



Critical incident stress:

The personal impact of a police shooting incident

By Rick Parent

A recent study of more than 400 fatal police shootings that took place over a 20-year period in the United States and Canada highlighted the need for police to be aware of the dynamics associated with a police shooting. In many cases, the surviving officer and his or her family were unexpectedly left to come to terms with a life-threatening event that was complicated due to the controversial death of the assailant.

Interviews with 40 of these police officers who had been involved in a fatal shooting revealed the personal impact that the event had on their lives and their families. Without exception, all of the officers involved in a fatal shooting in this sample indicated that they had, to some degree, been subject to the physiological, psychological, physical and emotional factors associated with critical incident stress.

The most commonly cited physiological factors experienced by these officers included difficulties with perception of time and visual and auditory distortions. As the incident unfolded, individual officers noted that the deadly force encounter appeared to occur in slow motion. Often their vision was focused upon the perceived threat with minimal awareness of the events taking place around them. Finally, when shots were fired, they were generally heard as muffled sounds, even though the officers were not wearing ear protection devices.

Most of the officers also stated that they experienced a loss of fine motor coordination upon conclusion of their deadly encounter. Typically their hands began to shake or their legs went into uncontrollable spasms. After the fatal shooting incident concluded, the majority of officers

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interviewed stated that they faced a wide variety of psychological and physical effects associated with critical incident stress. The physical effects included a loss in appetite, sleeping pattern changes and a marked decrease in their sex drive, resulting in an absence of sexual relations with their spouse or partner.

The psychological effects reported included depression, guilt, nightmares, flashbacks and a heightened sense of danger and fear. One of the officers related the flashbacks as a "video going on in your head that you can't control; it just keeps playing the video over and over and over again and you've got no control to turn it off."

Another officer reported that his near death event became a religious experience and a turning point in his life. The officer had been dispatched to a report of shots fired. Upon arriving at the location the officer noted a male subject standing on the sidewalk. The officer maneuvered his police vehicle directly beside the male and lowered the driver's window, asking the male if he heard the reported gunshots.

To the officer's horror, the male subject produced and leveled a loaded shotgun against the officer's head. As this occurred, a police helicopter suddenly flew by, distracting the shotgun-toting male. When the male subject turned to look at the helicopter, the officer discharged his pistol while still seated in the police vehicle.

I see the first round hit his head and his head splits open. Then I see my second or third round as his head turns. I see his hair blow apart to the back of his head. As he hits the ground, he was in a sitting position, still holding onto his shotgun. I wasn't sure if he was alive or not. Then he fell down and hit the ground, flat out.

The whole thing took 57 seconds; from the time that I hit the emergency button (in my police vehicle), when he put the gun to my head, until the time that I'm on the radio requesting emergency backup. Calmly, I got

on the radio and said I need an ambulance, I need back up, get me a supervisor. As I am doing this he is lying there and I think he's dead. Twice I thought that he had packed in but he never died.

In reflecting upon the incident and the thoughts that were racing inside the officer's head at the time of the incident, he stated:

If you're gonna die, you're gonna die. He was gonna kill me so you gotta take your opportunity. I figured I was gonna take him with me. If I'm going down then he's going down too. As I'm saying this, that I'm gonna die, I hear this voice inside my head, the Holy Spirit is saying, "No, you're not. You're not going to die. No." I kid you not! Just as I am hearing this voice in my head, that's when he suddenly turned to the left and was distracted. That's when I knew it was time to do something.

After it was all over I lost it! I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even close my eyes for 48 hours afterwards. It became a real religious event. Since then I've gone on to speak to youth about the power of God, leadership and making a difference whenever you work. I think this incident was in God's plan. It changed my life and was a real humbling experience. I learned that I'm not the be all, end all. There's more meaning to life than just being a cool cop. To this day I sit to the rear of my seat, with the seat all the way pushed back. I keep my head tucked in when I'm driving a police vehicle.

Suicide-by-cop and CIS

In some instances, the factors associated with critical incident stress are further intensified when the shooting incident is characteristic of a suicide-by-cop. In these particular cases, the officer is faced with the additional impact of killing an emotionally distraught individual who is, in essence, seeking help from the police in doing something that he or she could not do – the taking of his or her own life. For some officers, this situation results in the additional impact of personal feelings that include anger and confusion for “being set up,” manipulated and tricked into using deadly force. In this regard, one of the officers stated:

I was angry. There was no reason for him to kill me. He was gonna shoot me, he would have killed me. If anything, I waited too long (before I shot and killed him). I was lucky.

In other instances, the officer felt responsible for the surviving members of the deceased. The officer reasoned that he had taken away the life of their loved one and was now responsible for the grief that the family felt.

