Suicide by cop: implications for crisis (hostage) negotiations

Marina Sarno and Vincent B. Van Hasselt

Abstract

Purpose – Suicide by cop (SbC) is a growing problem and presents special challenges to crisis (hostage) negotiation teams. The purpose of this paper is to examine current definitions of SbC, early warning signs of SbC, successful and unsuccessful resolution of cases, and strategies that have proven most effective to resolve these incidents. Recommendations regarding appropriate training and coping strategies in dealing with the post-shooting emotional sequelae of SbC are presented.

Design/methodology/approach – With a dearth of empirical knowledge regarding how to properly respond to SbC crisis incidents, an extensive literature review was conducted to ascertain extant strategies to de-escalate and reduce the lethality of these events.

Findings – Results indicated that SbC crisis incidents are more likely to be resolved if officers provide reassurance for the way that subject’s feel, comply with reasonable requests, and offer alternative or realistic options. Establishing rapport by spending time with the subject and utilizing active listening skills can decrease the likelihood of another episode in the future.

Practical Implications – These findings have implications for the efficient training of law enforcement officers in general, and crisis negotiators, in particular, in how to appropriately deal with SbC events. The authors also highlight specific errors in negotiation and how to observe early warning signs in the SbC subject to inform prevention and intervention strategies.

Originality/value – The paper adds to the limited literature on crisis negotiation techniques for resolving SbC incidents.

Keywords Negotiation, Crisis negotiation, Law enforcement, Suicide by cop

Paper type Literature review

Each year, over 38,000 people die by suicide in the USA, making suicide the fourth leading cause of death in individuals ages 18-65 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2013). Although the act of suicide has been extensively studied, the phenomenon of suicide by cop (SbC) and effective crisis (hostage) negotiation strategies for peacefully resolving these incidents, have received a modicum of attention. SbC has also been referred to as police-assisted suicide, law enforcement-assisted suicide, suicide by police, and victim-precipitated homicide (Flynn and Hornant, 2000; Lord, 2000; Strentz, 2005; Wolfgang, 1959). The lack of consensus on how to accurately define SbC has led to challenges in research concerning this phenomenon. In SbC, the subject experiences suicidal ideation and views police officers as instruments to achieve their lethal end (Hornant et al., 2000). This complex mental state has made crisis negotiations with the SbC subject particularly difficult for police.

It is critical for law enforcement agencies in general, and crisis negotiation teams, in particular, to study SbC in order to be able to recognize and respond to these events. This paper will examine: current definitions of SbC, and how these definitions have led to disparate prevalence estimates; early warning signs of SbC; successful and unsuccessful resolution of cases; and strategies that have proven most effective in specific incidents. We conclude by recommending strategies that may have value for crisis negotiators. These may assist officers in
their preparation and training for SbC call-outs, and the post-shooting emotional sequelae for officers involved.

Definitions of SbC

Researchers have attempted to explain the phenomenon of SbC; and although definitions have considerable overlap, criteria for SbC differ across studies. Feuer (1998) credited Karl B.

Harris, a former California police officer and psychologist, with coining the term "SbC." Harris stated, "In the suicide business I saw all the different ways people attempted suicide, and it occurred to me that maybe some people were actually forcing cops to shoot them because they wanted to die" (cited in Feuer, 1998). According to Harris, SbC involves an individual who "bent on self-destruction, engages in life-threatening and criminal behavior in order to force law enforcement officers to kill him/her" (cited in Burke and Rigsby, 1999, p. 97). The notion that people commit suicide by forcing others to kill them has been in the literature since the 1960s. For example, Wolfgang (1958) discussed victim-precipitated homicide in which the victim precipitated their own death by using physical force against their "subsequent slayer." Parent (2000) also considered victim-precipitated homicide as one of several key factors (e.g., commission of a serious criminal offense, alcohol/drugs, mental disorder/irrational behavior, mistaken facts) that contribute to police shootings resulting in death.

