Suicide by police: a proposed typology of law enforcement officer-assisted suicide

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Abstract A typology of suicide by police was created by separating 143 such incidents from a database of 174 police shooting incidents. The 143 incidents were found to consist of three main categories: Direct Confrontations, in which suicidal subjects instigated attacks on police, Disturbed Interventions, in which potentially suicidal subjects took advantage of police intervention, and Criminal Interventions, in which subjects preferred death to submission. These three categories were then subdivided into nine types. Two judges obtained a reliability coefficient of 0.87 for distinguishing suicide by cop, and 0.58 for placement into the nine types. Meaningful distinctions among the types were found on three variables: subject age, real danger, and lethality.

Introduction
In 1998, five empirical studies of the phenomenon colloquially known as "suicide by cop" appeared (Hutson et al., 1998; Kennedy et al., 1998; Lord, 1998; Parent and Verdun-Jones, 1998; Wilson et al., 1998). Taken collectively, these studies support the conclusion that at least 10 percent of police deadly force incidents involve suicide by cop situations. The issue of suicide by cop has also surfaced in recent appellate court cases (Martinez v. County of Los Angeles, 1996; Palmquist v. Selvik, 1997), and an October 16, 1998 segment of ABC’s “20/20” focused on the phenomenon. Various police training programs are beginning to pay more attention to tactics for dealing with such incidents (cf. Homant et al., 1999, for a review of the literature on suicide by cop).

Because of its implications for community relations, for police training and tactics, for debriefing officers involved in such shootings, and for resolving possible legal actions that result from such incidents, it is important to clarify the diversity of incidents that may be referred to under the heading: "Suicide by police."[1] The purpose of this research is to develop a typology that can be used for classifying suicide by cop incidents, and to explore ways in which these incidents vary among categories.

Defining suicide by cop
The first formal definition of suicide by cop was offered by Geberth (1993, p. 105): “Incidents in which individuals, bent on self-destruction, engage in life-
threatening and criminal behavior in order to force the police to kill them.” One of the key advantages of this definition is that it focuses on the motivation of the subject and the nature of the incident itself, rather than the outcome. Thus, in the incidents that we review below, several outcomes are possible, including being killed or seriously wounded by police, a completed or attempted suicide by the subject, being overcome by less than lethal force, surrender, or even a complete police withdrawal.

Basis for this research
It should be pointed out that the subject’s “life-threatening behavior” in a suicide by cop incident may be either apparent or real. Some suicide by cop incidents involve death or serious threat to others, while in other situations the subject uses a prop and does not actually endanger anyone other than himself or herself. Homant et al. (1999) reviewed a collection of 123 suicide by cop incidents obtained from a variety of sources in order to determine both their real and perceived dangerousness.

It was found that in 56 percent of the incidents police or others were killed, wounded, or seriously threatened by the subject. In 22 percent of the incidents the subject merely bluffed being a threat, typically by using some sort of prop, such as an airgun. In the remaining 22 percent of the cases a more ambiguous level of danger was present (though often at a level that justified use of deadly force by the police).

In reviewing those 123 cases it became evident that suicide by cop subsumed a wide variety of behavior and that some sort of typology of cases was called for in order to come to a better understanding of what was involved in such incidents.

Previous research has resulted in various distinctions being made in suicide by cop situations. Hutson et al. (1998), for example, noted several distinct types of cases: cases stemming from domestic violence; offenders facing significant prison time; subjects with a history of alcohol or drug abuse; and subjects with a psychiatric or suicidal history.

Lord (1998) found her sample to be composed of three major groups: domestic disputes, mental illness, and criminal offenders liable to be returned to prison. She also noted the distinction between planned and unplanned attempts, with the bulk of her cases being unplanned. Homant et al. (1999) noted that planned vs. unplanned scenarios led to differences in how the subject approached and interacted with police. The present research, then, began with the assumption that the distinction between planned vs. unplanned confrontations, as well as the distinction between disturbed persons vs. “normal” criminal offenders, would be important.
Method
The basic methodology for this study involved compiling a database of suicide by cop incidents, subjectively sorting the incidents into groups of like incidents, defining the various categories thus created, and then determining how reliably an independent judge could assign the incidents to the categories that had been created. Once the incidents had all been assigned to a type, it was then possible to examine the various types to see if they presented any systematic differences in either the dangerousness or the outcome of the incidents.

