The Police Side of Shooting Deaths and Other Trauma

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Abstract

With recent media attention on police shootings in America, here is an unfiltered side of the trauma to police officers that killing in the line of duty produces. Split seconds decisions situate police in a peculiar predicament. The human instinct to fight or flight goes into action. Police are trained to fight or engage, whereas police are not trained to flight or run away from danger.

This article is about the police side of shootings written by a former police officer. One disclaimer is that the author never had to shoot an assailant in the line of duty. However, she has worked with police officers killed execution style and others who have shot assailants. The premise is that police officers have an emotional side to a police shooting that is human. However, this side is seldom seen and frequently discussed.

This article is dedicated to NYPD Detectives Weinjen and Ramos and all who have lost their lives in the line of duty, to the police families, friends, and fellow NYPD officers.
Police are the line of defense between order and disorder. In America, we chose order over disorder to protect our freedom and rights, thus we choose the police. Just what draws police to the profession varies, but they have a universal drive to make a difference in the community. Police officers never sign up for the scrutiny or for the chance to take a life.

In a perfect world children are taught to obey their parents, follow the rules, and obey authority. But let us face it; this is far from a perfect world. We live in one of the most liberal countries in the world (e.g., the United States) where divorce is prevalent, single parent families are the majority, and children frequently raise themselves. Without guidance the socialization process that we knew from the 1950s is gone and disobedience to law is rampant.

Consequently, this disobedience of the law and lack of respect for authority has led to more assaults and killings of police officers, such as the recent ambush of NYPD’s Detectives Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos. The ambush deaths of these two officers occurred directly after a hate protest.

The deaths of these two officers also coincided with nationwide unrest and hatred aimed at the police regarding the officer-involved shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. The Ferguson incident was based on a premise that a White officer shot and killed an unarmed Black man. In addition, a Grand Jury ultimately handed down a ‘no-true bill,’ which further incited violence, looting, and assaults on police officers nationwide.

The timing of these two cases in particular seemed to spark the perfect storm in regards to the media attention and death threats against all cops. Anti-police statements and such sentiments filled social media websites. The most notable comments came from the murderer of two NYPD officers Ismaaiyl Brinsley.

Brinsley shared an Instagram picture of himself brandishing a firearm followed by these statements: ‘I'm putting wings on pigs today. They take 1 of ours, let's take 2 of theirs,’ (Dienst, Long, Peltz, 2014, para. 2). In addition, the comments made by Brinsley were shared using “… the hashtags ‘Shootthepolice,’ ‘RIPErivGardner (sic),’ and ‘RIPMikeBrown’” (para. 2). Brinsley also told bystanders to watch what he was going to do. The trauma of the death of a police officer now goes public with the children on social media like Detective Ramos’ son, Jaden Ramos December 20, 2014 at 5:18pm post:

Jaden Ramos wrote: “Today I had to say bye to my father. He was their [sic] for me everyday of my life, he was the best father I could ask for. It's horrible that someone gets shot dead just for being a police officer. Everyone says they hate cops but they are the people that they call for help. I will always love you and I will never forget you. RIP Dad.” (Ramos, J. 2015).

According to the Police officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP), statistics show that over 100 police officers are killed in the line of duty each year. Chart 1 shows the statistics of police killed by gunfire over the past 5 years.
Police are also assaulted in alarming numbers. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigations Uniform Crime Report, 49,853 police officers were assaulted in the United States in 2013 (FBI, 2013). This statistic includes only 78.2% of the law enforcement agencies across America Reporting. Chart 2 shows the number of police assaulted in the United States over the past 5 years.

Chart 1: Police killed by gunfire from 2014-2010 by number

Chart 1 created by Dr. K. Carson 2015 from the Police officer Down Memorial Pages www.odmp.org
As seen in Chart 2 police officers face threats from a variety of methods. As a result, the way police officers use force has also changed. Police use of force used to be progressive and linear. Now, the use of force is more circular because threats can come from any direction and with any method. Chart 3 is a more accurate description of the 21st Century police use of force.
Police in the 21st Century have more resources than in the days of the black jack and flashlight. Chart 3 shows police officer presence and verbal commands as types of use of force. Chart 3 also shows control tactics, such as the use of defense tactics and less than lethal, such as the Taser©. Finally, Chart 3 shows lethal munitions (e.g., patrol rifle, shotgun, or pistol, and deadly force as use of force tools).

Notice in Chart 3, the police officer is in the center of the non-directional use of force. The reason the police officer is in the center is because police officers never know where or when use of force will be required. Police officers also do not know what type of weapon the assailant(s) will carry or if the assailant will have a weapon. As stated above in Chart 2, police officers are assaulted on average most often with hands, fists, and feet on average 28.84% of the
Police Emotion

A police shooting, vehicle pursuit, foot chase, injury, or death comes with consequences for police officers. Police officers sometimes re-live the precipitating event. They may experience fear and anger, issues with memory, and issues dealing with the decision they made to act and often, this occurs over and over again. Police feel dread, remorse, pain, and loss.

