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Abstract

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Suicide by cop.

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Author information**Abstract**

STUDY OBJECTIVE: "Suicide by cop" is a term used by law enforcement officers to describe an incident in which a suicidal individual intentionally engages in life-threatening and criminal behavior with a lethal weapon or what appears to be a lethal weapon toward law enforcement officers or civilians to specifically provoke officers to shoot the suicidal individual in self-defense or to protect civilians. The objective of this study was to investigate the phenomenon that some individuals attempt or commit suicide by intentionally provoking law enforcement officers to shoot them.

METHODS: We reviewed all files of officer-involved shootings investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department from 1987 to 1997. Cases met the following criteria: (1) evidence of the individual's suicidal intent, (2) evidence they specifically wanted officers to shoot them, (3) evidence they possessed a lethal weapon or what appeared to be a lethal weapon, and (4) evidence they intentionally escalated the encounter and provoked officers to shoot them.

RESULTS: Suicide by cop accounted for 11% (n=46) of all officer-involved shootings and 13% of all officer-involved justifiable homicides. Ages of suicidal individuals ranged from 18 to 54 years; 98% were male. Forty-eight percent of weapons possessed by suicidal individuals were firearms, 17% replica firearms. The median time from arrival of officers at the scene to the time of the shooting was 15 minutes with 70% of shootings occurring within 30 minutes of arrival of officers. Thirty-nine percent of cases involved domestic violence. Fifty-four percent of suicidal individuals sustained fatal gunshot wounds. All deaths were classified by the coroner as homicides, as opposed to suicides.

CONCLUSION: Suicide by cop is an actual form of suicide. The most appropriate term for this phenomenon is law enforcement-forced-assisted suicide. Law enforcement agencies may be able to develop strategies for early recognition and handling of law enforcement-forced-assisted suicide (suicide by cop). Health care providers involved in the evaluation of potentially suicidal individuals and in the resuscitation of officer-involved shootings should be aware of law enforcement-forced-assisted suicide as a form of suicide.

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