

Homicide-Suicide in Police Families: Aggression full circle

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Abstract: *Police officers are considered to be at increased risk for suicide, and such self-aggression may be extended to others. This paper describes antecedents of police family homicide-suicides in a sample of 29 cases. Police experiences with violence and aggression, domestic violence, and availability of lethal weaponry are possible correlates. Results from this sample suggested that police family homicide-suicides are increasing, as approximately twice as many cases were reported in 2006 as in the two previous years. The majority of homicide victims were women (N=24; 83%), however, five of the victims were men killed by women police officers. The majority of incidents occurred in younger age groups (< 40 years of age). The primary weapon employed was the police service firearm (90%). Most incidents occurred on the local police departmental level (76%) as opposed to state and federal level departments. Similar to the majority of nationwide homicide-suicides, the homicide victim was primarily a spouse or female acquaintance. In three cases a child was also killed by the perpetrator. While exposure to violence in police work cannot be changed, the establishment of a strict domestic violence policy by police agencies is discussed as one strategy to reduce the incidence of violence in the police family. [International Journal of Emergency Mental Health, 2007, 9(2), pp. 97-104].*

Key words: *homicide-suicide, police, police suicide, domestic violence*

"Suicidal individuals are profoundly aggressive"

(Buie & Maltzberger, 1989)

Palermo (1994) suggested that homicide-suicide should be considered as an extension of aggression first turned inward in the form of suicide. He contends that the perpetrator acts primarily out of a realistic sense of loss, which might be, at times, compounded by psychological and sociological factors. In his view, the perpetrator is unable to accept the failure of what he thought was a satisfactory relationship.

The perpetrator is viewed as an aggressive individual who hides behind a facade of self-assertion, is unable to withstand the reality of an unexpected rejection, and possibly a drastic life change. He commits suicide after killing his extended self.

This paper describes some of the possible antecedents of homicide-suicide in police families. Police officers themselves are considered to be at increased risk for suicide, and such self-aggression may be easily extended to others (Violanti, in press). There are certain factors in policing that increase the risk of homicide-suicide, including aggression, domestic violence, violence exposure, the availability of lethal weaponry, and work-related attributes of police officers. Additionally, this paper will provide a description of police homicide-suicide cases.

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Background: Homicide-Suicide

Although homicide-suicide has a low rate of occurrence nationwide, it has a profound impact on the police officer's children, extended family, community, and department (Morton, Runyan, Moracco, et al., 2003). Past studies of homicide-suicide have estimated rates of occurrence in the United States to be between 0.2 and 0.38 per 100,000 persons annually (Bossarte, Simon, & Barker, 2006; Marzuck, Tardiff, & Hirsch, 1992; Barraclough & Harris, 2002). Homicide-suicide incidents usually include one victim and one perpetrator. In a majority of incidents the perpetrator is male, older than the victim, and is likely to be Caucasian (Bossarte et al., 2006). A history of depression and/or mental illness is also common among perpetrators (Rosenbaum, 1990).

Victims of these incidents are more likely to be women who have separated or are divorced from their partners. In previous studies of homicide-suicides, more than 95% of the perpetrators were known to the victims. Most often, the perpetrator was a former or current husband or other intimate partner with the homicide taking place in the home of the victim (Bossarte et al., 2006; Chan, Beh, & Broadhurst, 2004). The perpetrator is more likely to die by suicide when the motive is related to possessiveness/jealousy, sickness, or stress and these incidents are more likely to be premeditated than a homicide alone (Dawson, 2005). The majority of deaths associated with homicide-suicides in the United States involve a firearm, with handguns being used most frequently. Other weapons associated with homicide-suicide incidents include knives, blunt objects, and motor vehicles; other methods of homicide have included strangling/asphyxiation, poisoning, and physical assault (Violence Policy Center, 2002).

An interesting study recently conducted by Bossarte et al., 2006 provided important information on homicide-suicide in the United States. Sixty-five incidents were identified for the year 2003; 144 incidents for the year 2004. In 2003, with seven states reporting, there were 65 homicide-suicide incidents, including 84 homicide victims (homicide rate = 0.230/100,000 persons) and 65 suicides (suicide rate = 0.177/100,000 persons). In 2004, with 13 states participating, there were 144 homicide-suicide incidents, including 164 homicides (homicide rate = 0.238/100,000 persons) and 144 suicides (suicide rate = 0.205/100,000). Among male perpetrators, nearly one third (30.6%) of those who killed their intimate partner ($n = 438$) also ended their own lives, while only 1.7% of those who killed a non-intimate ($n = 3459$) also killed themselves.