The database
In order to develop a typology of suicide by cop incidents, we began with the 123 incidents that were used in the research cited above (see Homant et al., 1999, for a full description of the sources of these incidents). The majority of these incidents were obtained either from the professional literature or from newspaper databases. These incidents were supplemented by an additional 22 incidents that were obtained subsequent to that study. The additional incidents came from three main sources: a continuing search of newspaper databases, cases supplied by prosecutors who had become aware of our interest in the area, and a search of the legal (appellate court) literature on police shooting cases.

To the 145 cases that were tentatively designated as suicide by cop, we added 29 incidents that had been collected from the same general sources but had been excluded because some element of suicide by cop was missing. Typically, the subjects in these cases did not expose themselves to police fire at the time they were posing a threat, or they posed a threat only to themselves, or they appeared to be engaged in a bona fide (though foolhardy) escape attempt. These 29 cases were included in this study in order to help clarify what suicide by cop was not, and to determine whether an independent judge could reliably exclude these cases. As will be noted below, a few of these cases, on reconsideration, came to be included as suicide by cop incidents, while a few of the original suicide by cop incidents were excluded.

Classifying suicide by cop
Most of the studies of suicide by cop referred to above used their respective authors’ subjective judgments in applying Geberth’s definition, or a slight variant. An exception is Hutson et al. (1998), who required that the subject in each case meet four specific criteria: evidence of suicidal intent, specifically wanting officers to shoot, possession of a lethal weapon or a facsimile, and intentional escalation of the incident to provoke officers to shoot in self-defense or defense of others.

While we were influenced by the Hutson et al. criteria, we found them too limiting for our purposes. With respect to the fourth criterion, for example,
some of the incidents, especially those that we will refer to as Kamikaze Attacks, occurred so rapidly that there was no “escalation” of the incident. Also, many of our accounts provided very little background information on the subject. Therefore, we were often unable to assess prior intent separately from the behavior in the incident that showed that the subject wanted the police to kill him or her.

In short, in order to classify an incident as suicide by cop, we required that the subject behaved in a way that seemed intended to provoke the police to shoot. Specifically, this required either deliberately exposing oneself while posing a threat to police or bystanders, or, in a standoff situation, knowingly forcing police to attack while harming or threatening to harm hostages or bystanders.

The above criteria were supplemented by several considerations. First, background information, such as leaving a note describing what one intended to do, could cause an otherwise ambiguous situation to be classified as suicide by cop.

Also, if the subject slowly advanced on one or more police officers, while armed only with a knife, and continued to advance despite the officers’ warning and commands, and despite their drawn and aimed weapons, this was sufficient to assume suicide by cop.

On the other hand, a hopeless gun battle was not enough to classify an incident as suicide by cop, especially when the gun battle resulted from “normal” criminal activity. In such a case the subject must have either deliberately exposed himself or herself to police fire, or verbalized the wish for police to assault his or her position.

A suicidal person who merely refused to cooperate with the police is not a suicide by cop, unless the person turned on the police and threatened them. Even here, if the main purpose of the threat to police was to keep one’s weapon, perhaps for one’s planned suicide, rather than to get the police to “do the job for me,” then this would not be classified as suicide by cop. Finally, a long-shot escape attempt was not classified as a suicide by cop, nor was an irrational attack on police in the course of resisting police intervention. In these cases there must have been some independent evidence of suicidal intent, such as a note or some verbalization.

Results

Distinguishing suicide by cop

The first task, then, was to determine the degree of agreement in classifying an incident as suicide by cop. It should be pointed out that a very high degree of agreement could be obtained in this type of task if “all police shootings” constituted the database, since many of them do not even raise the issue of
suicide by cop. In the present case, however, 29 incidents were excluded precisely because they raised some concern about whether suicide by cop was the subject’s motive.

Upon a review of the 174 incidents, we determined that 31 of the incidents did not fit the criteria for suicide by cop. Two of the 29 originally excluded cases were “promoted” to suicide by cop incidents; four of the original suicide by cop incidents were excluded.

**Excluded incidents**

Although not the original goal of this study, we then attempted to determine if the excluded cases fit any pattern. In fact, four separate subcategories of excluded cases emerged. The bulk of the cases, 18 (62 percent of the “excludeds”), were standoff or barricade situations. These cases typically presented a high level of danger, and often resulted in the subject being killed, though more often through suicide ($n = 11$) than at the hands of the police ($n = 4$). An illustrative case follows:

*Mario Patrone: excluded/standoff*

A woman gets a restraining order and tries to end a ten-month dating relationship with 30-year old Mario Patrone. Patrone forces his way into her apartment, sexually assaults her and threatens to kill her and himself. She runs out of the apartment and calls the police. When police arrive, Patrone shoots twice at them through a glass door. Police take cover and a standoff begins. SWAT teams arrive. Over the next 19 hours they try to negotiate. During several phone calls they are unable to calm Patrone down. He is drinking beer and peering at officers through the windows. He claims to have 300 rounds of ammunition and regularly threatens the police verbally. Finally, police shoot tear gas in and then enter the apartment. Patrone has shot himself in the head and died. (Adapted from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 30 and 31, 1996.)

