

# Suicide by cop

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**Suicide by cop** is a suicide method in which a suicidal individual deliberately acts in a threatening way, with the goal of provoking a lethal response from a law enforcement officer or other armed individual, such as being shot to death.<sup>[1]</sup>

While the phrase is colloquial ("cop" being slang for police officer) and primarily used in the United States media, it has become the most popular name for the phenomenon. Other names include **death by cop**, **suicide-by-police**, **copicide**<sup>[2]</sup> and **blue suicide** (a reference to the blue uniforms worn by many police officers). Two more technical terms often used in research are **officer- (or police-) assisted suicide** and **Victim-Precipitated Homicide**, though these are much broader and encompass other situations beyond this subject.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Overview

The idea of committing suicide in this manner is based on trained procedures of law enforcement officers, specifically the policy on the use of deadly force. In jurisdictions where officials are readily capable of deadly force (often by being equipped with firearms), there are usually set circumstances where they will predictably use deadly force against a threat to themselves or others. This form of suicide functions by exploiting this trained reaction. The most common scenario is pointing a firearm at a police officer or an innocent person, which would reasonably provoke an officer to fire on them in defense. However, many variants exist; for example, attacking with a knife or other hand weapon, trying to run an officer or other person over with a car, or trying to trigger a (real or presumed) explosive device.

This entire concept hinges on the person's state of mind, and their desire to end their own life, which can be difficult to determine post mortem. Some cases are obvious, such as pointing an unloaded or non-functioning gun (such as a toy gun or starter's pistol) at officers, or the presence of a suicide note. Some suspects brazenly announce their intention to die before they act (*e.g.*, the iconic declaration "You'll never take me alive!"). However, many cases can be more difficult to determine, as some suspects with the desire to die will actually fire live ammunition and even kill people before being killed themselves. Many law enforcement training programs have added sections to specifically address handling these situations if officers suspect that the subject is attempting to goad them into using lethal force.

The aftermath of such events is often traumatic for the officers involved.<sup>[3]</sup>

## History

While only formally studied in late 20th century, the concept of deliberately precipitating one's own slaying by the provocation of executive officials may span back to the late Roman Empire. In 4th century northern Africa, a Donatist sect known as the Circumcellions (or "agonistici") emerged that held the concept of martyrdom to be very sacred. On occasion, members of this group assaulted Roman legionaries or armed travelers with simple wooden clubs to provoke them into attacking and martyring them. Others interrupted courts of law and verbally provoked the judge so that he would order their immediate execution (a normal punishment at the time for contempt of court).<sup>[4]</sup>

Many modern cases that pre-date the formal recognition of the phenomenon have been identified or speculated by historians as matching the pattern now known as suicide by cop. According to authors Mark Lindsay and David Lester, Houston McCoy, one of the two Austin Police Department officers who shot and killed Charles Whitman, the Texas Tower sniper, believed that Whitman could have shot him and fellow officer Ramiro Martinez, but *"he was waiting for them, and wanted to be shot."*<sup>[5]</sup> The 1976 death of Mal Evans, road manager, assistant, and a friend of The Beatles, who aimed an air gun at police and refused to put it down, was theorized as a possible example of this phenomenon.<sup>[6]</sup> Some historians believe that Giuseppe Zangara, the man who killed Chicago mayor Anton Cermak in a possible attempt to assassinate then President-Elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, might have been attempting suicide by police.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Recognition and research

The phenomenon has been described in news accounts from 1981,<sup>[8]</sup> and scientific journals since 1985.<sup>[8]</sup> The earliest use of the phrase itself was in 1988<sup>[9]</sup> and it did not become common until the early 2000s. The phrase seems to have originated in the United States, but has also appeared in the UK, where a jury first determined someone committed suicide by cop in 2003.<sup>[10]</sup>

Some of the first research into suicide by cop was completed by Sgt. Rick Parent of the Delta Police Department. Parent's research of 843 police shootings determined that about 50% were victim precipitated homicide. Police defined victim precipitated homicide as "an incident in which an individual bent on self-destruction, engages in life threatening and criminal behavior to force law enforcement officers to kill them."<sup>[11]</sup>

The first formally labeled "Suicide by Cop" case in English legal history was a judgment made by Reverend Dr William Dolman while serving as a London coroner between 1993 and 2007.<sup>[12]</sup> It set a legal precedent and the judgment, as a cause of death, has been a part of English law since.