Homicide-Suicide in Police Families

The Police Occupation: Exposure to Aggression and Violence

Police officers work in an occupational culture premised on violence. They also have firearms available, a lethal method for both suicide and homicide. Police officers may be more prone to violence at home due to their exposure at work. Studies have shown that the estimated incidence of domestic violence among police officers (25-40%) is significantly higher than in the general population (16%; Pam, 2001). Because of job-related factors, police officers appear to be disproportionately at risk for homicide-suicide. They have access to guns, which some use as instruments of violence against others or themselves, usually with lethal results. Domestic violence appears to be heavily implicated in police homicide-suicide. The police culture encourages control, aggression, authoritarianism, domination, a strong sense of entitlement, and other conduct that correlates with aggressive behavior at home (Pam, 2001).

Exposure of police officers to violence and aggression may increase the risk of homicide-suicide. Several studies have suggested associations of suicide and aggression (Romanov et al., 1994). Farberow and colleagues (1990) compared suicide completers with accident victims, and concluded that suicide completers were more likely to have histories of angry outbursts. Other associations noted in relation to suicide are hostility and irritability. Officers considering suicide may be more likely to have a history of violence and act violently in a greater variety of relationships, especially spousal (D'Angelo, 2000).

One of the major determinants of police suicide is relationship problems (Violanti, 1997). The aggression and rage developed from bad relationships in police families can provide a direct route to homicide-suicide as well. A link between severe domestic violence, partner estrangement, and suicide has been firmly established in studies of homicide-suicide (Felthous & Hempel, 1995; Marzuck et al., 1992) and homicide alone (Wilson & Daly, 1993). Partner relationship disruptions preceding completed suicide such as divorce, separation due to arguments, breakup of steady dating, and serious arguments with a romantic partner leading to a change in the relationship have previously received attention (Heikkinen & Lonnqvist, 1995; Rich, Warsrad, Nemiroff, Fowler, & Young, 1991). Murphy and colleagues (1992) concluded that disruptions in partner relationships were the most prevalent type of disruption preceding homicide-suicide. Simi-

larly, spousal separations were judged to be the primary precipitants for suicide more often in younger than older men and more often in men than women (Heikkinen et al., 1992).

Police Domestic Violence: A Precursor to Homicide-Suicide?

The escalation of violence from street to home is reflected in domestic violence in police families. If not stopped, violence in the home can continue to escalate to the level of deadly consequences. Two studies on police domestic violence present a detailed analysis. In the first study, Neidig and colleagues (1992a) surveyed 385 male officers, 40 female officers, and 115 female spouses attending in-service training and police conferences. This study included measures on demographics, work-related factors, and a Conflict Tactics Scale. Results indicated 25% of male and 27% of female officers reported minor assaults on their spouses. Only 3% of the male and none of the female officers reported severe assaults on their spouses. The overall rates of violence remained consistent across respondents, ranging from 37% to 41%. When compared to civilian and military populations, police rated higher in all aggressive acts except those involving severe violence (Straus & Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

Neidig et al. (1992a) also focused on work-related variables. The highest rate of domestic violence existed among narcotics and patrol officers, officers working night shifts, officers working more than 50 hours a week, and officers who used more than 19 sick days a year. A second study by Neidig and colleagues (1992b) yielded similar results. Surveying a sample of 1,042 police and auxiliary officers at a national Federation of Police (FOP) conference, they found approximately 24% of male and 22% of female officers reported relationship violence. Police officers also had a higher annual incidence of marital aggression when compared to civilian populations.

A study by the Southwestern Law Enforcement Institute (1995) stands among the first to survey police agencies about the problem of police domestic violence. Of the 123 departments responding, approximately 29% reported that domestic violence cases had increased. A large percentage of departments (79%) attributed such an increase to an increase in reporting due to changing social attitudes and values. Roughly 45% stated they have no specific policy for dealing with domestic violence and generally handled them on a case-by-case basis. When asked about discipline following a first-sustained offense, approximately 52% imposed

counseling upon the offending officer. After a second-sustained offense, approximately 48% replied that suspension and days off without pay served as proper discipline.

