by the back-up officers.

Humphrey advised that when the on-duty Sergeant responded, he immediately asked Humphrey if he had called for legal assistance, then someone called his legal representative for him to have them respond to the scene. Humphrey was then asked by the author what the media's immediate response had been to the incident and if he had been subject to this. Humphrey advised that the media relations officer immediately handled any questions and made a statement to the media about the incident. Humphrey was informed that the suspect did not have a weapon and at first he was afraid of what the response would be, but he was informed that he had several witnesses that viewed the suspect reaching in his waistband and shouting that he was going to kill the officer. During the time of this incident, Dillard's was dealing with several issues that created bad publicity, to include another death at the hands of uniformed security guards and allegations of racial discrimination. The media generally focused on these issues, but they did check to see if there were any past examples of discipline in Humphrey's personnel file. The media also talked to the suspect's family who originally described him as depressed and suicidal. The media did come to Humphrey's residence and attempted to interview him, but he was not home at the time. Humphrey stated that his friends made several calls to his residence throughout the first couple of weeks to make sure that he was okay. Even his neighbors came by his house to check on him and make sure the family was okay during this ordeal. Since he was working for Dillard's at the time of the incident, they provided him with an attorney. The author then asked

Humphrey if he was provided psychological assistance immediately after the incident and he stated that it is the policy of his police department that officers see a psychologist within twenty-four to forty-eight hours of an incident of this type. Humphrey also stated that it is his department's policy that an officer must see a psychologist at least three times, be released for duty by the psychologist, and re-qualify with their duty weapon. The author also asked him when and how the suspect's family became involved in the situation. Humphrey said that within a day or two of the incident the suspect's family was interviewed by the media and they began to call the department to obtain as much information as possible. The family originally stated in the media interview that they expected it and it did not surprise them, but once they talked to an attorney they changed their tone and started making statements like, "He was the best guy in the world." The suspect's sister originally stated, "He did not have a weapon and forced the officer to shoot him." The author then asked him how he found out the suspect's family had filed a lawsuit against him. Humphrey said he was called by a reporter who wanted his comments on the \$50 million lawsuit that was filed against him and Dillard's. He was then served the lawsuit paperwork on Christmas Eve. He said the following February he was promoted to Sergeant at the annual department award ceremony and the media showed up to simply ask questions about the shooting. Humphrey stated that the lawsuit was dismissed during a summary judgment and he did not have to go to court. He further stated that the worst incident was having to attend the deposition. During this, the attorney that was representing the family began to berate him and called him a murderer and showed him the crime scene photos, which he had not seen. The author then asked what he had to endure during the criminal justice side of the process and he said that his Internal Affairs department only interviewed him one time and kept in constant contact to let him know where everything currently stood in the process. Humphrey showed up

at the Grand Jury proceeding and was asked one question about why he re-holstered his weapon prior to the shooting and he advised that it was because the suspect was not a threat at that time. The Grand Jury then informed him that they thought it was a good shooting. Humphrey advised that he missed about forty hours of duty time and when he returned they assigned him to the Criminal Investigation Division for a month before he returned to his patrol duty. The author asked Humphrey if there were any lingering affects from this incident and he advised that he generally only thinks about it on his wife's birthday because that is the day it occurred. Humphrey went on to advise that his department was great in the support that they offered him during the entire incident. He never felt that he was left on his own to deal with it and was kept in the loop through the entire process (K. Humphrey, personal communication, May 8, 2006).

The author was successful in obtaining a response from ninety percent of the questionnaires distributes to the following agencies: Seabrook Police Department, Lakeview Police Department, Webster Police Department, LaPorte Police Department, Baytown Police Department, Deer Park Police Department, Nassau Bay Police Department, League City Police Department, Dickinson Police Department, Texas City Police Department, Santa Fe Police Department, Hitchcock Police Department, Bayou Vista Police Department, Texas City Police Department, Galveston Police Department, Friendswood Police Department, and the Galveston County Sheriff's Department. The departments that responded to my questionnaire generally had a written policy to deal with officer involved shootings, which involved placing the officer on administrative leave and little else. However, a small percentage had no written policy to deal with this issue, but they dictated what they would do if they encountered an incident. A majority of the departments place the officer on paid administrative leave for three days before he can return to work. Approximately half had a written policy that included psychological assistance

and an evaluation prior to returning to duty. The author did not find a department that had a policy of placing the officer in a different duty assignment when they return to work. None of the departments that responded to the survey recognized the issue of “suicide by cop” and addressed it in their policy. Further, the questionnaire suggests that at least half of the departments that responded do not believe that this problem is significant enough to address in their current policy manuals. The responses show that most departments have not adequately prepared to deal with this type of encounter. This leaves the officer involved to essentially fend for himself when faced with this conflict. The author was also unable to find a department that provided training to supervisors or the administration on how to properly deal with an incident of this incident. A review of the policy and procedures of the author’s department does not address an officer involved shooting or an incident of Suicide by Cop. The author found a chapter in his department’s policy, addressing the use of deadly force. Additionally, the policy states that a memo pertinent to the incident must be written to the Chief of Police by the officer involved and his immediate supervisor. However, nothing is documented on the procedure the administration will follow once this memo is completed.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem facing officers and departments with the issue of “suicide by cop” is that the officer is repeatedly victimized by the incident. The victim officer is forced to take the life of another person in the original incident. Immediately after this occurs, the officer is often victimized by his department when they respond to the scene and take the officer’s duty weapon before sending him home, generally alone. The officer is then further victimized by the media when they sensationalize the incident with details like, “Unarmed suspect shot by police.” The officer is once again victimized by his department if he is forced to return to his regular duty

assignment too early and without proper psychological assistance. The officer is then victimized by the criminal justice system when they are forced to defend their actions in front of a Grand Jury. Not only does the criminal justice system victimize the officer, but so does the civil court system. Furthermore, the suspect's family usually files a lawsuit and the officer is victimized when he attends the deposition and finally by standing trial in the civil case with the risk of losing his financial future simply because he was chosen by a suicidal suspect as an instrument of his destruction. It was the author's hypothesis that departments are not properly prepared to handle an incident of this type. Through research and interviews, the author found that some police departments do an exceptional job of taking care of their officers if they are forced into an encounter of this type. The author also learned that most of the departments have some type of policy to assist in this situation, but they are all lacking in some fashion. The author believes that the findings support the hypothesis on this issue. The limitations to the research reason that it would have been helpful if the author could have interviewed any and all officers who have been involved in a "suicide by cop" situation in the last couple of years in the State of Texas. This study will assist in bringing this problem to light in law enforcement and assist in providing a better support system for the officers who are involved in these unfortunate situations. As the author learned in during the interview with Dr. Linda Rubin, the support structure provided to the officer is the most important factor in the officer's ability to ideally overcome this issue and return to his/her regular duty assignment with no lingering ill affects.

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