Others have offered more specific definitions of SbC. Hutson et al. (1998) defined SbC as an incident in which suicidal individuals engage in behavior with a weapon, or what can be perceived as a lethal weapon, toward police officers in efforts to provoke officers to shoot them. This definition includes the possibility that the suicidal person does not have to actually have a lethal weapon in their possession for the incident to be considered SbC. Hutson et al. (1998) delineated four criteria that had to be met if the incident was to be characterized as SbC, including evidence: of suicidal intent, that the individual wanted to be shot by officers, of a lethal weapon or the perception of a lethal weapon, and that the individual forced officers to shoot in self-defense or to protect others.

The consensus in definitions thus far is that the victim plays a direct and conscious role in their own death with the police officer being their instrument to achieve that end. However, officers are not always aware that they were involved in a SbC incident until after the encounter has been resolved by the subsequent departmental investigation of the shooting (Hutson et al., 1998). In these cases, the manner of death is suicide; however, the method chosen is suicide at the hands of an officer. In efforts to make the identification of SbC easier, Lindsay and Lester (2008) outlined 17 criteria to ascertain whether the incident is, in fact, SbC. Of these criteria, they found that those suicidal individuals involved in SbC were more likely to have experienced a recent stressor, initiated an incident, created an event to ensure police response, forced a confrontation, refused to drop their weapon, injured an officer or citizen, and had officers retreat from the scene for their own safety.

Prevalence

Although the prevalence of SbC cannot be accurately determined due to variability in definitions, estimates have been offered. Hutson et al. (1998) examined all officer-involved shootings (OIS) in Los Angeles County from 1987 to 1997. Their results indicated that SbC accounted for 46, or 11 percent, of the 437 OIS and 25, or 13 percent, of the 200 officer-involved justifiable homicides. This meant that there were approximately 4.2 cases of SbC or attempted SbC that took place in Los Angeles County annually. These rates are similar to those reported by Scoville (1998) who found that 10 percent of 384 OIS in Los Angeles County between 1987 and 1996 met criteria for SbC.

A more geographically inclusive study of the prevalence of SbC used a large nonrandom North American sample of OIS. Mohandie et al. (2009) examined 707 cases from over 90 police departments in the USA between 1998 and 2006. Cases were excluded if officers did not discharge their weapons, if they only fired at animals and not the individual, or if the officer's weapon was accidentally discharged. A total of 256, or 36 percent, of the 707 cases were categorized as attempted or completed SbC. This study further supports the contention that
SbC occurs at a higher rate than previously expected among OIS. Results can also be generalized across a wider geographic area due to a more representative sample drawn from across the nation.

Early warning signs of SbC

Indicators that an individual is planning SbC include: setting a deadline for their death, naming people who are dead and saying that they will be with them soon, making arrangements for their possessions, creating confrontation with the police, stating an intent to die, and making biblical references (see Geberth, 1993; Van Zandt, 1993). Additional warning signs are refusing to negotiate with authorities, killing a significant other prior to the incident, demanding to be killed, knowing that they have a terminal disease, indicating a plan for death, avoiding demands for escape or freedom, providing a verbal will, and experiencing recent stressors (Burke and Riggsby, 1999; Honig, 2001; Van Zandt, 1993). There is evidence that more indicators are associated with a greater lethality risk (Honig, 2001). Further, early warning signs often are related to feelings of hopelessness and depression, and ultimately to SbC incidents (Janik, 1992).

Although these warning signs are helpful in identifying a person intending to commit SbC, officers should not rely solely on these indicators. Van Zandt recommends that police officers focus on whether the offender has a poor self-image, a sense of guilt, aggression toward officers, or possession of an unloaded gun or replica (cited in Burke and Riggsby, 1999). All of these factors increase SbC risk, but do not guarantee that the officer is dealing with such an event.

