

Spring 1963

Police Officer Shootings--A Tactical Evaluation

Allen P. Bristow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Allen P. Bristow, Police Officer Shootings--A Tactical Evaluation, 54 J. Crim. L. Criminology & Police Sci. 93 (1963)

This Criminology is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

POLICE SCIENCE

POLICE OFFICER SHOOTINGS—A TACTICAL EVALUATION

ALLEN P. BRISTOW

The author is an Assistant Professor of Police Science at Los Angeles State College, Los Angeles, California. Professor Bristow supervised the collection of material by students on police officer shootings and has prepared a series of studies of which this article is one. He is a former member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department, holds a Master of Science degree in Public Administration from the University of Southern California and is an active member of several professional organizations including the American Society for Criminology.—EDITOR.

Beginning in 1959 students in Police Patrol classes at Los Angeles State College began to collect detailed case studies of police officers who had been shot (injury or fatality). No attempt was made to obtain a random selection of these cases, as they were extremely hard to collect. When the local cases, which were easily obtained by personal interview, were exhausted, it became necessary to proceed by correspondence on a nationwide basis.

In the spring of 1961, it was decided to discontinue the collection of these cases and evaluate those already on hand. By elimination of several non-applicable cases, a group of 110 incidents involving 150 officers was selected for study. The results must be viewed with the consideration that this is a pilot study, based on a small group of cases.

The preliminary report on the study was released in the Fall of 1961.¹ The material contained in this second report is a result of a study in depth of those cases primarily relating to officers who were shot while dealing with suspects who were either in automobiles or buildings.

An attempt was made to determine if other such studies had ever been attempted, and only two could be identified. Kirkwood, at the Public Administration Institute, has completed a project which deals primarily with the fatality rates between one and two-man cars.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was queried by the writer, and, as nearly as can be determined from that correspondence, they have no continuing program devoted to the analysis of officer shootings. This agency analyzed 28 cases

¹ The preliminary report of this study appeared in this Journal, Vol. 52, No. 4, pages 472-4, November-December 1961.

which occurred in 1960.² While this study appears to go more deeply into the history of the suspect than the tactical considerations in the shooting, much of the data verifies the results presented by this writer.

Companion studies, other than the two mentioned are apparently non-existent, and the writer feels that this is the first serious examination of the problem using analysis of case studies.

SUSPECTS IN VEHICLES

After careful analysis, 32% of the 110 cases (or 35 cases) could be identified as occurring when the officers were attempting to investigate, control, or pursue suspects who were in automobiles. These cases were separated and analyzed to determine what similarities or tactical circumstances occurred frequently enough to be significant. The approximate percentages discussed below are based on the above 35 cases.

Circumstances of Shooting. In 7% of the cases the officers were involved in vehicle pursuit, and were shot through the windshield or car body while their vehicle was moving. After stopping a pursued or violator's vehicle, it was found that in 28% of the cases the officers were shot while still sitting in their patrol cars, prior to dismounting.

In 22% of these cases the officer was shot while dismounting from his vehicle or while approaching the suspect's vehicle, up to and including the first contact. The most significant and striking statistic however, is that in 43% of the cases the officers were shot *after* the initial contact while interrogating, citing, or requesting a radio record check on the suspect.

² This data is reported in the FBI LAW ENFORCEMENT BULLETIN of November 1961.

These statistics, if valid, debunk the old police saying that the most dangerous thing a patrolman does is to "walk up" on a vehicle he has stopped. According to this data, his most dangerous period is *after the initial contact*. A great deal of police training material has been developed on the "approach" phase of this problem; perhaps some attention should be devoted to the subject of *occupant control*, after the approach.

Location of Suspect. The location and activities of the suspects in 28 of the 35 cases were verified, and the below figures indicate approximate percentages of these 28 cases. The suspect who shot the officers was seated behind the wheel of his own vehicle in 43% of these cases. In 32% of the cases, the suspect was *outside* his car, talking to or being searched by the officer.

It was unusual to note that in 6% of the cases, the suspect who shot the officer was concealed somewhere in the vehicle. It should also be noted that the officers were shot while pursuing the suspects on foot as they fled from their car in 7% of the cases. In 7% of the cases, the suspect leaped from his car and shot the officer while he was still dismounting from the vehicle.

Indicated hazard areas. From this examination of the location and/or activities of the officers and suspects it is possible to determine the point of greatest exposure hazard. The validity and reliability of such a determination is easily challenged on the size of the sample (35 cases). However, in the absence of any other comparative studies, such an attempt will be made.

On the basis of these statistics then, it may be said that the greatest hazard to an officer occurs after his approach, while he is involved in: (1) issuing a citation, (2) interrogation, or (3) using his radio. It may also be said that there is a very good possibility the suspect will be behind the wheel or standing outside the car; the chances slightly favoring the former.

Once this hazard area was identified, the cases wherein these situations occurred were restudied in an attempt to determine if any of the circumstances indicated similarities. One circumstance permeated these cases: the officer-suspect contacts were almost entirely of a traffic violation or field interrogation nature. The cases wherein the officers knew or had reason to believe that they were handling felony suspects were rare.

