

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

At 10.30 P.M. on November 14, 1997, 19-year-old Moshe Pergament, who was despondent over a \$6,000 gambling debt, raced his new Honda Accord along the Long Island Expressway in a rainstorm for 40 minutes, sideswiping other cars. When officer Anthony Sica drew up behind him, with lights flashing, Pergament stopped his car, got out, and drew a gun. Officer Sica shouted for Pergament to drop the gun. Pergament held onto the gun and walked toward Sica. As Pergament drew closer, Sica shot him. The gun turned out to be a plastic replica of a .38 revolver. On the front seat of the Honda was a suicide note addressed "To the officer who shot me." Rebecca Stincelli (undated) has reproduced the note.

Officer,

It was a plan. I'm sorry to get you involved. I just needed to die. Please send my letters and break the news slowly to my family and let them know I had to do this. And that I love them very much. I'm sorry for getting you involved. Please remember that this was all my doing. You had no way of knowing.

Moe Pergament.

The medical examiner ruled the death as homicide caused by gunshots, and the police report classified it as a justifiable homicide. These days we call it *suicide-by-cop*.

Sometimes the situation turns into a barricade incident. The offender may be killed by police or he may kill himself. Fuselier, Van Zandt, and Lancely (1991) reported the case of Jimmy Hyams, who on July 18, 1989, had a row with his daughter, Lisa, about her decision to move in with her boyfriend. His wife fled the house with their 7-year-old daughter, and Hyams shot Lisa with a .32 caliber semi-automatic pistol. He closed the door and held off the police for seven hours. He wounded a Suffolk County police officer and eventually killed himself.

The offender does not always get killed. Richard Parent (1998) described a case in August, 1989, in which an officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in a suburb of Vancouver responded to a call about a drunken youth who was threatening his family with a knife. The 15-year-old teenager was hanging out of his broken bedroom window with a bayonet in his bloody hand. The officer entered the house, and the youth rushed the officer waving the bayonet. The officer retreated out to the driveway and back out into the street, pursued by the youth who was uttering threats. Other officers arrived, and the youth was subdued without further incident.

Although these kinds of incidents seem to be occurring with increasing frequency today, they are not a new phenomenon. Nor are they confined to North America. They are an interesting type of suicidal behavior, they often involve criminal behavior such as murder, and they present very difficult law enforcement problems. How should these individuals be handled, and can their lives be spared?

And what is often forgotten, these incidents cause tremendous trauma for the police officers involved. Officer Anthony Sica killed a man holding a toy gun. But he did not know this. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common for the police officers involved in these incidents, and counseling of the officer may be required if he or she is to continue to function effectively as a police officer.

This book will address the issues involved in suicide-by-cop and related phenomena. Chapter 2 will review the research on suicide-by-cop. What do we know about the phenomenon? In the second section (Suicide, Murder, and Cops), Chapters 3 and 4 will review other situations in which individuals commit suicide during confrontations with the police (typically by shooting themselves) and other situations in which police officers kill civilians (civilians who are not necessarily suicidal). These situations have some of the elements found in suicide-by-cop incidents, but differ in important ways.

In the third section (Looking at the Larger Context), we place the phenomenon of suicide-by-cop in a broader context. In Chapter 5, we review phenomena found in other cultures that resemble suicide-by-cop, such as "Crazy-Dog-Wishing-To-Die" among Native Americans in previous centuries. In Chapter 6, we review incidents of individuals running amok in America (or engaging in rampage murders, to use another term), and in Chapter 7, we review the literature on victim-precipitated murder in general. In Chapter 8, we explore the possibility that some murders seek suicide-by-execution, and in Chapter 9 we review the research on murder followed by suicide in general.

Section 4, the final section (A Look at the Issues) reviews some of the issues that suicide-by-cop raises for the criminal justice system. In Chapter 10, we discuss the racial issues involved in suicide-by-cop—does racial bias play a role? Chapter 11 presents some legal issues raised by such incidents. Chapters 12 and 13 discuss law enforcement issues, such as how to conduct hostage negotiations and whether police officers need counseling after being involved in such incidents. Finally, in Chapter 14 we discuss ways in which the incidence of suicide-by-cop might be reduced in our society.