

Police tactics in incidents with mentally disturbed persons

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FULL TEXT

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Introduction

Since the 1950s developments in psychiatry and law have returned most mentally disturbed people to community settings. One consequence has been an increase of incidents in which police officers must intervene to control mentally disturbed people. In New York City, for example, incidents involving "emotionally disturbed persons" (EDPs) increased from 7,300 in 1980 to 22,600 in 1992, according to police reports (James, 1994).

As early as 1960 the National Mental Health Association published *A Manual for the Police Officer: How to Recognize and Handle Abnormal People* (Matthews and Rowland, 1979). However, the topic has not received adequate attention in police training programs (Murphy, 1986). A study of emergency referrals brought to a psychiatric facility by police found that 69 percent of the cases did not need psychiatric treatment even on an out-patient basis (Steadman, Morrissey, Braff and Monahan, 1986). Sometimes police deliberately use psychiatric referrals in inappropriate cases because there is no other immediate practical solution to a situation, but more often the problem is simply that police officers lack a clear idea of what constitutes mental illness. Criminal behavior is sometimes mistaken for mental illness, and on other occasions mental illness is mistaken for criminal behavior. Hence, routine screening of arrestees tends to find mentally ill people among them who might be routed more appropriately to a mental health program than to the criminal justice system (National Institute of Justice, 1994).

Ruiz (1993) reviewed 28 police departments' procedures for management of the mentally disturbed and pointed out the need to provide more adequate tactical guidelines for patrol officers. Bittner (1990) observed that individual police officers take a pragmatic approach to encounters with mentally disturbed people. The police officer's goal is to resolve problems at the "street level" to the extent that it is feasible. Officers try to reduce agitating contact between this person and others, try to keep a semblance of normalcy in their conversation with the person, and, when feasible, try to get someone else to look after the person.

Police are often the first personnel from a public agency to encounter people who seem to be mentally disturbed, making police the "gatekeepers" to other services, but they fulfill this role by keeping the gate shut most of the time (see Hanewicz, Fransway and O'Neill, 1982). Police object to the amount of time that can be consumed in making effective referrals and the apparent futility of referrals since the same persons often reappear on the street in the same condition (Taft, 1980). Organizational linkages between police departments and mental health agencies seem to be minimal and training of individual police officers to act as referral agents is scant (Murphy, 1986).

Rogers (1989) interviewed English police officers about 61 incidents in which they had made psychiatric referrals. She found that uncertainty about whether an incident should be handled as a criminal or psychiatric matter was

commonly resolved by determining if the person previously had been the subject of a psychiatric referral, with less emphasis on present behavior. Officers relied on the use of both physical restraints and verbal tactics to control people who seemed to be mentally disturbed. Fifty-one percent of the interviewed officers mentioned verbal tactics. "Talking" was used to "cajole, coax or persuade a person to come along to the station" (Rogers, 1989, p. 231). Police department procedure required officers to bring the person to a supervisor (Inspector) to determine if psychiatric referral was appropriate. Rogers reported that on the street these people were treated the same as non-psychiatric referrals in similar incidents, but in the police station the psychiatric subjects were treated less punitively. Later, in the hospital setting, psychiatrists generally concurred with police judgments about the appropriateness of the psychiatric referrals screened by police supervisors, although the contacts between police and psychiatrists were characterized by "indifference and veiled hostility on both sides" (Rogers, 1989, p. 372). In a survey of 48 police departments, the Police Executive Research Forum found that 17 percent had some kind of special unit to respond to incidents involving mentally disturbed persons (Murphy, 1986). The survey also found that 19 percent of departments required either on-scene presence or consultation with a supervisor, and 40 percent had some kind of designated liaison with mental health agencies. No data were provided about the sizes of the police departments in the survey or whether these organizational features were related to department size. Bittner (1990) has underlined the need for descriptive studies of how police actually handle various kinds of situations. With this in mind, arrangements were made to conduct a study in a police department whose records indicated a large number of incidents with mentally disturbed persons occurring daily. The department had a special unit assigned to respond to all incidents involving "emotionally disturbed persons." However, a plan to conduct an observational study turned out to be unfeasible. The annual report of the special police unit indicated that they responded to approximately 35,000 incidents a year. But when the unit's supervisors were asked at a planning meeting how the unit's personnel could possibly respond to so many incidents, the supervisors explained that the official report was subject to two qualifiers. One qualifier was the agency's definition of "respond." In about 97 percent of the cases, the officers of the special unit did not actually go to the scene of an incident, according to an informal estimate by the supervisors. When the police dispatcher notified them of incidents, they did not actually respond until they received a second notification. Most notifications were cancelled before an actual response occurred. Often patrol officers were handling the situations. Hence, the official statistics referred to notifications by the dispatcher, not actual responses. In five full tours of ride-along observations with a special unit team over the course of a week, no incident of any kind was observed. However, the practice of not responding to an initial dispatch was observed.