Another significant warning sign for SbC is the subject having recently committed a homicide. Stack (1997) discovered that the closer the relationship between the offender and the individual killed, the greater the subsequent guilt and likelihood that the subject will commit suicide. Results of this study have significant implications for police officers, who may have prior knowledge that the subject has killed another person and, therefore, can anticipate a potential SbC event.

Awareness of SbC indicators may help in efforts to predict the subject’s possible behavior. Honig (2001) delineated other warning signs including: dramatic mood swings, prior suicidal ideation, separation from a significant other, and/or victimization through domestic violence. Further, Pinizzotto et al. (2005) offered that if a subject verbalizes self-destructive impulses or intentions, and has recently experienced significant loss (e.g. spouse, job), there is a greater possibility of SbC. In many cases, there is a correlation with a prior loss of life or health problem that overwhelms the coping ability of the offender. The more information that can be gathered about the individual, the more prepared officers and specialized units (i.e. crisis negotiators, tactical teams) can be in dealing with these incidents.

Crisis Negotiation Threat Assessment Scale

To facilitate the identification of SbC incidents, Lindsay and Dickson (2004) developed the Crisis Negotiation Threat Assessment Scale to assess for the presence of discrete factors that are usually a part of hostage, barricade, and/or suicide incidents. If three of five History Factors (mental or chronic physical illness, suicide attempts, criminal history, drug or alcohol abuse, low socioeconomic background) and eight of 12 Event Factors (e.g. initiates aggressive action, advances toward officer, recent stressor) of the scale are endorsed, the incident is labeled SbC. There are several consistencies (e.g. aggression toward officers, recent stressors) between the factors presented previously and those that comprise this scale. The second part of the scale consists of specific events: the incident is initiated by the subject, the event ensures police response, and the subject forces confrontation, initiates aggressive action, threatens the officer, advances toward the officer, threatens a citizen, has a weapon, refuses to drop the weapon, has experienced a recent stressor, injures an officer, and forces officers to retreat (Lindsay and Dickson, 2004). This scale offers a rapid and efficient way for police officers to assess the dangerousness and severity of the encounter.
Verbal and behavioral indicators

Warning signs of SbC fall under two categories: verbal and behavioral. According to Van Zandt (1993), verbal indicators to SbC risk are: offering to surrender to the person in charge, looking for a "macho" way out of the situation (e.g. going out in a "big way"), and expressing feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. These subjects will often tell their hostages and/or others at the scene that they wish to die (Geberth, 1994; Wecht et al., 2010). Kingshott (2009) explained that verbalizations could also be interpreted as explicit challenges ("Now is your chance; you know you want to do it"), threats to others ("Move away or hostages die"), giving up ("There is no other way"), explicit demands ("I want my wife here now"), or a countdown ("I'm going to count to five; then I will do it"). These verbalizations should be considered reflections of underlying suicidal motivation. Mohandie and Meloy (2000) warn police officers that while certain verbal indicators can be more suggestive of an elevated risk of suicide or violence, the relative lack of empirical research in this area does not allow unequivocal determinations or probability estimates.

Behavioral indicators, such as shivering, uncoordinated movements, and finger pointing to emphasize statements, are also important in reflecting the subject's current mental status. Particularly relevant are sudden behavioral changes as well as signs of intense emotional distress (e.g. sudden movements, incoherent speech, breathing pattern changes, environmental scanning, crying) (Kingshott, 2009). These behaviors reflect an emotional escalation. Other behavioral indicators of SbC risk are: pointing a weapon, shooting at police, reaching for a weapon when officers are on scene, advancing toward the officer, and forcing a confrontation (Honig, 2001; Kennedy et al., 1998; Kingshott, 2009). These actions are carried out to ensure the police officer's awareness of the lethality involved in the incident in hopes of forcing them to open fire. Kingshott (2009), however, warns against assuming logical explanations for these behaviors when there may not be any. Pre-incident behaviors in SbC events are often unpredictable and irrational. The forementioned indicators should be viewed as guidelines to improve detection of possible SbC. There is a consensus that the greater number of indicators evident, the more likely an incident will be SbC (Honig, 2001), although this has yet to be clearly ascertained empirically.