An investigation by the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, Domestic Violence Task Force, Office of the Inspector General (1997), provided a comprehensive view of domestic violence in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) from 1990 to 1997. Overall, the LAPD findings indicated the department sustained 40% of the 227 reported cases of domestic violence from 1990 to 1997. Discipline imposed appeared extremely light upon examination of the facts of each case. Alcohol abuse appeared a prominent factor in many of the cases. Additionally, the study found approximately 31% of all allegations involved repeat offenders. Only 6% of all reported incidents concluded with an arrest within the city limits of Los Angeles, while 16% resulted in arrest by jurisdictions outside the city limits.

Kirschman (1997) suggested a correlation with violence in police families: type of work assignment, sleep deprivation due to long hours and shift work, burnout, job dissatisfaction, poor coping skills, and excessive sick leave. The legitimate use of aggression often becomes necessary in policing, but such aggression may spill over into the officer's home life. Officers can become desensitized to verbal, physical, and emotional violence because they have become second nature due to work exposures (D'Angelo, 2000). D'Angelo suggests that police officers can actually become addicted to violence which involves the inability to control the amount, frequency, or duration of violence. The expression of anger and rage progresses over time with increases in amount and severity. Such interactions can ultimately result in homicide-suicide.

Police Alcohol Use and Homicide-Suicide

Alcohol use has long been characterized as a problem among police officers (Richmond, Wodak, Kehoe, & Heather, 1998; McNeill, 1996, McNeill & Wilson, 1993; Violanti, Marshall, & Howe, 1985). Davey, Obst, and Sheehan (2000) utilized the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) on a large sample of police officers and found that 32% scored at risk for harmful alcohol consumption range. Richmond, Kehoe, Hailstone, and colleagues (1999) found that 48% of their male and 40% of their female police sample were drinking alcohol to an excess. Alcohol use was even higher among younger police officers.

It is not uncommon to find a synergistic effect of alcohol use and suicide. Viqlanti (2004) suggested that certain traumatic police work exposures increased the risk of high level posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, which subsequently increased the risk of high alcohol use and suicide ideation. The combined impact of PTSD and increased alcohol use led to a ten-fold increase risk for suicide ideation.

Alcohol use is a common risk factor in homicide-suicides (Bossarte et al., 2006). In a review of factors associated with perpetration of a homicide followed by suicide where toxicological information was available, 34% of the perpetrators had detectible blood alcohol content during postmortem exams and other substances were identifiable in 18% of that same group (Morton, Runyan, Moracco, et al., 2003).

METHODS

Data on police homicide-suicides was collected from police_dv@yahoogroups.com, a website devoted to topics concerning domestic violence and related problems in police families. Accounts of police homicide-suicides were extracted from newspaper accounts of the incidents described on the website. A sample of 29 homicide-suicide cases were collected, ranging from January 1, 2003 to February 28, 2007. There were several newspaper articles on each incident, providing increased robustness of information for the present study. While some may question the validity of newspaper reports, Rainey and Runyan (1992) point out that newspapers are a viable source of information for intentional injury surveillance. They found that newspaper reports were decidedly more complete for variables of interest than reports filed with governmental officials in the area of the event, and have potential value in raising public awareness.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides a descriptive analysis of characteristics of the police homicide-suicide incident.

Based on reporting frequency, Table 1 suggests that police homicide-suicides are increasing yearly. There were approximately twice as many cases reported in 2006 as in the two previous years. The mean age of the homicide victim was approximately 33 years of age ($SD = 10.2$); approximately 39 years ($SD = 8.3$) was the mean age for the perpetrator. The majority of homicide victims were women ($n = 24$; 83%), however five of the victims were men killed by women police

Table 1.
Descriptive Characteristics of the Police
Homicide-Suicide Sample

Homicide Victim		
<u>Year of occurrence</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)**</u>
2003	1	3.4
2005	7	24.1
2006	15	51.7
2007*	3	10.3

<u>Age of victim</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)**</u>
7-30 yrs	8	38%
31-40 yrs	9	42%
41-56 yrs.	4	15%

<u>Gender of victim</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Male	5	17
Female	24	83

<u>Relationship to perpetrator</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Wife/ex-wife	16	55
Girlfriend/ex-girlfriend	8	28
Child	3	11
Husband	2	6