**Comment:** Although desperate and suicidal, and although he did engage in extremely threatening behavior toward the police, Patrone never actually tried to get the police to kill him. He never deliberately exposed himself to police fire.

The other excluded cases fell into three categories: interrupted suicides ($n = 4$) were cases in which the individual either did not turn on the police, or seemed to react reflexively or angrily to police intervention rather than in an attempt to provoke a police shooting. Mistakes ($n = 4$) involved either the police or the subject reacting too quickly, for example, in response to a sudden movement. While these cases may have involved suicidal motivation by the subject, there was no evidence to support such a conclusion. Desperate escapes ($n = 5$) involved cases where the subject engaged in an impulsive or irrational shootout with police but appeared to be making an effort to escape. The most difficult of these cases to classify was as follows:

*Roberto Perez, aka Dion Bailey: excluded/desperate escape*

Perez, age 25, was a pimp and drug dealer, with a previous conviction for armed robbery. He may have been upset that a recent traffic stop found him in possession of $4,000 in cash and
he may have feared that the police were about to investigate his activities. It is suspected that he used phony 911 calls to try to lure any available police officer to a strip mall. Before an officer can respond, however, he spots a Long Branch police officer entering a Chinese restaurant. He walks up to him and kills him with two shots to the head. He then takes the officer’s car and leads police on a wild 60-mile chase. During the chase he yells curses and threats over the dead officer’s radio at the pursuing police. He puts the lights and siren on as he races up the freeway, shooting at and grazing a state trooper whom he happens to pass. Twice he stops to carjack a new car at gunpoint, possibly because he is running out of gas. Finally he is cornered at the George Washington Bridge as cars are stopped ahead to pay the toll. He swallows a wedding ring and a postage-stamp-sized photo of a former lover and her two daughters. Then he shoots himself and dies as he crashes into the car ahead of him. A bridge officer is hurt by “friendly fire” when he approaches the wrecked car, indicating how close the pursuit was. (Adapted from Newsday, November 22, 1997; New York Daily News, November 22, 23 and 24, 1997.)

Comment: If Perez’ intent from the start was to die “in a blaze of glory” after killing an officer and leading police on a wild chase, then this would be a suicide by cop incident. Although his use of the police siren casts doubt on his escape attempt, nevertheless his hijacking of two cars and desperate rush for the bridge make the whole episode seem spontaneous. The suicidal denouement seems more like an unwillingness to give the police the satisfaction of shooting him. This was a suicidal attack, but probably not a “suicide by cop.”

Major categories of suicide by cop
As expected, the 143 suicide by cop incidents were readily divisible into categories, which we term Direct Confrontation, Disturbed Intervention, and Criminal Intervention, respectively. Each of these categories, in turn, was divisible into two to four types.

I. Direct Confrontation
We placed 44 cases (30.8 percent of the suicide by cop incidents) in the category Direct Confrontation. These situations have in common that the subject plans ahead of time to attack the police or other law enforcement agents in order to be killed by them. Incidents in this category were found to fit into one of four types, reflecting the manner in which the subject interacted with the police.

Ia. Kamikaze attack. In this type, the subject uses deadly force to suddenly attack a police station or a group of police officers. There is no immediate provocation that leads up to the attack. Five incidents (3.5 percent) fit this type. An example is as follows:

Ia. Kamikaze attack: Marvin Terry
On May 14, 1998, Marvin Terry, age 25, calls his brother-in-law and asks him to take care of his son if anything happens to him. He sounds depressed. Then, he dribbles a basketball into the main entrance of a Detroit police precinct and announces that he is going to “kill
everyone." He says, “Everybody down, Detroit ain’t shit.” At first, four officers behind the front desk do not take him seriously. When he bounces the basketball toward them and pulls out two guns they order him to drop his weapons. He points a weapon at an officer and says, “Now what are you going to do?,” a number of times as he (Terry) backs up. Then he riddles the station with bullets as he crouches behind a vending machine with a handgun and a sawed off rifle, saying, “I’m invincible.” Bullets hit the front desk and a back wall, but the four officers and three civilians in the room are unhurt. The four officers now fire back, as Terry crouches behind two vending machines reloading. Four other officers leave the rear of the building, circle around, and fire through the front window. They shoot some 50 to 75 times. Terry is hit six times. He is taken to a hospital and later dies. Terry’s behavior greatly surprised those who knew him, though he was described as “having mood swings” and being depressed over a break-up with his son’s mother. There is speculation that an attack on a police station in the television show “Homicide: Life on the Streets” might have inspired Terry. (Adapted from the Detroit News, May 15, 1998, and from the official Detroit Police Department investigation.)