Another qualifier on the official response rate had to do with the agency's classification system. Under the heading of "emotionally disturbed person" (EDP) situations, the agency included not only incidents involving mentally disturbed people but all acts of aggression, conflict and other situations which might include any sort of emotionally aroused person, e.g. domestic disputes, all assaults.

It also turned out to be unfeasible to base a study on agency records. Other than dispatch data, records of incidents involving "emotionally disturbed persons" were not centralized. Records of incidents were generally left to patrol officers in individual precincts. Even at the incident report level, information in records was too minimal to determine what happened in these incidents.

Given the inadequacy of official records and difficulty of observational research on sporadic occurrences, it became necessary to reconstruct past situations in some manner in order to learn what kinds of situations occurred and how officers responded to them. The first problem was to describe the range of police incidents involving mentally disturbed people. The second problem was to describe police tactics in responding to these incidents.

Method

Questionnaire. Following preliminary studies based on open-ended questionnaires and considerable discussion with police officers, a detailed survey instrument was developed; it contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

The survey focussed on ten specific kinds of situations: (1) involuntary commitment from a residence; (2) nonviolent person in confusion or shock; (3) person in a state of extreme emotion owing to some actual stressful situation; (4) violent mentally disturbed person; (5) emotional hostage taker; (6) nonviolent person exhibiting bizarre behavior in a public place; (7) mentally disturbed, incompetent homeless person; (8) suicide attempt threatened or in progress; (9) paranoid person; (10) drug- or alcohol-intoxicated.

For each kind of situation there was a definition based on observable behaviors which draw the attention of police. Although police are not expected to make clinical judgments, they are expected to recognize behavioral patterns which may be related to mental disturbance, such as the following description for category 9:"

9. Paranoid person: violently angry and threatening, does not trust anyone to get near, irrational accusations against others, threats, but has not assaulted anyone yet at time of police arrival. (Situation #4 covers violence before arrival of police on the scene.)"

Besides the ten specific categories, the survey included an open-ended "other" category which was defined as, "Some other kind of situation which involved a person who was mentally or emotionally disturbed" and asked the respondent to describe this "other" situation.

The survey asked how often the respondent had personally been present at each of these kinds of situations during the past year and the approximate date of the last incident of each kind. It then asked the respondent to reply to a set of detailed questions about one particular incident. Finally, the respondent was asked to write in "three tactics which are effective" and "three things which should be avoided" in these kinds of situations.

Sample: The questionnaire was distributed to all 365 members of a special unit in a large metropolitan police department; the special unit was mandated to deal with all incidents involving "emotionally disturbed persons." All members of the unit were male. Completed questionnaires were returned anonymously. Since the responses were voluntary and anonymous, this was essentially a self-selected sample. However, anonymous and voluntary participation seemed desirable to bolster the validity of the data. Ninety officers (25 percent of the special unit) returned completed questionnaires. The average officer responding to the survey had been a police officer for more than 14 years and a member of the special unit for nearly six years. This was consistent with the profile of the unit as a whole.

Results: number and characteristics of incidents

Owing to small numbers of cases for some types of incidents, some categories were collapsed in the data analysis. Categories 1 and 7 were collapsed into one category, "persons requiring committal." Categories 2, 3 and 6 were collapsed into one category, "nonviolent disturbed people." This reduced the number of categories from ten to seven.