No matter what I think about this guy and what he did, I can't help but feel responsible to his mother and father. I know that every Christmas, for the rest of their lives, it will never be the same for them because of me. I took away their son's life, and they will never have Christmas with him again. It will never be the same for them. No matter what you think, he was still a person.

The media frequently intensified the situation and were cited by most of the interviewed police officers as one of the greatest sources of stress immediately after their fatal shooting incidents. The added stress was a consequence of the continual coverage that surrounds many of the fatal shooting incidents. Particularly painful was the speculation by many journalists who were impatient about the release of the official police investigation.

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tions for the shooting incident, particularly during suicide-by-cop incidents in which the deceased was later found to have an inoperable or imaginary weapon.

Upon conclusion of the public disclosure of evidence, many of the interviewed officers reported that they were finally able to get on with their lives and leave the tragedy of the shooting behind them. Even years after the fatal shooting incident had taken place, all the officers reported that they considered the shooting incident to be a significant event in their life, one that they will never forget.

Long-term post-shooting effects

In the months and years after their fatal shooting incident, many of the police officers in this sample reported a variety of personal life changes, attributing these changes to their fatal shooting. Some officers suffered post-traumatic stress to such a degree that they required extensive counseling and a lengthy time away from work. In these few cases as well as in a minority of other instances, the shooting incident had a profound negative impact upon the officers and their family. Many reported marital or relationship changes shortly after the life-threatening event. Roughly half of the reporting officers stated that their relationship with their significant other was satisfactory prior to the shooting, but once faced with the stresses that accompany a fatal shooting, their relationships crumbled. One officer stated, “I went through two marriages after the shooting incident.” Another officer reported, “My marriage ended within a year or two after the shooting. I became distant from my wife and I didn't talk about the shooting incident with her.”

Noteworthy is that an equal number of police officers spoke highly of their spouses or significant others, emphasizing that their family helped them endure the negative aspects of a police shooting. These officers reported that they tended to have a good relationship with their spouse or partner prior to the shooting incident. Upon suddenly being confronted by the emotional and psychological impact of the life-threatening event, established positive relationships served to support the police officer during challenging times. Often these established relationships were strengthened as a result of the shooting incident.

Historical perspective

It is important to emphasize that there have been significant changes in the manner in which most police agencies respond to a police shooting incident. This study noted that during the 1980s through to the mid-1990s, several police agencies tended to leave the officer and their family largely on their own to cope. Many of the officers in this study's sample who were involved in a fatal police shooting that occurred during the 1980's and early 1990's stated that their supervisors typically provided them with a "police prescription" of alcohol, a brief time away from work and a voluntary visit to the police psychologist. As one officer stated:

After I shot and killed the guy I was told to report to the chief and my supervisor. We talked about the shooting incident and then a bottle of whisky was pulled out of a drawer and put on the desk. They basically told me to go out with my buddies, have a few drinks and get drunk. When I sobered up and had a couple of days off I was expected to report for duty, as if nothing had happened. In hindsight, this probably wasn't a good way to deal with the shooting.

In the past ten years, most police agencies in North America have adopted progressive responses to officer-involved shootings. Typically, a police agency response includes a critical incident debriefing process involving both the officer and their family. In addition, a wide range of support is often available and may include a lengthy time away from the work site, psychological services, employee assistance and chaplaincy programs. Distinct from the past practices of 1980s and early 1990s, significant inroads have occurred in how police officers and their families are treated when an officer-involved shooting occurs.

Honig and Sultan (2004) did a detailed confidential survey of 982 police officers from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department who were involved in critical incidents between June 1995 and March 2004. More than 90 percent of these incidents were officer-involved shootings. Their study found that a significant majority of these officers did not have long-term devastation to their careers or personal lives. These authors observed the resilience that officers can have under fire when provided with support and proper intervention.

Conclusion

A police shooting incident will likely have an enormous impact upon an officer and his or her family. This study noted the physiological, psychological, physical and emotional impact that has affected many of the police officers who have taken the life of another or who have faced a lethal threat during the course of their duties.

Operational police personnel must be made aware of these dynamics prior to encountering a lethal threat. Further training in this area may reduce the effects of stress when facing a life-threatening situation. Additional training may allow the officer to seek alternatives to deadly force and to better cope with the aftermath of a life-threatening situation.

Finally, this study also emphasizes that police managers and peers must reach out and support individuals during the challenging times that often follow an officer-involved shooting. This is especially important when controversy or the dynamics associated with a suicide-by-cop surround the shooting. Departmental support and established relationships are key factors in allowing officers to move forward after a police shooting, an event that will likely be one of the most significant that will occur during their police career. ◀

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