



## Suicide by Cop: Police shooting as a method of self-harming

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### A B S T R A C T

Suicide by Cop (SbC) incidents, police-related deaths that could be considered suicides due to the subject's precipitated actions that demonstrate suicidal motivations through words or behavior are difficult to classify. The subjects' intent is not understood, and risk factors for SbC incidents include the complication of others' interactions. The current study advances a set of indicators that help classify police shootings that could be considered SbC.

Using a modification of the decision tree developed by Best, Quigley, & Bailey (2004) to assess suicidal intentions of police shootings through observable acts, the current study compares cases classified as self-inflicted suicide or suicide attempts with those classified as SbC cases in the Hostage Barricade Data System (HOBAS).

Overall the model increased the percentage of cases correctly predicted to 97.9 percent, 16.9 percent beyond chance. The primary indicators are significant. Other historical or situational variables did not improve the odds of predicting the SbC versus self-inflicted suicides.

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### Introduction

Suicide is recognized as a nation-wide lethal tragedy with more than 33,000 reported deaths and about 400,000 self-inflicted injuries treated annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Cause of death and intent is determined by coroners or medical examiners, whose credentials vary, and whose decisions are subject to error (Drylie, 2006; Jobes, Casey, Berman, & Wright, 1991). The criteria of proof of suicide, or self-inflicted death, are likely to exclude a number of actual suicides by labeling them as accidents or police-involved shootings. It is even more difficult to get an accurate figure on attempted suicides. Figures for attempted suicides usually come from self-report information in medical settings or police reports.

The act or attempt of suicide encompasses more than the individual. Family members agonize over what they did wrong and/or why their loved one felt the need to cope with life stresses by death. When the individual involves the police by provoking officers to shoot, then a larger circle of highly emotional people are involved reviewing, judging, condemning, and redressing. Often the criticism is directed toward the officer rather than the subject, and the probability that civil action will be taken against the police agency and the individual officer increases (Flynn & Homant, 2000). Police officers' first duty is to protect life; so shooting a citizen, even when legally justified, places a heavy emotional

toll on individual officers and their departments (Klinger, 2001; McKenzie, 2006).

In an effort to standardize the criteria used to conduct medicolegal investigations and suicide certification, the Centers for Disease Control convened a group of experts (Rosenberg, Davidson & Smith, 1988). Input from these experts and related organizations such as American Association of Suicidology, National Association of Medical Examiners, and American Academy of Forensic Sciences resulted in the Operational Criteria for the Determination of Suicide (OCDS). The 22 criteria of the OCDS revolved around intent and evidence of self-infliction to distinguish suicide from accidental deaths. Additional studies continue to increase OCDS validity and reliability (Jobes et al., 1991).

It is not surprising that efforts to examine intent are difficult given the complexities of suicide. Much of the research on intent relies on self-report of suicide attempters or the comparison of individual characteristics among those individuals who commit suicide and other populations (Brezo et al. 2007; Brown, Steer, Henriques & Beck, 2005; Forman, Berk, Henriques, Brown & Beck, 2004; Fushimi, Sugawara & Saito, 2006; Jollant et al., 2005; Keilp et al., 2006; Wyder & DeLeo, 2007; Zalsman et al., 2006). In the instances of police-involved shootings that might be considered subject-precipitated, the criterion of self-infliction vanishes, so the actions by the subjects must be carefully analyzed to assess the possibility of the subjects' intent to die.

Suicide by Cop (SbC) incidents, police shootings that could be considered suicides due to the subject's precipitated actions that demonstrate suicidal motivations through words or behavior (Homant & Kennedy, 2000; Hutson et al., 1998; Lord, 2000; Lord, 2004; Parent & Verdun-Jones, 1998), are difficult to classify because they involve many

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of the complexities surrounding the study of suicide including no living subjects. When there are living subjects because attempts of self-inflicted and SbC suicides are interrupted, intent possibly can be examined. The motivations of the subject's actions are often complex and not thoroughly understood, and the risk factors for SbC incidents must include the additional complication of at least one other person's interaction with the subject.

Best, Quigley, and Bailey (2004) attempt to assess the suicidal intention of police shootings classified as SbC through observable acts revealed by a decision tree composed of nine indicators. Using a modification of Best and colleagues' decision tree on cases from the Hostage Barricade Data System (HOBAS) of the FBI Crisis Negotiation National Data, the current study examines the following research questions:

1. Do individuals who use self-infliction to attempt or complete suicide differ personally and historically from those who attempt or complete suicide by inducing police officers to shoot them?
2. Do the primary, secondary, rational thought and minimal indicators of the decision tree significantly discriminate between self-inflicted suicides or suicide attempts and SbC (completed or attempted) subjects?

### Literature review

Early anomie and strain theorists such as Durkheim and Merton have been credited with developing the first theories designed to explain suicide (Durkheim, 1951; Merton, 1957). Durkheim focused on the relationship between societal changes and suicide rates at the aggregate level. On the other hand, Merton examined the relationship between individual strain and suicide, proposing that suicide was a mode of adaptation designed to cope with unattainable material goals. More recently Shneidman (1996) focused more on the psychological pain surrounding unattainable needs such as love, acceptance, control and achievement.