Police also feel criticism from the public, the deceased assailant’s family and friends, the police officer’s family and friends, and the police officer’s department and the respective government (i.e. city, parish, county, state, or federal government). The police officer also questions his or her actions through his or her belief system including values, personal beliefs, religion, psychology, and the socialization process.

The 21st century police officer now experiences what predecessors in the profession may have not called technology. Now the death threats come on social media, protests and police shootings are broadcast on social media live, and the computer provides data on police officer’s home addresses, family member addresses, etc. A fellow colleague reported that a suspect’s family member showed up to his personal residence. The pain behind the badge is real and if not treated, can end marriages and lives.

The police officer realizes that he or she is the only person that knows how he or she perceived the situation and must be able to articulate to others the thoughts and thus actions. During intense situations police officers may lose perception of the actions taken when adrenaline takes over and training becomes the automatic reaction. Things like drawing the service weapon or using the police radio occur during a heated situation as a direct result of a reflex action (Fearing, 1926). Reflex actions are “automatic” and may be enhanced by repetitive training and the use of muscle memory (Fearing, 1926).

The badge does not protect police officers from taking a bullet to the head, nor does the badge create a superhero as frequently portrayed in prime time television drama like NCIS, Miami Vice, and Nash Bridges. The badge symbolizes honor and a sense of duty. One choosing to wear the badge accepts this is just a reality of the job. Officers also understand that they are expected wear numerous hats and act in numerous roles, yet have the patience of a saint.

Police have different thresholds for fear, pain, and tolerance, which are other human characteristics. Being different does not make the officer weak or a bad officer, but rather makes the officer human. Police leaders must recognize when an officer has exceeded his or her threshold and get help for that officer.

The days of the police officer just toughing through psychological issues caused from the trauma of the job are over. Police leaders must lookout for the police officer’s needs, and the officer’s family. One aspect often overlooked by police leaders is the impact of the media on the police officer.
Media Implications

Frequently, the media and social media, including print, television, radio, and the Internet, portray the police as uncaring, covering up certain questionable behavior, and abusing their authority. Some media uses the emotions and actions of the deceased family while they are in the grieving process to sell news, political positions, or personal objectives (Sullender, 2010).

This one-sided media coverage can be seen in the pictures shown in the shooting death of Michael Brown, in that childhood pictures of Brown were some of the first images shared. Some media also highlighted the fact that Brown was unarmed, and that the killing of an unarmed, Black man by a White officer was somehow a racial issue. Even showing the video of Brown’s last minutes alive revealed that Brown was involved in a strong-armed robbery of a convenience store just minutes before his death. YouTube has another video of Brown beating an elderly man and kicking him in the head when he is down then stealing his belongings.

This type of negative or one-sided press is responsible in many ways in breeding hatred for the police through vicarious grieving, which makes it a more dangerous job for police (Sullender, 2010). The most recent example of breeding hate was the execution of Detectives Liu and Ramos of the New York City Police Department. In addition, some media shares inaccurate information causing further distrust of the police. And investigations are not immediate, so many not knowing how the legal system works will many times feel that there is a cover-up or that the police are not being forthcoming about the incident.

Some media outlets slant the news by reporting the assailants’ family and friends while they are in the grieving process. Generally, researchers agree to five grieving steps including: denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Individual uniqueness will allow some to grieve at different rates, while some will never completely make it through the 5-step grieving process (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Most of us know people stuck in the grieving loop, which never seem to be able to move on. Police officers are no exception.

Though selling news is not always the case, sensationalism helps contribute to painting a picture of the police that is simply uncharacteristic of the majority of police (e.g., rural police departments). One researcher found that over half of departments in America had less than 10 police officers (Reaves, 2000, as cited in Carson, 2014, p.23). Other researchers found 78.1% of departments had 25 police officers or less (Falcone, Wells, and Weisheit (2002) as cited in Carson, 2014, p. 23). Two researchers found 90% of departments served less than 25,000 in population (Reaves and Goldberg, 1998, as cited in Carson, 2014, p. 23). Finally, another researcher reported 90% of rural departments had a local population less than 25,000, with fewer than 50 police officers (Edwards 2002, as cited in Carson, 2014, p. 24).

Further, these findings indicated that rural police departments had between 11 and 24 police officers and small rural departments, usually sheriff’s offices, had an average of seven police officers (as cited in Carson, 2014, p. 171). Contrary, some of the rural departments had less than 10 police officers (as cited in Carson, 2014, p.171). When police officers work in a rural or small department the community they serve is also small. Consequently, the pressure on rural police officers may be high because the community knows the police officer’s family, location of his or her home, and activities. With all of the aforementioned pressure and stress it is no wonder police officers have a higher suicide rate than the general public (Johnson, 2010; Kelly & Marin, 2006). In fact, police officer suicide rates are higher than line-of-duty deaths (Violanti, 2007).
Changing Public Perception

Changing public perception on police shootings and other seemingly violent encounters requires an active, positive media campaign and open police relationships within the community they serve. Often, the public lacks knowledge about what the police do and how they are trained to react. Consequently, the public may jump to conclusions that an officer killing an unarmed man may seem excessive. However, police officers everywhere know that this is not a valid argument and that unarmed people have killed many police officers as seen in Chart 3, which address officers assaulted in the line-of-duty. The majority of assaults against the police were with no weapon, but rather with hands, fits, and feet.