Successful vs unsuccessful resolution of cases

Whether or not an event is a successful SbC appears to depend, at least in part, on the length of the incident. SbC events that end more rapidly are most likely to result in the injury or death of the subject (Lord, 2004). This difference can be attributed to officers who are surprised by the actions of the subject and are consequently, more likely to shoot to protect themselves. The specific strategies used by law enforcement also play a major role in the outcome of the incident. For example, Lord (2004) found that in cases where the officer did not implement any tactical method (e.g. distraction devices, physical restraint, gas), the SbC incident often ended with the death of the subject. In other cases, the primary negotiation tactic was speaking to the subject about their problem, followed by officers focussing on the weapon. In those cases in which the officer discussed the problem, 66.7 percent of the subjects were taken into custody without injury compared to only 7.7 percent when dealing only with the weapon. These findings suggest that if police officers are given sufficient time to develop rapport by allowing the subject the opportunity to talk and vent about their problems, there is a greater likelihood of resolving the incident peacefully (Flood, 2003; Procurier, 2014).

Case illustrations

The following three cases are illustrative of SbC incidents which ended successfully (with a peaceful resolution) or unsuccessfully (with the death of the subject). They include background information about the subject, the type of law enforcement response (i.e. road patrol, tactical, or hostage negotiation team), and how the incident was ultimately resolved.

Case 1: female subject; unsuccessful negotiation

On August 12, 2013, in Cooper City, Florida, a 44-year-old white female called 911 stating that she was going to kill "anyone who comes near me." Before hanging up on the dispatcher, the
subject stated: "I'm going to kill somebody. I have a gun. Send a cop here." While operators attempted to call her back, officers were dispatched. Two Deputies and a Sergeant arrived on scene and found the female subject walking down the street with what appeared to be a small handgun. The officers repeatedly demanded that the subject drop the weapon, but she refused and aimed the weapon at officers. All three Deputies opened fire. The subject was later pronounced dead at a local hospital.

Following the shooting, investigators learned that the subject had a previous encounter with the police in 2011 under Florida's Baker Act and was involuntarily committed for mental health treatment. The investigation also revealed that the weapon that the subject was holding was a Crossman handgun, which shoots 6mm BBs. The incident suggests the importance of basic negotiation training for all first responding officers, as there was insufficient time for a crisis negotiation team to respond to this incident.

Case 2: male subject; unsuccessful negotiation

A 58-year-old white male originally from Illinois called his brother on August 26, 2013 threatening to kill himself. The subject's brother immediately notified the authorities that the subject was armed and threatening suicide. Deputies from Columbia County, Georgia located the subject pulled over on the interstate with a flat tire. The subject was holding a 0.45-caliber handgun, which he refused to put down. Police officers quickly set up a perimeter and blocked off the interstate for over four hours while crisis negotiators attempted to de-escalate the situation. Several less-than-lethal 12-gauge shotgun beanbag rounds were fired but proved ineffective, as they "did not stop the threat." The subject then raised and pointed his weapon at the officers and was shot and killed on scene. A post-incident investigation indicated that the subject was likely suffering from depression due to the recent death of his father.

Case 3: male subject; successful negotiation

On May 8, 2013, in Middleboro, Massachusetts, the relative of a 40-year-old white male notified police that the subject posted on Facebook that he was going to commit "SbC." When police arrived on scene, the subject pointed a gun to his throat and shouted, "Don't come any closer or there's going to be consequences." The suspect then barricaded himself in his truck in front of his home. When responding officers attempted to "talk him down," the subject told them "leave me alone" and proceeded to drive his vehicle into a P&L Paintball parking lot. At this point, negotiators and SWAT were called to the scene. Police immediately placed "stop sticks" across the route nearby and created a perimeter around the paintball fields "to prevent him from going mobile again." Negotiators spent over two hours negotiating with the subject and were successfully able to convince him to get out of his vehicle and to remove the gun from his head. The subject, uninjured, was then apprehended by police and taken to a nearby hospital for evaluation.