Number of incidents. The data provided two ways of estimating the number of incidents in each category. First, the officer was asked how many times during the past year he was present at each kind of incident. Second, the officer was asked to record the date of the most recent incident of each kind. The data are presented in Table I. The Table shows that, among the respondents, the average officer in the special unit was present at a total of about 21 incidents a year of these kinds. If the officers in the sample were representative of the unit as a whole, this would yield a total unit workload (21.26 incidents x 365 officers per average of 4.13 officers per incident) of 1,879 incidents per year. This would be about 5 percent of the 35,000 dispatches. Agency supervisors had informally estimated that the unit actually responded to about 3 percent of the dispatches. The supervisors' informal estimate may have been off by 2 percent, or maybe officers with slightly more experiences were more inclined to answer the questionnaire.

The percent of incidents of each kind, as shown in Table I, indicate that mentally disturbed and violent people constitute the smallest category of incidents, although a larger number of people are threatening (paranoid). The largest category of incidents, though not by much, consists of nonviolent disturbed people.

Characteristics of incidents. Since each respondent described one particular incident in great detail, there were 90 detailed incident descriptions. From examination of approximate dates and other details it was apparent that

these were 90 separate incidents. The following description of incident characteristics is based on these 90 incidents.

How do police get involved? The most common way that police get involved in these incidents is in response to a call from a family member (32 percent of the 90 incidents). In 16 percent of cases the problem was first observed by officers on patrol. In 9 percent of cases a neighbor called the police, and in another 9 percent of cases the call came from another agency. In one instance, a mentally disturbed person himself called the police. Landlords, businesspeople, various others and unidentified callers accounted for the remaining 33 percent of cases.

When do these incidents occur? Approximately one-third of all the incidents took place between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., and another third took place between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. The days of the week with the highest incidences, in rank order, were Sundays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

Who responds? Typically the initial police response was not by the special unit but by patrol officers. Although patrol officers did minimal documentation of incidents, it seems that many cases were handled by regular patrol officers themselves from start to finish. They might handle cases informally, or by referring them to a medical unit rather than dealing with them as psychiatric cases, or by arrest when conditions warranted. The special unit was called when commitment to a mental facility seemed to be necessary and when patrol officers could not otherwise handle a situation.

Patrol officers responded to 70 of the 90 situations in this study. For those 70 situations, the average number of patrol officers was 6.04. In 50 of the 90 cases no personnel from any other agency were present. However, if another agency was present, then it was most often Emergency Medical Services, which was present at 22 of the 90 incidents. Hostage situations and suicides attracted more special unit officers than other kinds of situations (means of 5.71 and 5.70 compared with an overall mean of 4.13).

Where do incidents occur? A total of 65 incidents took place in residences, including one in a group psychiatric home. But in 48 of the 90 cases there were no family members present. In the 42 situations in which family members were present, the number of family members averaged 2.19. All of the hostage situations took place in a residence.

Who are the subjects and what have they done? Among the 60 cases in which the subject's age was reported, 30 was the most common age. Overall, 67.2 percent of the subjects were of low income. Most subjects were seen as a threat to others before the arrival of the special unit (52 out of 90), but considerably fewer had actually threatened somebody (31 out of 90) or injured someone (23 out of 90). Forty-six had a weapon of some kind. Furniture or other property had been damaged by 29 of the subjects before police arrived. Patrol officers, responding before special unit officers, encountered resistance from 38 of them.

How did subjects react to the police? Fifty-eight percent of the subjects were still agitated when the special unit arrived; 47 percent wanted the special unit themselves to leave, and 17 percent wanted the special unit to remove other people from the scene. Twenty-four of the 90 subjects took some action against the special unit officers, most often swinging something at them or stabbing at them with something. Four had guns, of whom three fired at special unit officers.

What were the outcomes of the incidents? Of the four subjects with guns, one killed himself before police arrived, one killed himself after firing at police, and two were killed by officers' responding fire. Only 13 subjects were described as cooperative by the end of the incident. However, subjects were arrested in only 19 of the 90 cases. In a few cases, subjects were arrested and taken to a medical facility. Nearly half of the subjects (43) were taken to a psychiatric facility. Slightly fewer (39) were taken to a medical facility. The medical facility seems to have been a surrogate for a psychiatric facility in most cases, since only nine subjects were injured, eight slightly and one seriously. Two subjects were left at the scene rather than taken into custody of any kind.