Comment: It is perhaps significant that no officers were killed in this or in the other four attacks on police. In one case an officer was seriously wounded, and in a second case an officer was saved from a serious stabbing injury by his vest.

**IIb. Controlled attack.** This type differs from the Kamikaze in that the police are confronted rather than attacked. Typically, the subject approaches one or more officers, confronts them with a weapon, or a threatened weapon, and demands that they kill him or her, or else he or she will escalate the confrontation into a deadly assault. In retrospect, the subject may or may not have possessed a deadly weapon. Six cases (4.2 percent) fit this type. An example is:

**IIb. Controlled attack: Henry Brown**

On January 6, 1997, in Shelby, North Carolina, Henry Brown, a 32-year old security guard parks his car in the middle of the street, approaches a nearby police station on foot, and starts yelling. He has two handguns. Thirty police surround him. He says, “Do your job, it’s gonna end today.” A sheriff, an experienced negotiator, talks to him for 45 minutes. Brown starts to withdraw from the conversation, then fires a shot, hitting himself in the leg (apparently on purpose). Then Brown raises the gun up toward the sheriff. A police marksman fires, killing Brown. Described by relatives as "paranoid", Brown had moved south from New York about a year earlier, seeking a new start. (Adapted from The Buffalo News, April 26, 1998, and ABC “20/20" transcript, October 16, 1998.)

**Ic. Manipulated confrontation.** In the manipulated confrontation the subject orchestrates a situation in order to get the police to investigate. The subject may call the police to report a crime or to say that he or she is suicidal. Another tactic is to drive carelessly to provoke a traffic stop, possibly using a chase to further engage the officer. The subject then confronts the police with real or apparent deadly force. We placed 22 cases (15.4 percent) in this category.

**Ic. Manipulated confrontation: Catherine Falzarone**

Catherine Falzarone, age 42 with history of suicide attempts, calls her police officer husband
to ask where the handgun is. She claims that she wants to unload it because their young nephew is coming over to play. After he tells her, she says, “Nobody can help me any more. I love you.” She also writes a note to the unknown officer who she expects to kill her, apologizing, but saying she was too “chicken” to kill herself and hoping he wouldn’t get into trouble. Then she calls the police and tells them that a woman friend is trying to shoot her. “You better kill her,” she says, hanging up. Later she calls again, says that she is at a mall, and plans to kill the first person she sees. Three police arrive and a standoff ensues. They see she has a gun. She says it’s loaded and refuses to drop it. The police retreat, but she points the weapon at two officers. A supervisor orders them to shoot. She is hit seven times. As she dies she says, “Thank you, God, thank you, God.” The gun is empty. (Adapted from the Daily News, June 11, 1996.)

*Id. Dangerous confrontation.* The dangerous confrontation is similar to the manipulated confrontation in that the subject deliberately orchestrates the arrival of the police. In this case, however, the subject commits a serious crime, and/or creates a much higher level of danger for police or hostages. The subject is more interested in bringing the police than in getting away with the crime. In an extreme case, the subject may desire to take a police officer along when he or she dies. We placed 11 cases (7.7 percent) in this category.

*Id. Dangerous confrontation: Alan Griffin*

Alan Griffin, age 21, had history of arrests, was wanted for violation of parole, and was depressed over a domestic dispute. He takes a shotgun and heads for a bank. On the way he shoots and seriously injures a passing jogger. He steals a car and drives to the bank. Entering the bank he orders everyone to lie down and say the Lord’s Prayer. He joins them in the praying, mixing in some obscenities. He kills two bank employees and injures another. He never tries for any money. He watches out the window until police arrive, then he exits the bank, grabbing a man using the ATM as hostage. Police surround him. Holding the hostage by the neck he fires several times at police. Then he pushes his hostage down and kills him. Police then open fire, killing him. Witnesses say he “died with a twisted smile on his face.” (Adapted from the Daily News, March 12, 1997 and court depositions.)

**II. Disturbed Intervention**

We placed the majority of the cases, 82 (57.3 percent), in the broad category of Disturbed Intervention. These incidents have in common that the subject is acting in an irrational, emotionally disturbed manner. The subject may be overtly suicidal, or may seize on the opportunity of police arrival to become suicidal.

