

Suicide by cop – four Coroner’s reports

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In a recent issue we (Pridmore et al, 2019) listed two examples of Suicide by Cop (SbC) “defined as when a suicidal individual purposefully provokes the police to shoot and kill him or her” (Dewey et al, 2013). These were taken from newspaper accounts, one from Australia and one from New Zealand.

The New Zealand decedent was described in the press as a popular, successful fisherman who was unknown to police. This was an unexpected profile – as a large USA study found that 66.2% of those who die by SbC have a criminal history, prior suicidal ideation, and substance abuse at the time of the incident (Dewey et al, 2013). These authors also found 42.6% suffered a mental illness, 35.3% were experiencing relationship problems, 33.8% had participated in domestic violence, 23.5% had made a previous suicide attempt and 16.2% had experienced psychiatric hospitalization.

We were interested to examine Australian Coroner’s reports of people who had completed SbC. With the benefit (over newspaper reports) of time and resources, Coroner’s reports are extremely thorough – they are conducted after extensive evidence collection; all witnesses and others with potential contributions are interviewed and a formal hearing has been conducted.

We located 4 examples. Brief details:

TC, aged 15 years and 8 months, shot in Melbourne in 2008. (Coate, 2011)

Early trauma – father died when he was 11 years of age.

Expelled from school for swearing and aggression – anger problems.

Expressed suicidal thoughts many times.

Intoxicated.

Armed himself with knives.

Demanded police be called.

Repeatedly stated he would kill someone if he was not killed himself.

Threatened police with knives and was shot.

MC, aged 45 years, shot in country NSW in 2015. (Grahame, 2017)

Early trauma – parents separated when he was 2 years of age.

At 5 years, diagnosed with conduct disorder.

Adolescence – spent time as a psychiatric inpatient – diagnosed with ADHD, and depression.
Attempted hanging and jumping from a 3rd floor, overdoses.
Formed a relationship – 3 children.
Children removed by authorities – due to domestic violence, child neglect.
Placed a samurai sword on his bed.
Convicted of assaulting his partner and police, road rage conviction.
Capsicum spray deployed.
Threatening police with knives and was shot.

RMcI, aged 48 years, shot in country Tasmania in 2016. (McTaggart, 2019)
Early trauma – adopted, but adoptive parents divorced when he was 6 years.
Expelled from 3 schools.
Commenced work at 14 years – back injury – chronic pain.
Drank alcohol heavily. Chronic analgesic use.
Diagnosed with ADHD, chronic dexamphetamine use.
Married – 2 children. Relationship ended.
Another relationship. Heavy alcohol and benzodiazepine abuse.
Capsicum spray deployed.
Threatened police with knives and was shot

CMcG, aged 44 years, shot in country New South Wales in 2017. (Truscott, 2020)
Early trauma – family separated when he was 4 years.
Expelled from a number of schools.
Placed in juvenile detention centres.
At 19 years, jailed for malicious wounding.
Spent many years in jail for drug and violence crimes.
Frequent expression of suicidal ideas.
Drug-induced psychosis (amphetamine).
Taser and capsicum spray both deployed.
Threatened police with knives and was shot.

The risk factors described by Dewey et al (2013) – including a criminal history, prior suicidal ideation and substance use, among others – were also found in this sample. We noted the additional features, 1) all these individuals had disrupted early lives, one with the early death of a parent, the others experienced parental separation, 2) all had disciplinary problems at school (including expulsion), and 3) none achieved continuous employment (TC died before he achieved employable age).

When SbC occurs, there is often criticism of the police (People Against Prisons Aotearoa, 2019). However, in the 4 cases listed, police behaviour had complied with professional standards. In 3 cases tasers and/or capsicum spray had been deployed and, in all cases, the police officers had been threatened with large knives and had legitimate fears for their lives.

While 4 cases is a small sample, we found strong evidence of early disadvantage and social/interpersonal problems. Such circumstances reduce opportunities for well rounded personality development, and in this sample, there was clear evidence of personality disorder which led to disregard of the rights and well-being of others. The decedents all planned and placed unknown individuals (police officers) in the abhorrent situation of having to kill another human – this was done to achieve the decedents' ends/wishes – that is, the decedents placed their wishes above those of others.

Suicide is an undesired outcome, and prevention strategies such as the erection of barricades at high points to prevent jumping from a height have had been initiated (with uncertain success (Sinyor and Levitt, 2010)).

The prevention of SbC could not be approached by the banning of knives. It will require the universal institution of supportive loving families in which individuals can grow and develop functional personalities and respect for the rights of others. Police departments have developed approaches to violent individuals. It is important that the government and judicial system understand and appropriately classify these events, and avoid laying blame.

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