Results: effective and ineffective tactics

As part of the survey, officers answered open-ended questions about effective and ineffective tactics. To prompt more than minimalist answers, the questionnaire asked the officer to list three effective tactics and then three "things which should be avoided" in such situations. Hence, the questionnaire provided answer spaces for 540

responses to the 90 incidents. The respondents made a total of 420 responses, 223 describing effective tactics, 185 describing things to be avoided, and 12 irrelevant responses.

Content analysis. These open-ended responses were subjected to a formal content analysis. Eleven of the completed questionnaires (one from each category, including "other") were used to devise content categories and train the two raters (the authors). Following inspection of the 49 responses on these 11 questionnaires, content analysis categories were devised. There were 17 categories for effective tactics and, by coincidence, 17 for ineffective tactics. Then these same 49 responses were used for rater training. The two researchers discussed these responses thoroughly and agreed on how to categorize them, which included agreeing on the scope and meaning of each category. After that, the rest of the data set (371 responses) was categorized by each rater independently. The two raters agreed independently on 320 of these 371 responses. Using the interjudge reliability formula developed by Sandifer, Fleiss and Green (1968) with the criterion of agreement by two judges sorting data into discrete categories, the interjudge reliability was 0.74. Most of the 51 disagreements concerned items which were judged by one or the other rater to be either "miscellaneous" or "irrelevant." These disagreements were resolved by discussion between the raters before proceeding to the data analysis.

Tactics. Effective tactics are listed in Table II and ineffective tactics in Table III. The most frequently mentioned effective tactic was to "maintain a dialog" which included both dialogs intended to resolve a situation and dialogs used merely as a distraction while officers got into position to rush the subject. Still, only a little more than half of the officers indicated that some sort of communication with the subject would be an effective approach to such situations. Many officers hold to the belief that people in these situations are totally irrational or otherwise impossible to talk to.

As indicated in Table II, considerable emphasis was put on equipment. The unit lacked equipment especially designed for dealing with mentally disturbed people; few of the officers had ever heard of or seen such things as leather handcuffs, restraining sheets, or other restraints designed to minimize injuries to struggling or panic-stricken people. The emphasis on equipment was an emphasis on electric shock devices, large shields, restraining bars, and nets.

Beyond maintaining a dialog and proper equipment, other effective tactics were mentioned by far fewer officers. "Isolating the subject" starts with having family members or other onlookers move from the immediate scene, when feasible. Sometimes these people are a source of agitation to the subject; at other times police officers simply prefer to operate without onlookers. Isolating the subject also includes the notion of getting or keeping the subject in a physical location that minimizes risks and maximizes the potential for control by the officers. It is the inverse of the ineffective "tactic" of "improper containment of the subject." The most obvious guideline is that the subject should not be in a kitchen or bathroom where sharp instruments may be at hand and there is little space to maneuver. The officers were mindful of the importance of the physical and social environment in which the encounter takes place.

When officers refer to proper planning as an effective tactic and inadequate planning as an ineffective factor, they were referring to short-term planning on the scene. Despite the veneer of being a paramilitary organization, police officers have very little training to act in concert with a large number of other officers. Even the special unit ordinarily works in teams of two officers, not in larger units. Sometimes no supervisor is present, and sometimes a supervisor arrives after an encounter is under way, so that even supervisors have grown accustomed to the practice of letting officers determine their own course of action. In addition, with both patrol officers and special unit officers on the scene, there may be different supervisors for each, so that no one is clearly in charge. When supervisors do get involved, it is most often merely to nod assent to a tactic proposed by an officer. By getting the supervisor's approval, the officer shows respect and shifts responsibility to the supervisor. But it is rare that a supervisor initiates or actively controls tactics.