Although it may be obvious that the disturbed behavior would bring the police, there is no evidence that the subject is deliberately attempting to create police intervention. Some degree of standoff is often present in these situations. Incidents in this broad classification seemed to fit into one of three types: suicide intervention, disturbed domestic, and disturbed person.

**IIa. Suicide intervention.** The subject appears to be engaging in a bonafide suicide attempt, but is hesitant and ambivalent. Although he or she may have
previously thought about suicide by cop, the current suicide attempt does not appear to be a manipulation to bring the police. Either because the person objects to the police attempt to prevent the suicide, or because their arrival provides a handy alternative, the subject then threatens the police. We found 29 (20.3 percent) of the incidents to be of this type.

**IIa. Suicide intervention: Alex Guttierrez**

A mother is concerned about her 23-year old son, Alex Guttierrez, behavior. The previous day he yelled profanities at her and threatened suicide. She calls the police about him twice, once when she hears gunshots outside, and once when he breaks a window after she won't let him in the house. After an officer arrives to talk to her, Alex returns and wants to come in. The officer goes outside to talk to him. Alex points a gun at his own head, and tells the officer that he wants to say good-bye to his mother. Gun drawn, the officer orders him to put the gun down. Alex points the gun at the officer. The officer fires twice, and Alex falls to the ground with wounds to his hand and abdomen. Alex then raises the gun and shoots himself in the head, fatally (technically the death is a suicide). (Adapted from the *Denver Post*, May 22, 1997).

**IIb. Disturbed domestic.** The disturbed domestic begins with what is primarily a domestic conflict (involving an immediate family member, lover, former lover, etc.). Police intervention during or immediately after the domestic fight is met with hopeless, suicidal resistance. We found 24 (16.8 percent) incidents to be of this type.

**IIb. Disturbed domestic: Thomas Gray**

Thomas Gray was a 17 year old learning disabled youth. When his girlfriend attempted to end their relationship he tried to jump in front of traffic. He was hospitalized but released after a few hours. He made up with his girlfriend, but after several weeks she again ended the relationship. Armed with a pellet gun, designed as a replica of a 0.357, he enters the supermarket where she is working. Police are called. He runs when police try to stop him. Police see he has a gun and yell for all in the store to get down. They chase him up and down the aisles. At the checkout counter, Gray points the “gun” at a man and his nine-year old daughter. Police shoot and kill him. (Adapted from the *Denver Post*, May 4, 1995.)

**IIc. Disturbed person.** With this type, a drunk, drug influenced, mentally ill, or otherwise disturbed person is acting strangely or dangerously. The person is not obviously suicidal prior to the police intervention, though there may be a past history of suicidal thoughts or behavior. If the person is engaged in criminal behavior, there is an irrational, desperate quality to it (and little if any realistic attempt to evade detection or arrest). The person resists police intervention in a way that indicates a preference for death over submission. The subject was not acting disturbed in order to provoke police intervention, nor can the subject’s resistance be explained primarily as an attempt to avoid criminal penalties. We found 29 (20.3 percent) cases to be of this type.

**IIc. Disturbed person: Anderson Arias**

Anderson Arias, age 23, gets in an argument at a bar. He leaves, but then returns and fires two shotgun blasts at the bar’s back door. Police confront him at a nearby gas station. At first
he lies down on the ground in response to a police command. Then, as more officers arrive, he gets back up. He ignores police commands, dares them to shoot him, and then walks toward the shotgun he had dropped. Nine officers have him surrounded. He hesitates, then picks up the shotgun and begins to aim at the officers. Police shoot and kill him. (Adapted from the *Los Angeles Times*, November 12, 1993.)

III. Criminal Intervention

We placed 17 (11.9 percent) of the incidents in the general category of Criminal Intervention. This category begins with what is essentially a normal or ordinary crime. The subject has an expectation of getting away with the offense. Police intervention is unwelcome and basically unexpected. The subject, however, prefers death to arrest and, giving up any hope of escape, prefers to be killed by the police. This category was found to contain two types: major crime and minor crime.

IIIa. Major crime. Major crime refers to incidents in which the subject’s main motive for resistance to the police appears to be an unwillingness to go to jail or prison. Often this involves someone on parole or probation, or at least someone who has previously done time. We found nine (6.3 percent) of the incidents to be of this type.