Having identified the hazardous area and the hazardous circumstances, an attempt was made

to determine what prevention training has been developed. The training manuals or publications of eleven major police agencies were examined, and it was found that while extensive space was devoted to methods of approach, removal of suspects from cars, and search or handcuffing procedures, little or no space was devoted to the control of drivers or occupants in citation or interrogation situations.

Indicated Research. The results of this portion of the study then, if valid and reliable, indicate that safety procedures should be developed in these hazard areas. Methods of controlling or isolating drivers or occupants during citations or interrogations must be developed; methods which will not offend the innocent motorist yet which will protect the officer.

SUSPECTS IN BUILDINGS

It was established that 51% of the 110 cases occurred when the officers were attempting to arrest or interrogate persons in buildings. These cases range in extremes from officers attempting to interview the parents of a juvenile delinquent to officers in combat with barricaded suspects. For this reason analysis by circumstances was more difficult than in the cases involving automobiles. The percentages discussed in this section relate to these 51% of the 110 cases, or 56 cases in all.

Circumstances of the Shootings. One of the outstanding and unbelievable circumstances that was revealed is that in approximately three-fourths of the cases (71%) the officers *knew or had good reason to believe that the suspects were armed*.

In approximately 41% of the cases the officers were confronted with a barricaded and armed suspect. In 11% of these cases the officers requested tear gas and special weapons and were shot while using them as they rushed the suspect. But, in the other 30% of these cases the officers were shot when they rushed the suspects without use of special weapons or tear gas.

In some cases, only one circumstance could be identified, and in others several distinct circumstances were combined in the shooting of the officer. For this reason the percentages discussed will total over 100%.

Another identifiable circumstance involves officers who were too close together during an incident. In approximately 23% of the cases *two* officers were shot, where only one might have

been, because they were too close together during a room or building entry, or when interrogating a suspect. As one reads the cases the thought occurs that in some of these instances the suspect might not have opened fire if he had not felt that both officers could have been shot at once. Many of these cases occurred while officers were rushing barricaded suspects.

Failure to search the suspects or rooms properly was identified as a circumstance in approximately 19% of these cases. This is unusual as training in such procedures is common on most police agencies.

A number of the cases involved officers who were entering buildings or rooms in other than "combat" conditions; for answering disturbance calls, making routine arrests, etc. It was interesting to note that in 10% of the 51 cases, the officers were shot through doors on which they were knocking. A review of these cases indicates that almost all of the officers were shot through doors while they were involved in routine police business.

The last circumstance which was identifiable as being significant; involved the honoring of hostages. In approximately 9% of these cases the officers were shot after the suspect had used a hostage to gain a position of advantage. This position of advantage ranged from the officer throwing down his weapon on one extreme to refusing to return the suspects fire on the other extreme.

Indicated hazard areas. The greatest hazard area indicated in this portion of the study was the rushing of barricaded suspects by officers. The statistics point up that far fewer officers were shot in cases where chemical agents or special weapons were used than in cases where the suspect was rushed without such special equipment. This comparison is somewhat dangerous because of the small number of cases evaluated.

One unusual circumstance, however, becomes evident when the cases are read which involve rushing without special equipment. In almost every one of these cases the officers had access to such equipment, had contained the suspects, and could have waited for the equipment to arrive before rushing the building.

The other hazard areas are self evident and could probably be alleviated by training or the development of procedural orders.

Indicated research areas. The above mentioned problem area involving use of special equipment seems to the writer to be a proper and interesting

area for research. Why do officers fail to use such safety equipment, when they will use seat belts and crash helmets? Is it because they lack training or confidence in such equipment, because their supervisors discourage its use, because they have a "hero complex", or does some other reason exist?

CONCLUSIONS

This article has discussed 83% of the 110 cases collected which were classified into two general tactical areas; officers involved with suspects in vehicles, and officers involved with suspects in buildings. The remaining 17% of the cases occurred under infrequent circumstances which did not lend themselves to classification.

The study may be based on too few cases to be valid or reliable. It is reported, however because to the writer's knowledge, no other such study has ever been made. After presenting this data from this phase of the study, the writer would presume to make some suggestions to those agencies interested in reducing fatalities and injuries by shooting.

1. The interested agency should conduct an independent study by case method of as many shooting cases as can be obtained. The results should be compared to those of this study, and if correlation is noted, it might be prudent to accept the hazard areas indicated.
2. The interested agency should experiment with, develop, and *implement by procedural order*, techniques in the following areas.
 - a. Vehicle occupant control while issuing traffic tickets, interrogating, or other routine police business.
 - b. Use of special police safety equipment such as tear gas, shotguns, and portable flood lights on barricaded suspects.
 - c. Tactical deployment of two or more officers to establish a "cover" and "approach" role for each, even on routine contacts.
 - d. Policy on recognition of hostages, and procedures for withdrawal when necessary.
 - e. And lastly, the routine training which concerns searching suspects after arrest, immobilizing them, knocking on doors, etc., must be reevaluated and reemphasized.