In addition, the radio messages about a situation may attract officers who were not officially dispatched to the scene. The lists of effective and ineffective tactics both highlight the problem of nonessential personnel on the scene. Sometimes a melange of assorted officers arrives on the scene and a process referred to as a "circus"

begins. For example, in one case a naked woman was threatening to jump from a fifth-floor fire-escape around noon time near a busy intersection. About a dozen dispatched and undischarged officers from various units arrived at the scene. Some stood below the fire-escape together with passers-by, just observing and commenting on humorous aspects of it. Some went inside the building and eventually got on to the fire-escape from windows on various floors. A few climbed down the fire escape from the roof, and another few boosted one up from the sidewalk, who lowered the fire escape ladder for others. There was no supervisor coordinating any of the actions. Each group of officers took its own approach to the situation and went for the target subject. Those who were first to reach the woman pulled her off the fire-escape through a window into an apartment.

The list of ineffective tactics also highlights the problems of too many civilians and too many supervisors. Although three officers mentioned the possible usefulness of getting cooperation from family members when dealing with a distraught person, the more common opinion is that family members and other civilians should be asked to stay out of the way. Similarly, the reference to too many supervisors is a reference to patrol force supervisors. The department's standard operating procedures put precinct supervisors in charge of certain situations. However, the special unit officers expected the precinct supervisors of all ranks to defer to them and any of their supervisors who might be present. In some cases, the precinct commanding officer is officially required to respond and take command, but in reality he is expected to yield control to the special unit officers who may not include anyone above the rank of sergeant. An informal matrix organization based on functional expertise often replaces the official paramilitary organization based on rank, although the agency does not officially recognize or sanction this. Some precinct supervisors insist on actually taking charge since the agency is going to hold them responsible for whatever happens. This irritates the special unit officers, who acquire a considerable dislike for precinct supervisors who are known to take command of situations.

Among the effective tactics, use of force ranked higher than show of force. Police supervision texts generally recommend merely displaying force ("show of force") as a preliminary to the use of force, consistent with the general principle that police should always use the least necessary force to handle a situation (e.g., Remsberg, 1986). Sometimes a show of force is sufficient to induce compliance from people. However, in dealing with emotionally disturbed people, the responses of the special unit officers expressed the belief that the subjects are not rational and are not amenable to more moderate tactics. Since the officers also believed that situations get worse rather than better with the passage of time, they preferred direct action of some type. The officers' recommendations about effective tactics were complemented by their comments on ineffective tactics. Among the ineffective tactics they listed indecisiveness, excessive compliance with the subject's demands, and waiting for other personnel to arrive. The suggestion to call a hostage negotiator or interpreter in some situations was more than counterbalanced by the sense that it would take too long for such personnel to arrive at the scene. The elements of a more cautious response are also among the tactical suggestions, although they do not rank so high on the effective and ineffective lists. Effective tactics include "show empathy" just below "show force" and, among the ineffective tactics, the need to avoid agitating the subject, unnecessary force, and panic triggers. Panic triggers include anything which might alarm the subject. Sirens could be a panic trigger. Displaying weapons could be a panic trigger. Letting the subject see equipment which will be used to subdue him might cause panic, so such equipment should be kept out of sight until the last instant.

Discussion

The officers' tactical responses need to be understood in the context of the special unit's customary beliefs and tactics. The unit was a multipurpose unit whose members defined themselves primarily as a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team. Their training and equipment emphasized preparation for dealing with a terrorist gang or other heavily armed, violent, intractable enemy. At the time of this study, the special unit was mandated to handle all situations involving mentally disturbed people, but the members had no training in how to deal with such people. The unit did not see these situations as its primary mission. The unit's self-image was based on its readiness to deal with armed and dangerous people.

Officers' stereotype of mentally disturbed people included the idea that it is not possible to have a meaningful

conversation with such people. A training videotape produced by the agency showed officers managing a mentally disturbed person in a fictional scenario. The training tape showed the patrol officers and then special unit officers handling the whole situation from beginning to end without anyone saying even one word to the subject. Various pieces of equipment were brought to the scene and used to trap and subdue the subject.