Homicide-Suicide Perpetrator		
<u>Age of perpetrator</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)**</u>
24-35 yrs.	6	35
36-40 yrs.	6	35
41-57 yrs.	5	30

<u>Gender of perpetrator</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Male	27	93
Female	2	7

<u>Weapon used</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Service Firearm	26	90
Other	2	10

<u>Rank level</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Patrol officer	15	52
Higher rank	14	48

<u>Type of department</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>(%)</u>
Local	22	76
State	6	21
Federal	1	3

Circumstances

<u>Motivation for act</u>	<i>n</i>	<i>(%)</i> **
Divorce/estrangement	10	35
Domestic violence	12	42
Marital problems	2	7
Other	1	4

<u>Presence of domestic violence</u>	<i>n</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Yes	18	62
No	11	38

<u>Past domestic violence</u>	<i>n</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Yes	20	70
No	9	30

N = 29

* - as of February, 2007

** - % do not add up to 100% due to missing cases

officer perpetrators. The primary weapon employed was police service firearm (90%). Most incidents occurred on the local police departmental level (76%) as opposed to state and federal level departments. The use of alcohol before or during the incident could not be determined from the data available. However, Comstock, Mallonee, Kruger, et al. (2003) reported that it is common to find alcohol use in the majority of homicide-suicide cases. Similar to the majority of nationwide homicide-suicides, the homicide victim was primarily a spouse or female acquaintance. In three cases, a child was also killed by the perpetrator.

A Description of Police Homicide-Suicide Cases

The following case descriptions are presented to further enhance an understanding of the police homicide-suicides in this sample.

Case 1

A county deputy jailer was fatally shot inside her home early Sunday in what police are calling a domestic-violence killing. The woman, 42 years of age, was shot in the chest in her home shortly after midnight Sunday. She died several hours later. The killing marks the third time in less than a week that domestic violence turned deadly. As authorities searched for the man Sunday in Tennessee and Arkansas, her car, which was stolen after the shooting, was found about 12:40 p.m.

The body of a man was inside the car, dead from a gunshot. Police were working to identify the man. Before the woman died, she identified the man who shot her as a corrections officer. Police have identified a corrections officer as the man they say killed his ex-girlfriend, and then himself in a domestic violence incident that turned deadly.

Case 2

A birthday argument between a guard and his wife escalated into a homicide-suicide last Wednesday night. Both were found dead on the second floor of their home just before 11 p.m. According to police, he shot his wife with a 9 mm pistol and then turned the gun on himself. Neighbors reportedly saw the couple arguing outside their home both earlier in the week and in the hours before the shooting. The husband believed his wife was having an affair with a co-worker. She had threatened a month earlier to leave him, friends said.

Case 3

A 33-year-old Police Deputy Inspector shot his 28-year-old wife several times, killing her. It happened on Friday night during an argument the couple had in their car. The officer had earlier approached his wife in a cafeteria and ordered her into the car. He later committed suicide. During the month prior to the homicide, the wife told friends she felt threatened and afraid. However she never filed any claims or notified the police. He was well-known as a campaigner against domestic violence, only weeks earlier receiving praise for his efforts in the protection of women.

Case 4

A county Sheriff's Office jailer shot his 4-year-old son, his wife, and then himself. The jailer called 911 and informed the dispatcher of the situation prior to turning the weapon on himself. Shortly after the killings, the Sheriff said that the jailer had been in good spirits and had not exhibited signs of depression or agitation at any time prior to the homicides. Last week, the Sheriff investigated allegations made by the jailer's wife, accusing the sheriff's office of not acting on information regarding abuse at the hands of her husband. The wife's father said Friday that he had contacted County officials multiple times to report domestic abuse, but officials did not act. He alleges his daughter was the victim of physical abuse, and said he had witnessed his daughter with black eyes.

Case 5

Sheriff kills wife, then himself - Two people are dead after an apparent homicide-suicide Saturday evening, the first violent deaths in the county this year. The county Sheriff said the wife died of multiple gunshot wounds at the hands of her estranged husband, 34, moments before he turned the gun on himself. The incident happened just before 5 p.m. at the residence of her brother. Evidently they had been having troubles. She died the same day she had left her husband and had gone to stay with her brother. Just before 5 p.m., the wife was sitting in her car in a relative's driveway just when the husband, 34, walked up to the vehicle and shot her several times. The family had three children, a grown child, a teen-aged son who was at the residence when the incident occurred, and a 7 year old daughter.