**IIIa. Major crime: Richard Anderson**

While on parole, Richard Anderson, age 29, is caught by a homeowner while attempting a B&E in Texas City, Texas. The homeowner pursues Anderson in a car chase, while calling the police on his cellular phone. The police join the chase. During the chase, Anderson jettisons a rifle and a shotgun. Forty-five minutes later, Anderson abandons his car and runs between some homes. Police find him holding a pistol to his head and threatening suicide. The officers talk to him for two hours. Finally he turns and points his gun at the police; they shoot and kill him. (Adapted from the *Houston Chronicle*, September 2, 1998.)

*Comment*: Although an attempted B&E is not necessarily a crime that carries a stiff prison sentence, the fact that Anderson was on parole makes it likely that his primary motive for seeking death was to avoid a return to prison. We do not doubt that his escape attempt was a sincere one.

IIIb. Minor crime. In these incidents, police intervene in a minor crime, such as a simple assault, or a traffic stop, etc. Rather than a fear of imprisonment, the subject seems to resent and resist police intervention as a matter of principle. The individual may become ego involved and escalate the resistance until it does become a major incident. The original incident was not planned, but someone with underlying suicidal motivation may seize the opportunity of the (consciously) unwanted police intervention. These incidents are distinguished from IIC, Disturbed person, mainly in that the person did not seem to be psychologically disturbed prior to the police intervention. We found eight (5.6 percent) of the incidents to be of this type.
IIIb. Minor crime: John Luck

John Luck, age 29, was accused of child abuse by his former girlfriend. He also broke off relations with his mother and sister, and there was a warrant out on him for probation violation. He was a habitual traffic offender, and the warrant was evidently a battery charge for hitting the former girlfriend’s 11-year old son. He gets in a traffic accident and leaves the scene. Two officers investigating the accident are directed to a motel room where Luck is staying. They knock on the door, guns drawn. When Luck opens the door he is pointing a gun at the closest officer. The other officer fires four shots at Luck but misses. There is a three-hour standoff, with six police outside the motel room door. In a phone conversation with him, Luck says he is committed to dying that day and will take officers with him if they get in the way. He says he has a powerful gun and they’d better put on their bullet-proof vests. Finally the police use tear gas to flush him out. He bolts from the room and points a gun at officers. He is shot and killed. His gun proves to be an “air powered dart gun” that looked realistic. Police then learn that a 21-year old woman was in the room with Luck. She says that they were committed to dying together, because he didn’t want to go to jail. (Adapted from the Louisville Courier-Journal, April 6, 7, 8, 14, and 21, 1993.)

Comment: Although it is possible that Luck was mainly concerned about going to jail, it does not appear that he was in trouble for anything that would have resulted in much jail time, if any. This seems more like a desperate person whose life was unraveling and who was not about to face any more problems.

Evaluating the typology

A typology such as we have proposed here should have three characteristics. First, the categories should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive; that is, each incident should fit best in one and only one category. Second, judges working independently should achieve essentially the same results (rater reliability). And third, once incidents are grouped by type there should be some predictable differences between the types (construct validity).

A decision tree

The typology achieves exclusivity and exhaustiveness by establishing a series of decision points. In rating any given incident, the first task is to determine whether it fits the broad concept of suicide by cop. Given that it is a suicide by cop, the next decision is whether the incident was planned by the subject. If so, this puts it in category I. If not planned, it is either a II or a III. To distinguish between II and III, one must determine whether the subject was exhibiting some sort of disturbed behavior (category II), or whether the subject was engaged in more or less normal or ordinary crime (category III). Once the incident is classified into one of the three main categories, the final decision involves assigning it to a type. Within category I, the first distinction concerns whether the subject approached the police (Ia or Ib) or whether the subject set things up for the police to intervene (Ic or Id). The distinction between Ia and Ib or likewise between Ic and Id then becomes a matter of degree.
The second main category, Disturbed Interventions, merits more comment here. There would seem to be no end to the possible subdivisions of “disturbed person.” Indeed, many of the subjects had characteristics of all three types: they were suicidal, there was an indication of generally disturbed behavior (usually related to alcohol, drugs, or mental illness), and there was a domestic conflict involved. Nevertheless, it seemed reasonable to try to bring some order out of this global category.

Therefore, if the subject’s behavior was plainly suicidal prior to the police intervening, the incident was categorized as a IIa. If the incident began as a domestic dispute, it was categorized as IIb. All other disturbed persons were classified IIc, which therefore became a sort of residual group. Certainly, once more incidents of this type are accumulated, it may make sense to further subdivide the IIc type.

Rater reliability
To summarize the above section, the rating task was routinized as a series of decision points according to which each of the 174 incidents was first separated into “excludeds” versus suicides by cop, then subdivided into one of three main categories, and finally assigned to one of the nine suicide by cop types. A graduate student in counseling was recruited to provide a measure of rater reliability.