This was the subject's second SbC attempt in just over two weeks. Information gathered following the incident revealed that the parking lot where the subject had stopped was the same lot in which his father had committed suicide years earlier. Hostage negotiators from several police departments attributed their success to the cooperation of multiple agencies involved in this incident. Specifically, the local police agency was aided by the state police department, SWAT, and multiple hostage negotiation teams to peacefully resolve the incident.

Strategies for law enforcement

Recommendations from previous research have emerged to assist police in dealing with SbC.

Richard B. Parent, a renowned SbC researcher stated, "For cops who work the field, the more they know about suicide, the more they know about police work" (cited in Scoville, 1998). If police officers are to effectively deal with the suicidal subject, recognizing the signs of suicidal ideation can help minimize the likelihood of harm to the subject or responding officers. It has been recommended that the first responding officer serve as temporary incident commander to immediately secure the scene and set up a perimeter (Miller, 2007a; Scoville, 1998). It is also imperative that if the officer realizes the subject will not surrender, SWAT and negotiation teams
should be immediately notified (Scoville, 1998). The longer officers can delay a confrontation, the better the outcome of the event, since negotiation teams will have sufficient time to set up and work toward diffusing the incident (Miller, 2007a; Scoville, 1998).

However, the ability to "buy time" in SbC incidents may not always be possible. Indeed, as Hutson et al. (1998) reported, the median time from the arrival of officers to the time of a shooting in SbC incidents was 15 minutes. Moreover, they found that 37 percent of the shootings examined in their study occurred within even less time—five minutes after the officer's arrival. The brevity of many of these incidents underscores the importance of providing all first responding road patrol officers with basic crisis negotiation training, as there may not be adequate time to contact and assemble tactical or crisis negotiation teams. Expanding such training to all road patrol officers and supervisors can help to circumvent the problem of not being able to set up in such a short timeframe.

Nevertheless, some researchers argue that tactical withdrawal or retreat should be an option for police (Parent, 2000; Scoville, 1998). They contend that there is no reason to enter a location where only the suicidal subject is at risk, and withdrawal can help neutralize the actions and intentions of the subject. Police officers may, therefore, have more time to formulate an action plan and explore alternatives that may potentially include less than lethal force.

Impact of SbC on officers

The realization that one was used as an instrument in a person's death can have a dramatic psychological impact. Following a shooting, many officers experience preoccupation with the incident, guilt, depression, flashbacks, and wishes that what happened could be undone (Allen, 2004; Loo, 1986). It has been recommended that any officer involved in a shooting should be debriefed, counseled, and relieved of duty for a period of time until the effects of the event have subsided (Loo, 1986; Scoville, 1998). Officers may also benefit from participating in critical incident stress management debriefings (see McCutcheon et al., 2013) in which they discuss their thoughts and feelings about what occurred in a safe, supportive group environment. Also, by making mental health services available, officers can obtain help if their reactions to the incident (e.g., sleep disturbances, diminished appetite, increased irritability) begin to interfere with daily functioning. Janik (1992) believes that an increase in communication between law enforcement and the mental health community is imperative in peacefully resolving SbC cases and in helping law enforcement officers cope with the emotional sequelae of these incidents.

Implications for crisis negotiations

Crisis negotiations have been identified as one of the most efficacious strategies law enforcement has in dealing with a critical incident such as SbC (see McMains and Mullins, 2008). "The successful resolution of tens of thousands of hostage, barricade, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world has repeatedly demonstrated its value" (Fregini, 2002, p. 1). An examination of the FBI Crisis Negotiation Unit's Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS), containing a collection of cases from agencies across the nation, indicated that approximately 82 percent of reported incidents between 2002 and 2003 were resolved without death or injury to the subject or victim (Flood, 2003). The success of crisis negotiations has made it a valuable asset in police procedures that aim to preserve human life, even under the most dire circumstances (Procurier, 2014; Van Hasselt et al., 2008).