Case 6

A detective was stabbed and shot to death by her estranged husband yesterday - in front of their three children - before he turned the gun on himself, police said. About 2 p.m., the husband took a large kitchen knife and stabbed his wife several times in the back and torso, the police said, then took her semiautomatic handgun and shot her in the head. He then went outside and fatally shot himself - all while their three young children were home. Almost 18 months before she died, cops were called to their house when her husband threw a block of knives at her and then picked up one of them to threaten her. She declined to press charges. A major obstacle to a successful prosecution is that often the victim, because of fear or other concerns, will make a complaint, then later recant.

Case 7

Officers arrived at the home where an officer lived with his 29-year-old wife. The two were found dead inside the home. Information from family and friends indicate they were having some problems. The fatal gunshot wound to the officer appeared to have been self-inflicted, the chief said. Relatives and neighbors have told investigators the couple was having marital problems. They believe the wife was suffocated.

Case 8

The bodies of officer, 52, and his wife, 50, were found inside their home about 7:30 p.m. Monday, after neighbors

saw the couple argue in the front yard and heard shots fired in the home a short time later, police said. The wife filed for divorce last week, police said. Officer worked for the police force for 17 years, police said.

Conclusion

Data from the present sample suggests that homicide-suicide in police families appears to be increasing. However, the present results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and possible reporting bias to the website. It is likely, however, that the number of homicide-suicide cases reported is much lower than the actual number. In this sense our sample estimate is quite conservative and should serve only as a first look at this tragic topic.

The present results suggest that domestic violence coupled with exposure to violence and aggression which police officers encounter may be common triggers for homicide-suicide in police families. While exposure to violence at work cannot be changed, the extension of such violence into the police family can be reduced. The key to prevention of homicide-suicide may thus lie with reduction of domestic violence. Many departments are now considering a formal policy to deal with this problem. The Los Angeles Police Domestic Violence Task Force (1997, p. 39), for example, provided recommendations:

- Create specialized unit within Internal Affairs Division with the primary responsibility of conducting investigations of officers involved in domestic violence situations.
- Treat offending police officers no differently than any other citizen. A crime report should be taken in every instance where a crime is alleged or there exists evidence that a crime occurred. Make an arrest in every legally mandated instance.
- Refer every domestic violence investigation with prima facie evidence of criminal misconduct to the appropriate prosecuting agency in a timely manner.
- Do not discontinue domestic violence investigations merely because the victim recants or indicates unwillingness to testify in disciplinary hearings.
- Mandate termination of employees in serious cases of domestic violence where officers demonstrate by a convincing pattern that they cannot control their abusive conduct.

- Increase suspensions for sustained acts of domestic violence in length and severity. Mete out long-term suspensions or terminations to those who have repeated instances of sustained allegations.
- Document sustained allegations of misconduct and consider them in performance reviews and promotions.
- Develop a Batterers Program under the direction of the Behavioral Science Services Section. Require contracts to include mandatory counseling in all sustained complaints involving domestic violence.

Difficulty in the internal detection of police domestic violence exists for other reasons. Many victims will not report domestic violence incidents to authorities because of shame, guilt, or fear of reprisal. As one police spouse stated, "You don't anger your husband when he carries a gun." In reported incidents, police administrators may not take complaints seriously. They may not fully understand the dynamics of domestic violence and thus may fail to take proper action. Other supervisors may believe ignored domestic violence problems will solve themselves (Violanti, 2001).

Recent passage of the federal Domestic Violence Gun Ban Law prohibits persons convicted of domestic violence offenses from owning or using firearms. While the law intends to decrease the risk of injury or death, it may also add to obstructing detection of police domestic violence. Officers will increasingly hesitate to report other officers for domestic violence because such officers will have their firearms taken away and will likely lose their jobs. Chief John W. Lamb, head of the Denver Police Department's Civil Liability Bureau, succinctly stated, "The police department has no unarmed positions, so if this law is not changed, it will be career ending for those affected by it. If you can't carry a gun, you can't do your job" (cited in Clark, 1997).

We hope that this first attempt to categorize possible antecedents and demographics of police homicide-suicides will help to stimulate further research on this issue. Many national databases such as the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) are in the process of providing linkages of homicide-suicide incidents. With the addition of occupational linkages, such databases will allow a more comprehensive picture of this tragedy in police families.

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