There is a long history of looking on equipment as the key to handling these situations. In the police department where this study occurred, tragic incidents in the past were followed routinely by agency announcements that new equipment was being purchased to handle such situations in the future (first mace, then nets, then shock devices, then restraining bars, then long shields for hemming in the subject). Each new failure found that the equipment bought after the last tragedy was inadequate because it "doesn't work on this type of person," the physical setting of encounters is either too congested or too open, or the subject moves around too much. Still, the officers' tactical suggestions put great emphasis on having proper equipment.

The special unit officers believed that, if they had to actually respond to a situation, it was because the situation was already out of control. It was assumed that patrol officers or others had already tried talking and failed. Their working hypothesis was that situations of these kinds get worse as they get prolonged, so it is necessary to take action as quickly as possible, not "waste time" talking. The common belief that time is the police officer's enemy in these situations is contrary to what is known about hostage situations. Remsberg (1986) expressed the usual rule for hostage situations most succinctly: "Remember: as a rule, the longer a hostage event lasts, the less likely it is to turn violent" (p. 399). However, the officers in this study of incidents involving mentally disturbed people held the belief that time is the police officer's enemy. This belief prompted officers to seek speedy physical resolutions of these situations.

The analysis of police tactics in situations involving mentally disturbed persons has implications for police training and for police administration. In the area of training, one must recognize the intimate connection between police officers' attitudes and their preferred tactics. Only a broadly conceived training program which deals with officers' stereotypes of mentally disturbed people can affect tactical decisions. So long as officers hold on to the ideas that mentally disturbed people are completely irrational and cannot be reasoned with, verbal tactics will play a minor role, sometimes being only a ploy to facilitate physically subduing the subject. Perhaps even the tendency to believe that the final tactical answer to such situations will be some kind of equipment militates against the effectiveness of training in verbal tactics.

The potential for change through training is constrained also by administrative and organizational factors. Police officers have little training in coordinated action. Their occupational experience instills self-reliance and individual decision making. The absence of meaningful supervision in most routine police patrol work engenders the occupational belief that individuals must make their own decisions, and supervisors must support the tactical decisions of subordinates. When the supervisors are not regarded as trained specialists in the kinds of situations being encountered and are not even the ordinary supervisors of the officers, there is still more impulse to ignore or resent direction by the supervisors. Bittner (1990) has noted that American police function least well in paramilitary situations. To the extent that situations involving mentally disturbed persons are approached as paramilitary operations, they are likely to remain the bane of police work.

The number of incidents per year responded to by the special unit raises the question of whether a large full-time unit is needed to handle these incidents. Some police departments have relied on a very small number of officers especially designated to handle situations involving mentally disturbed persons (Murphy, 1986). Such an organizational structure makes it more feasible to have highly trained specialists committed to specific tactics for working with mentally disturbed persons. Another possible organizational arrangement is suggested by the way some police departments structure hostage negotiation units. Since the need for hostage negotiators is somewhat rare, individuals are trained and designated as hostage negotiators but left in their other assignments; they are called on when needed, thus implementing a matrix organization structure.

It is questionable whether situations involving mentally disturbed people can be handled without major tragedies by a multipurpose special unit. Police, like people in other occupations, take their pride and self-image from the

most glamorous task assigned to them, no matter how rare its occurrence. Although the overwhelming majority of police officers never use deadly force in the course of their career, patrol officers have traditionally defined their job in terms of the potential for using or being the victim of deadly force (Bittner, 1990; Skolnick, 1966). A special unit which defines its status in terms of a SWAT team may not see situations involving mentally disturbed people as central to their mission and pride. Moreover, they may not adjust their tactics appropriately. In a police organizational structure where a special unit actually responds only in situations where patrol officers have failed to cope with the problem, it is more likely, and more reasonable, for special unit officers to adopt the working philosophy that more moderate tactics have failed and so to rely on more aggressive tactics. Organizational structure seems to have a decisive impact on tactical choices. A multi-purpose SWAT team is probably the wrong unit to handle situations involving mentally disturbed people. To optimize police performance in managing the growing number of situations which involve mentally disturbed people it may be necessary to focus on both training and the police department's organizational structure.

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Illustration

Caption: Table I; Special unit officer encounters with mentally disturbed people; Table II; Effective tactics; Table III; Ineffective tactics

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