After being thoroughly trained on the nuances of suicide by cop, he rated each of the 174 incidents according to the criteria described above. His ratings were then compared with the rating that had been assigned each incident by the two authors.

On the distinction between suicide by cop versus excluded, the two sets of ratings showed 96.5 percent agreement. Expressed as a reliability coefficient ($\phi$) this is 0.87 (cf. Hays, 1963, p. 604). Given that there was agreement that an incident was suicide by cop, there was 78 percent agreement for placement into the three main categories; $\phi = 0.74$. For placement into the nine types, the agreement was 60 percent; $\phi = 0.58[2]$. In examining the disagreements, it was clear that in many cases a lack of detail meant that key aspects of the subject’s motivation had to be inferred. In other cases, however, there was sufficient detail but the resulting scenario was simply so convoluted that it offered more than one or two interpretations. Distinguishing the disturbed person (IIc) from either the dangerous confrontation (Id) or the minor crime (IIIb) was often quite problematic. Given that suicidal individuals are often ambivalent and contradictory, however, some disagreement among judges in classifying suicide by cop incidents is not necessarily a fault of the typology itself.
Validity
Having determined that the typology could be reliably applied to the sample of 174 incidents, we then examined the incidents as a function of the type in which they were placed. Table I shows the distribution of incidents according to type, and presents three variables on which the incidents were compared.

The demographic variable age was available for about two-thirds of the subjects. One benefit of this variable is that it played virtually no role in the categorization of the incidents (although technically judges were not “blind” as to age). As can be seen in Table I, the distribution of age by subgroups appears to follow a predictable pattern. The more criminal and aggressive the subject’s behavior is, the younger the age for that category. Because the \( n \) for many of these subtypes is quite small, this trend should be considered merely suggestive; nevertheless, the differences in age according to type were in fact significant (\( F = 2.11; \) df \( 8/89; p = 0.05 \)).

A second demographic variable should also be mentioned at this point. There were 13 females (9.1 percent) among the suicide by cop subjects (none in the excluded cases). While this number is too low for a statistical analysis, it seems noteworthy that none of the females was represented in the two “attack” types (Ia and Ib), and only one female incident stemmed from a domestic disturbance (IIb). However, the distribution of females in the three major categories mirrored the distribution of the overall sample rather closely: 30.8 percent, 61.5 percent, and 7.7 percent in categories I, II, and III, respectively.

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<td>Suicide by police (total)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Direct Confrontation</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ia. Kamikaze attack</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ib. Controlled attack</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ic. Manipulated confrontation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Id. Dangerous confrontation</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Disturbed Intervention</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iia. Suicide intervention</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIB. Disturbed domestic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iic. Disturbed person</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Criminal Intervention</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIa. Major crime</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIIb. Minor crime</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Percentages are based on only the 143 suicide by police incidents. Age was available for 118 of the 174 subjects. Danger was rated on a 6-point scale, with 1 representing the highest level of real danger, and 6 representing very low danger. Lethal was measured on a 4-point scale, with 1 indicating that the subject died and 4 indicating that the subject surrendered peacefully.
The variable “Danger” refers to the extent to which police or others were killed, injured, or placed at risk by the subject. This was scored on a 6-point scale, with 1 representing cases where the subject killed someone in the incident, and 6 representing incidents in which the subject used a replica or merely bluffed having a firearm (cf. Homant et al., 1999, for a more complete explanation of this variable). Looking at the major categories, Direct Confrontation had the lowest level of danger (3.73), which is to be expected because the use of a replica or prop was most likely to occur in these pre-planned situations. The differences among the three major categories were statistically significant: $F = 5.91$, df $2/140$, $p = 0.01$.

Despite the fact that Direct Confrontation was the least dangerous, two of its subtypes, kamikaze attacks (2.80) and dangerous confrontations (2.82), had the highest levels of danger. This, too, is to be expected because these scenarios are based on very direct threats to police or others. It is only because they constituted a relatively low percentage of the category I cases that the overall category remains the least dangerous of the three major categories. It is also quite understandable that the disturbed domestics (IIb) and the major crimes (IIla) would be somewhat higher on danger, since both are likely to involve some level of assault and possibly even homicide. The differences in danger among the nine types were significantly different: $F = 4.04$, df $8/134$, $p = 0.01$. (Because of the low $n$s for many of the types, post hoc comparisons were not performed.)