Role of mental illness

Individuals with mental health problems are disproportionately represented in hostage and barricade incidents (e.g., Feldmann, 2001; Grubb, 2010). Moreover, police are usually the first responders to calls involving the mentally ill (Lurigio and Watson, 2010). The frequent interactions officers have with this population make it necessary for them to learn how to stabilize and de-escalate psychiatric crisis situations. Lurigio and Watson (2010) stated that police officers must be trained to: contain, control, or arrest the subject without excessive force that can potentially exacerbate their mental health condition, redirect the subject from their intent to harm themselves or others, and facilitate
referral to increase a subject's access to mental health services. In their study on the importance of covering mental health topics in law enforcement training programs, Vernet et al. (2005) found that 90 percent of the participating officers believed the topic of mental illness was very important to their work. Most officers also ranked SbC, decreasing suicide risk, and mental health law as significant areas of personal and professional interest.

Those individuals involved in SbC usually suffer from some form of mental illness, and often experience feelings of depression, hopelessness, and helplessness. In dealing with depressed subjects, the crisis negotiator is encouraged to begin the conversation at a slow pace and adopt the stance of a supportive authority figure (see Miller, 2007a). Miller (2007a) stated that if the subject begins to dwell on the painful past, negotiators should use gentle verbal redirection to selectively focus on positive aspects of the here-and-now.

In dealing with a suicidal individual, it is usually futile to "talk them out of it" or to try to argue or be rational with the individual (Vecchi et al., 2005). Instead, the negotiator should attempt to understand the situation, utilize active listening skills (e.g., emotion labeling, paraphrasing, summarizing), find out what matters most to the subject, and encourage consideration of a better future without making any assumptions (Miller, 2007a; Vecchi et al., 2005). Another effective strategy that can be implemented is attempting to "postpone" the suicide. Negotiators can state the following: "We both know I can’t talk you out of what you’re going to do, but let me understand why this is happening, okay? There’s got to be a reason for this, and I really want to understand it" (Miller, 2007a, p. 73). Time is an officer’s greatest ally in these incidents as it allows for the development of a relationship between negotiator and subject, and a reduction of the influence of substances in individuals who may be intoxicated (Feldmann, 2001; McVains and Mullins, 2006; Strentz, 2005; Vecchi et al., 2005). The promise of help from the negotiator can diffuse the high level of emotionality in the subject.

Errors in crisis negotiation

Greenstone (2007) outlined 25 serious errors that are often made by crisis negotiators and provided suggestions on how to overcome these. For example, choosing the wrong negotiator or timing the negotiation incorrectly can be very costly. It is critical to choose the person with the most appropriate skill set for the particular incident. This negotiator should also have an awareness of when it is useful to bargain and when it is better to remain silent. Other errors discussed by Greenstone (2007) include a lack of understanding of the situation, the mind-set and interests of the subject, and of their prime objective. Prior to initiating negotiations, time should be taken to: ascertain the specifics of the case, examine the subject’s intentions, and understand the purpose of both the subject and the negotiator. Solutions include establishing rapport, developing empathy, gathering information, ensuring officer safety, exploring alternatives, and practicing effective communication to correct or avoid errors during the negotiation process.