## Other notable examples

- Aramoana massacre
- Lakemba Shooting, Sydney, Australia<sup>[13]</sup>
- Hollywood and Vine intersection shooting of November 2011<sup>[14]</sup>

## See also

- Deadly force

- Running amok
- State-assisted suicide
- Suicide crisis
- Suicide intervention
- Suicide prevention

## References

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2. <sup>a</sup> copicide (<http://wordspy.com/words/copicide.asp>) on WordSpy
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5. <sup>a</sup> Mark Lindsay, David Lester (2004). *Suicide by cop: committing suicide by provoking police to shoot you* ([http://books.google.ca/books?id=zY0O7OIhd2MC&pg=PA45&dq=Ramiro+OR+Ray+Martinez+Whitman&hl=en&ei=1xEhTJSQNsaAlAe13PHGAQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=13&ved=0CGQQ6AEwDA#v=onepage&q=Ramiro%20OR%20Ray%20Martinez%20Whitman](http://books.google.ca/books?id=zY0O7OIhd2MC&pg=PA45&dq=Ramiro+OR+Ray+Martinez+Whitman&hl=en&ei=1xEhTJSQNsaAlAe13PHGAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=13&ved=0CGQQ6AEwDA#v=onepage&q=Ramiro%20OR%20Ray%20Martinez%20Whitman&f=false) &f=false). Baywood Publishing Company. p. 45. ISBN 978-0-89503-290-4. [http://books.google.ca/books?id=zY0O7OIhd2MC&pg=PA45&dq=Ramiro+OR+Ray+Martinez+Whitman&hl=en&ei=1xEhTJSQNsaAlAe13PHGAQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=13&ved=0CGQQ6AEwDA#v=onepage&q=Ramiro%20OR%20Ray%20Martinez%20Whitman](http://books.google.ca/books?id=zY0O7OIhd2MC&pg=PA45&dq=Ramiro+OR+Ray+Martinez+Whitman&hl=en&ei=1xEhTJSQNsaAlAe13PHGAQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=13&ved=0CGQQ6AEwDA#v=onepage&q=Ramiro%20OR%20Ray%20Martinez%20Whitman)
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14. <sup>a</sup> [2] ([http://laist.com/2011/12/09/hollywood\\_shooting\\_rampage\\_police\\_k.php](http://laist.com/2011/12/09/hollywood_shooting_rampage_police_k.php)), Hollywood Shooting Rampage: Police Kill Gunman Who Fired Randomly at Cars

## Further reading

- Lindsay, M. & Lester D. 2004, *Suicide by Cop: Committing Suicide by Provoking Police to Shoot You*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company. ISBN 0-89503-290-2
- Mohandie, K, Meloy, J.R. & Collins, P.I. (2009) Suicide by Cop Among Officer-Involved Shooting Cases – *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp 456–462.

## External links

- Results of one study of the phenomenon (<http://www.usc.edu/uscnews/stories/4160.html>)

- Law enforcement suicide prevention resources ([http://www.suicidepreventionhelp.com/directory/Groups\\_at\\_Risk/Helping\\_Professions/Law\\_Enforcement/](http://www.suicidepreventionhelp.com/directory/Groups_at_Risk/Helping_Professions/Law_Enforcement/))
- FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin: February, 2005; Volume 74; Number 2 (<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/2005/feb2005/feb2005.htm#page8>)
- An information portal with support resources for Law Enforcement officers (<http://www.suicidebycop.com>)

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