The variable “Lethal” refers to the outcome to the subject. It was scored on a 4-point scale, where 1 indicates that the subject was killed (either by police or conventional suicide), 2 indicates that lethal force was used but the subject survived, 3 indicates that the subject was overcome by less than lethal force, and 4 indicates that the subject surrendered without force having to be used. Overall differences in lethality were not significant. In examining the data, however, it was noted that, of the 12 cases where a subject was successfully overcome using less than lethal force, seven occurred with suicide intervention (IIa). This difference proved to be fairly significant: chi-square (1 df, $N = 143$) = 6.60, $p = 0.02$. While this finding may take advantage of numerous chance possibilities, it does make intuitive sense. If police are aware that they are involved in a suicide intervention, they may be more prepared to employ some level of non-lethal force. Also, since the subject is already hesitating in the suicide attempt (and turning on the police may be mainly an effort to resolve ambivalence), the subject may be more compliant once some level of force is applied. In any event, because of possible tactical implications, this relationship certainly merits further investigation.
**Discussion**

This research has found that suicide by cop can be reliably distinguished from a group of related incidents, and can be accounted for by three basic categories, in turn subdivided into nine different types. Reasonable rater reliability was achieved in assigning cases to types, and meaningful distinctions among the types were found in terms of age, danger, and lethality. Before drawing any implications from our results, several weaknesses need to be addressed.

First, the number of cases in several of the types is too small to permit confident generalizations about these types. We would prefer a minimum of 20 cases before placing a high level of confidence in the characteristics of a particular type.

Second, although our sample of suicide by cop incidents is reasonably representative, in the sense of being drawn from several sources, it may over-represent cases in which the subject was killed by the police. Such incidents, we believe, are more likely to be noted in the literature, described in the popular media, and end up as court cases. A different sampling approach may well find a different distribution of incidents from that shown in Table I, although we believe that the basic nine types will continue to show up in other samples.

Finally, there is a possible methodological weakness, in that our findings on rater reliability and validity are based on the same sample of incidents from which the typology was derived. New incidents might be more difficult to assign to these types. To put it briefly, cross-validation is needed.

**Implications**

In the meantime, however, this research has shown that meaningful differences exist among suicide by cop incidents. Different types of suicide by cop incidents appear to present the police with different types of subjects, in terms of age, dangerousness, and commitment to suicide. Some preliminary evidence was found that various less than lethal force tactics may be more effective with the suicide intervention type (IIa) than with other types of suicide by police. This finding certainly merits more research exploration.

There are two research strategies for learning more about suicide by police situations and how to handle them. One is to examine the wide variety of situations that qualify as suicide by police and to look for different subtypes; this has been the primary logic of the present research. An equally helpful method would be to focus on a fairly narrow type of situation (e.g. barricaded gunman), of which suicide by cop makes up some significant subset, in order to see whether the suicide by police incidents present any unique problems or opportunities. It is hoped that the present typology will help to inform such research so that all are clear about the nature of the phenomenon being explored.
Finally, a word should be said about the underlying “theory” of suicide by police. While one can learn empirically how to deal with a type of situation without understanding why such situations develop, most observers would no doubt agree that a better understanding of a phenomenon should help to produce more effective training and tactics.

In the case of suicide by police, there has been much speculation but little if any actual research as to subjects’ underlying motivations. We have previously catalogued some 14 different motives that have been proposed to explain the various subjects’ motivations (Homant et al., 1999). These motives include the psychodynamic (e.g. expiating unconscious guilt feelings through death at the hand of an authority figure) and the more practical (e.g. concern about payout on an insurance policy if one commits traditional suicide). While it is well beyond the scope of the present research, we believe that there may be some systematic differences in subjects’ motivations, both for suicide and specifically for suicide by police, according to the particular types that we have identified. Thus, assigning an incident to a particular type may help to disentangle a subject’s motivation, and this, in turn, may further help police in identifying and responding to suicide by police situations.

Notes
1. Several terms have been proposed for the colloquialism “suicide by cop.” Hutson et al. (1998) recommended “law enforcement – force-assisted suicide.” Homant et al. (1999) preferred the simpler “police officer assisted suicide,” and Wilson et al. (1998) used “police-assisted suicide.” The court in Palmquist v. Selvik (1997) adopted the term “suicide by police.” While each of these phrasings has its own connotation, it still comes down to suicide by cop.

2. The 60 percent agreement for type was for all 143 suicide by cop incidents. If we limit the comparison to the 108 cases for which there was agreement on the general category, then the ratings for type had a 77 percent agreement ($\Phi = 0.68$).

References
Denver Post (1997), May 22.
Houston Chronicle (1998), September 2.


*Palmquist v. Selvik*, 111 F.3d 1332 (7th Cir. 1997).