Along these lines, the Behavioral Change Stairway Model (BCSM), developed by the FBI’s Crisis Negotiation Unit, outlines the relationship-building process involving the negotiator and subject which culminates in a peaceful resolution of a critical incident such as SbC (see Vecchi et al., 2005). BCSM consists of a sequential and cumulative progression through five stages. According to Vecchi et al. (2005, p. 541), “the negotiator proceeds in sequence from Stage 1 (active listening) to Stage 5 (behavioral change). However, in order to establish rapport (Stage 3) with the subject, active listening skills (Stage 1) and empathy (Stage 2) must first be demonstrated and maintained throughout by the negotiator. As this process continues, influence (Stage 4) and behavioral change (Stage 5) follow. The latter stage refers to the successful resolution of the crisis that can only occur when, and only when, the previous stages have been carried out successfully” (see Figure 1). The utility of the BCSM model has been consistently documented in the successful negotiation of a wide range of volatile crisis situations (Dalfonzo, 2002; Flood, 2003).

Crisis negotiation strategies

SbC as a motivation presents unique challenges for crisis negotiators as the subject’s resolve to die is a high-risk indicator of a potentially lethal outcome. In a comparison of OIS cases where
the subject is not suicidal with SbC cases, Mohandie and Meloy (2010) found that the subject is more likely to die during the latter. Further, they reported that there were 37 fatalities among the 55 SbC cases and six fatalities among the 21 OIS cases. In addition, 32 of the 37 fatalities among SbC events received some form of verbal intervention by negotiators. Although the data suggest that verbal efforts to de-escalate appeared to have no effect on outcome, the researchers urge negotiators to understand the importance of learning from both failures and successes in the field.

As crisis negotiators continue to develop an awareness of possible negotiation errors, the next logical step is to determine how to best prevent these errors. Van Hasselt et al. (2006) examined the effectiveness of the FBI’s National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC), which focuses on active listening skills training and successful diffusion of crisis situations. Results indicated that those who participated in the NCNC used significantly more active listening skills (i.e. paraphrasing, emotional labeling, reflecting/mirroring, open-ended questions) following the two-week intensive training. Participants were also significantly less likely to use problem solving, which is often detrimental to establishing rapport during the early stages of negotiations.

Training recommendations for those dealing with potential SbC incidents have also been made (Miller, 2006). For example, dispatchers are encouraged to get the exact message provided by the subjects and to keep the caller on the line as long as possible as they relay relevant information to the responding officers (Pinizzotto and Davis, 1999). Intelligence gathered at this time should include information about intent, prior actions, substance abuse, mental health history, and other key life events or losses (Honig, 2001). The officer can then be advised of updates and other psychological “hooks” that can allow the crisis negotiation team to ultimately reach a peaceful resolution (Kingshott, 2009; McCutcheon et al., 2013). The suicidal subject will often request the presence of a family member or (ex) partner on scene. However, negotiators are urged not to comply with such “third party intermediaries” (TPIs) as they may prompt the SbC subject to commit the final act in the presence of that other person (Kingshott, 2009). With few exceptions (e.g. overseas kidnappings), use of TPIs in negotiating with a SbC subject, or most other persons for that matter, is not advised (Kingshott, 2009; Romano, 1998).

Once the on-scene negotiators have evaluated suicide risk and the potential for SbC, they can utilize crisis intervention and negotiation strategies rather than lethal force if they determine no lives are in imminent danger. In efforts to bring the SbC incident to a peaceful resolution, the negotiator must determine the subject’s immediate needs and “talk the subject down” (Miller, 2006, 2007a). This includes providing reassurance for the way that they feel, complying with
reasonable requests, offering alternative or realistic options, and most importantly, avoiding being “bailed” by the subject. “Baiting” occurs when the officer begins to feel more at ease with the subject due to increased communication, and approaches closer when suddenly the subject attacks, leaving the officer no choice but to use lethal force. If the SbC incident is to be successfully resolved, spending time with the subject (further establishing rapport) and commending them for their courage after the incident can decrease the likelihood of another episode in the future.

SbC incidents occasionally have involved the taking of hostages, which increases the level of severity and dangerousness. Such events require the negotiation team to set up a command post, establish communications, and collect intelligence to formulate an intervention strategy (Getherth, 1993; Horig, 2001; Vecchi et al., 2005). In some SbC incidents, the subject was willing to take the lives of hostages in order to prompt a deadly police response (Strentz, 2005).