While theories surrounding a subject's motivation to die have evolved, the capability to measure plausible intent remains out-of-reach, requiring researchers to identify risk factors and their relationships to suicide (Brezo et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2005; Forman, Berk, Henreques, Brown & Beck, 2004; Fushimi et al., 2006; Jollant et al., 2005; Keilp et al., 2006; Wyder & DeLeo, 2007; Zalsman et al., 2006; Zhang & Lester, 2008). The field of suicidology focuses on the identification of risks that strengthen and intervention/prevention strategies that weaken the association between strain and suicide ideation and attempts. The internal struggle between the wish to die and the wish to live is dynamic. Even with a wide range of helping organizations, to live or die is a personal decision incorporating the associations between strain and suicide ideation at conscious or subconscious levels (Brown et al., 2005; McKenzie, 2006).

The suicide literature contains numerous studies that attempt to identify risk factors for suicide (although always with the caveat that previous suicide attempts are a primary risk factor for suicide). The demographics remain stable with suicides completed at the highest rate by White older males, and suicide attempts by teens, young adults, women, and African Americans (Spicer & Miller, 2000). Other studied risk factors besides previous suicide attempts include maladaptive personality traits such as impulsivity and aggression (Brezo et al., 2007; Wyder & DeLeo, 2007); psychiatric diagnoses such as bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia (Fushimi et al., 2006; Hamlin, 2004; Keilp et al., 2006); psychological factors such as depression, hopelessness, social problem-solving deficits, and cognitive distortions (Pollock & Williams, 2004; Yufit & Lester, 2005); experiential trauma such as child physical or sexual abuse (Brezo et al., 2007), and drug abuse/dependence (Brezo et al., 2007; Hamlin, 2004). Sher and colleagues (2007) concluded that depressed suicide attempters with comorbid alcohol-use disorders had higher aggression and impulsiv-

ity levels; so they often had higher rates of lethality compared to other groups without alcohol-use disorders. Forman and colleagues (2004) examined multiple suicide attempters and concluded that multiple attempts were behavioral markers for severe psychopathology. These multiple attempters usually possessed several of the listed risk factors so it is impossible to isolate the impact of multiple attempts from the other risk factors.

Within the methods used to attempt or complete suicide are those classified by Kennedy, Homant, & Hupp (1998) as "hidden suicides." These are deaths that appear to be accidental such as certain one-car accidents and accidental workplace fatalities. A number of researchers also would consider some police shootings as hidden suicides and have categorized them under the most common term of SbC.

SbC is a term that has been used by law enforcement officers for a number of decades with its introduction into the literature in 1992 (Geller & Scott, 1992; Noesner & Dolan, 1992). Geberth defined SbC as "incidents in which individuals, bent on self-destruction, engage in life-threatening and criminal behavior in order to force the police to kill them" (1993, p.105). Hutson and his colleagues (1998) expanded the definition to include more observable details and a process, but further emphasized the individual's intent:

...intentionally engage in life threatening and criminal behavior with a lethal weapon or what appears to be a lethal weapon to gain attention of law enforcement officers...These suicidal individuals then intentionally escalate the potential for a lethal encounter by threatening officers or members of the civilian population ...This forces officers to use deadly force by shooting the suicidal individual... (p.666)

Kennedy and colleagues (1998) described SbC suicidal intent as situations where "either by word or gestures or they confront the police with a dangerous weapon despite having no way to escape, virtually forcing the officer to shoot" (p. 22). Lord (2000, 2004) added specific gestures such as pointing a weapon at the officers or hostages, running at officers with weapons directed toward officers, or throwing weapons at officers.

Researchers (Drylie, 2006; Homant & Kennedy, 2000; Lord, 2000, 2004; Parent & Verdun-Jones, 1998) have concluded that there are a number of individual and situational factors that are unique to SbC subjects, as well as factors that are shared with other suicidal victims. Criminal history and a criminal act preceding (and often precipitating) the lethal act are prevalent among SbC subjects. Unique to SbC subjects is the use of an "outrageous act" such as committing a violent crime that triggers law enforcement involvement in the SbC incident (Drylie, 2006; Lord, 2004; Mohandie & Meloy, 2000). The verbalization of the subject's desire to die by forcing police officers to shoot and/or life threatening behavior toward police or other citizens (that comes to the attention of the police) also appears to be unique to SbC subjects (Hutson et al., 1998; Lord, 2001; Parent & Verdun-Jones; 1998). In addition, prevalent among SbC subjects is their general attachment with other people. A majority of SbC subjects possess a support system; however, the termination of a relationship or family problems are often the precipitating events (Lord, 2001, 2004). Similar to other types of suicides, suicide ideation, a history of mental illness, abuse of drugs and/or alcohol, and past suicide attempts are prevalent in SbC subjects (Best, Quigley & Bailey, 2004; Klinger, 2001; Lord, 2001; McKenzie, 2006).

As noted by McKenzie (2006), the current research on SbC is inadequate for assessing suicidal intent; however, he concluded, "...assessment of intention is core to equivocal death analysis.....intent (or intention) may be assessed by building up a picture of what are technically known as 'chains' of behavior rather than a single behavior" (p. 22). Researchers generally agree that the intent of the act of suicide is either instrumental or expressive. An individual who is attempting to avoid the consequences of a criminal act, influence a

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