The importance of officer vigilance

by Rick Parent

Police officers are expected to use their firearms only in very limited circumstances. The vast majority of officers never have to use potentially deadly force. The few who do generally use it to immediately incapacitate a perceived lethal threat. Their decision-making in these rare instances is often complex, multifaceted and instantaneous.

Researchers have suggested that police use of deadly force is best explained by officer exposure to dangerous persons and places. It can be stated that the number of criminal homicides and instances of extreme violence in an area is correlated with police use of deadly force. Simply put, officers are more likely to use it during situations when they encounter increased levels of violence or when they perceive their duties to be particularly dangerous. Perceived threats directly apply to police work due to the calculated risks associated with policing.

Unlike other occupations, the possibility of being murdered or suffering grievous bodily harm at the hands of an assailant is a real and constant concern in street level policing. On average, two Canadian police officers are murdered each year, typically while assigned to “routine” general duty patrol. In contrast, the issue of homicide is either accidental or self-inflicted in most other occupations. Also unique to policing is that front line officers are often required to enter situations from which others are fleeing.

Canada and the US: Differences and similarities

Canadian and American police are not obligated to use force whenever it is legally justifiable. Its use depends upon both the unique circumstances of the incident and the unique decision-making of the officer. While several fundamental differences exist between the two federal legal systems, there are also some key similarities surrounding police use of force.

The US legal system provides substantial criminal law powers to individual states, allowing for varying degrees of criminal legislation, law enforcement and punishment. In Canada, the federal government has exclusive jurisdiction to enact and regulate criminal matters. Individual provinces have some limited influence by directing and shaping police related policies and regulations but these must exist within the parameters of federal legislation.

Another important difference is that police use of deadly force is far more of a concern in the US than Canada. In absolute numbers, as well as proportionately, far more people die by legal intervention in the US than in Canada. Upon adjusting for population figures, the number of deaths is almost three times greater than the corresponding number within Canada (UCR, 2014).

This marked difference is also apparent in other forms of extreme violence, including the frequency in which police officers are murdered while performing their duties and the national homicide rate. For example, there were 543 homicides during 2012 in Canada, reflecting a rate of 1.56 homicides per 100,000 (Stats Canada, 2014). In contrast, the United States recorded 14,610 homicides during 2011 reflecting a rate of 4.7 per 100,000 (BJS, 2013).

In sum, the general US laws and procedures governing police use of force can be considered to be in harmony with Canadian legislation. While differences exist, the fundamental basic application is very similar. Police officers in both nations are legislated to use deadly force only when their or others lives are in immediate danger. It is within this setting that approximately 400 individuals are shot and killed by US law enforcement personnel each year (UCR, 2014). In Canada, there were 139 fatal police shootings between January 1, 1999 and December 31, 2009, approximately 12 per year (Parent, 2011:58).

Interestingly, research shows there are very few differences in relation to the dynamics and circumstances of police use of deadly force in the US and Canada. The issues are for the most part very similar. The major difference noted was in the frequencies of incidents and not the individual characteristics.

Risk-taking and consequences

It must also be emphasized that countless incidents of lethal threats against law enforcement personnel are resolved each year without a firearm being discharged. Alternate tactics or less-lethal compliance tools such as pepper spray, bean bag shotguns or conducted energy weapons are used to subdue the individual posing a lethal threat.

Alternate resolution methods often pose an increased risk to police and have resulted in their deaths. Owing to the very nature of their day-to-day duties, officers routinely face the possibility of being assaulted or murdered. On average, approximately 60 US officers are feloniously killed in the line of duty each year. Sixty more will die in mishaps such as automobile and aircraft accidents (UCR, 2014).

During the 1980s, there was an average of...
185 police fatalities per year in the US, down from an average of 215 per year in the ‘70s. The widespread adoption of body armour and the advancement of emergency medical care are cited as key explanations for the decline. Another significant factor is the increase of sophisticated training and tactics over the past three decades.

In Canada, 17 police officers were killed from January 1, 2000 through to December 31, 2009, an average of about two police murders per year. Thirty officers died in traffic accidents during the same period (ODMP Canada, 2014).

In addition to the inherent physical dangers, researchers have noted that involvement in a fatal shooting will typically have a profound psychological and emotional impact upon the officer and their family. Officers reported that they had, to some degree, been subject to physiological, psychological, physical and emotional factors associated with critical incident stress. As a result, most agencies require some form of mandatory counselling for officer involved fatal shootings. The negative effects of the traumatic event/near death experience may remain with the officer or a family member for the rest of their life.

Emerging trends

In today’s society, police are continually occupied with the threat of violence in their day-to-day activities. Researchers have noted that officers tend to develop “perceptual shorthand” to identify certain kinds of individuals as “symbolic assailants,” individuals who use specific gestures, language and attire that the officer has come to recognize as a prelude to violence. This may also apply to symbolic settings which the officer has come to recognize as having the potential for danger. In most instances, law enforcement personnel will be aware of the risk and level of danger they face when entering or confronting a situation.

In the United States there has been an emerging trend towards “contact to kill,” engaging unaware law enforcement officers for the specific purpose of murder. In some cases, the motives of the assailant(s) were based upon their anti-government beliefs and hatred of police. In other cases, it is unclear why innocent and unsuspecting officers were singled out and targeted for the sole purpose of execution. These factors add a new dimension to the framework of assailants that symbolize potential lethal threats.

Canadian law enforcement personnel have also tragically experienced aspects of this phenomenon. However, the US trend towards violence by right-wing and lone wolf extremists may be an emerging factor within Canada, placing front-line officers at increased risk. These factors emphasize the importance of officers being vigilant to the ever changing environment that they work in and the real risks they face.

References

Statistics Canada (2014) Homicide offences, number and rate, by province and territory.

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