In addition to the public better understanding what the police do and why they do it, department’s need to do a better job of getting the positive stories out in the public view through police blogs, police newsletters, citizen and youth police academies, and public service announcements. Police departments can also get the positive word out by running use of force scenario training for the public for naysayers and for political leaders. Police ride-along programs also help enlighten the public to the realities of policing and often positively influence the perception of police.

Police departments must offer counseling and peer support for police officers involved in shooting incidents for extended periods of time, counseling for co-workers directly involved in the shooting, and for family members. Often, spouses and children are left to pick up the pieces when the police officer becomes over burdened by the shooting. Police officers tend to turn towards other police officers and cut off the family from the situation.

Recently, an anti-police activist had the opportunity to train with the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office in use of force scenario training. Reverend and Community Activist Jarrett Maupin recently led a protest on Phoenix Police Headquarters after an unarmed man was shot by Phoenix Police while fighting with police officers (Fox News 10 Phoenix). Troy Haden Fox10 reported on January 7, 2015, Maupin underwent use of force scenario training with the Phoenix Police Department (http://www.fox10phoenix.com/story/27788056/2015/01/07/activist-critical-of-police-undergoes-use-of-force-scenarios).

Maupin was involved in a training scenario, in which an unknown individual approached Maupin. The individual placed his hands in the air, but Maupin shot the individual when the individual got within Maupin’s “comfort zone.” The training scenario offered Maupin a small window of insight into what the police do on a daily basis and why the police do what they do. According to the Fox 10 News interview, Maupin experienced a change of heart about second guessing a police officer’s split second decision with use of force and unarmed suspects.

Formal Shooting Review

Police formally answer for their actions through different means like a shooting review board, coroner’s inquest, civilian review boards, grand jury, civil lawsuits, and etc. Each state has rules for the formal review process that vary widely. Most departments have policies and procedures in place for handling such situations. The public must know that there is not a policy or procedure to cover each and every situation, thus enters police officer discretion.

Recommendations

One recommendation is that police officers and families monitor one another for signs and symptoms that are excessive or not normal as a result of a police shooting or trauma. If the
signs or symptoms do not go away then the officer and family should seek help. Help may come in many forms, such as using a critical incident stress debriefing team, police psychologist, religious figure, or family counselor.

Another recommendation is for first line supervisors or other police leaders to monitor the officer’s work performance. Major changes like reclusiveness, tardiness, carelessness, excessive consumption of alcohol, and defiance may be indicators that the officer needs intervention. Sometimes just sitting down with the officer one on one and having a talk about the incident will help the officer deal with the situation. Yet, other times the officer will require more help. Police leaders and insurers should note that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a real, psychiatric disorder that must be dealt with accordingly by a professional.

As illustrated in Chart 3 (the non-directional use of force), police officers deal with threats from every direction. The pressure from high intensity calls can build up over time and also cause excessive stress that interferes with work performance and the officer’s personal life. Annual training with P.O.S.T certified police trainers in the area of health and wellness is recommended as an outlet for officers to discuss frustrations and solutions.

Another recommendation for police leaders is to limit the amount of information reported on critical incidents to media. Recognizing that the media wants information to the incident is important, but the media just needs the basics (e.g., who, what, where, when, and how). Police leaders must refrain from giving our information that the detective division can use to determine the validity of suspects. Police leaders should try to put out a press release as soon as possible with the basics. Further, comments about the crime after the press release should be limited to the police public information officer or the Chief or Sheriff.

Not all media outlets are biased, but the ones that are bias cause the majority of trouble for police department mistrust and poor public relations. The biased media outlets need to refrain from inflammatory words, such as reporting the news story as White versus Black, list of police killings, and why the police kill, etc. Inherently, most police officers do not trust the media because the media has been known to cut and paste comments to suit the story, rather than to tell the story as quoted by police. So the recommendation for the bias media is to respect the situation including the officer and his or her family, the assailant’s family, and to respect the public’s right to know by reporting the facts in a neutral non-bias way.

Finally, another area of police study that needs further research is the repetitive police shooting. Two local police officers have been involved in two separate shootings in different departments over the course of their patrol career. Both police officers were cleared in their shootings after a coroner’s inquest. The inquest involved a majority vote from the 7-jury panel with members consisting of civilians living in the jurisdiction.

Carson (2015) believed that police officers that have shot assailants in the past logically process danger at a faster rate and consequently react faster to a second life threat than police officers who have not shot an assailant before. This is by no means conclusive, but further research into this topic is recommended.

About the Author: Dr. Carson is a retired police officer from Montana. She has also worked as a Reserve Deputy in Montana and North Carolina. She retired from the U.S. Army as a Lieutenant with service in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. She has a bachelor’s degree in sociology with a minor in psychology, and masters’ in criminal justice administration and forensic science. She also has a doctorate in management of organizational leadership.
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