It has been suggested that the negotiator ask the subject if and why they want police to kill them and to make the interaction personal so that the subject understands the trauma that the officer and their family will experience (Lindsay and Dickson, 2004). Further, the subject needs to know that they are dealing with other people and not with objects (Lindsay and Dickson, 2004). These strategies have been shown to discourage subjects from going through with their suicidal plans.

As previously mentioned, the negotiator’s ally in these incidents is time. Negotiators are urged to delay the potentially lethal act and instill doubt in the subject’s judgment and logic (Strentz, 2005). According to Strentz (2005), it is critical for negotiators to develop a dialogue with the subject and tell them about people who have changed their minds about committing suicide in order to increase further doubt in the subject’s decision. Stalling for time is particularly important in those situations in which the subject has taken drugs or alcohol because it gives the body time to process those drugs (McMains and Mullins, 2005; Strentz, 2005). In general, the more time that elapses, the less impact drugs have on the subject’s system, thinking, and decision making.

In a hostage negotiation, it is also recommended that officers place their “badge in their pocket” to shift their role from that of officer to “counselor” (Strentz, 2005). Negotiation techniques based on crisis intervention concepts include: slowing down the situation, utilizing active listening, conveying help, and refraining from lying to the subject (Strentz, 2005). The goal of the negotiator is not to attempt to solve all subject’s problems; rather, it is to help the subject move toward a state of heightened rationality (Lindsay and Dickson, 2004). In previous successful resolutions, negotiators have spent considerable time listening to the subject and allowing them to think through their options with as little pressure as possible (Kingston Ephrath, 2009). This leads to positive rapport, which, in turn, promotes the subject’s willingness to accept and act upon the suggestions made by the negotiator (Vecchi et al., 2005).

The more information that is learned from the responding officer about the subject and the incident characteristics, the greater the possibility of a successful resolution (Wecht et al., 2010). SbC incidents are different from other crisis scenarios in that the subject most often controls the element of time. It is, therefore, important for negotiation teams to attend to indicators that negotiation strategies are working. These include diminished tension, anger, voice volume, profanity, aggressive body language, and threats of violence within the SbC subject (see Wecht et al., 2010).

Summary and conclusions

SbC has been previously referred to as police-assisted suicide, law enforcement-assisted suicide, suicide by police, and victim-precipitated homicide. Despite the lack of consensus on a uniform definition of SbC, research has shown that the phenomenon is real and that consequences of such an event are far-reaching. Further, there is agreement that the victim plays a direct and conscious role in their own death, using police as their vehicle to achieve that end. Law enforcement is urged to examine the early warning signs of SbC as a preventive measure. Factors, such as refusing to negotiate with authorities, killing a significant other prior to the incident, demanding to be killed, knowing that they have a terminal disease, delineating a plan for death, avoiding demands for escape or freedom, providing a verbal will, and
experiencing recent stressors, can serve as indicators of an impending SbC incident. Moreover, there are indications that the more risk factors observed, the greater the likelihood of a SbC event.

As the rate of suicide remains high, it becomes imperative for law enforcement and mental health professionals to work collaboratively in order to more effectively intervene with individual's attempting to end their lives in general, and at the hands of police, in particular. There is consensus that active listening skills (e.g. emotion labeling, paraphrasing, summarizing) currently employed by most crisis negotiation teams, serve as the gateway for developing rapport with the potential SbC subject and increasing the likelihood of subsequent change in thinking and behavior. Further research is needed to better understand the phenomenon of SbC and the most efficacious strategies to prevent this act.

References


Dall'Onno, V. (2002), National Crisis Negotiation Course, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA.


Flood, J.J. (2003), “A report of findings from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS)”, Crisis Negotiation Unit, Critical Incident Response Group, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA.


Corresponding author
Marina Sarno can be contacted at: ms2581@nova.edu

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints