OCCUPATIONAL VIOLENCE - A POLICE PERSPECTIVE

STEVEN DINE
Grad Dip OHM, MSIA

ABSTRACT

Violent incidents in the workplace are an identifiable and increasing phenomenon in occupational health and safety, and there has been a significant amount of work done on suggesting the employer response to these incidents in both prevention of, and reaction to, specific events. In dealing with an incident, a common limit of consideration is the arrival of police, and their subsequent investigations and action.

Violent incidents are the workplace of police officers, and the same duty of care exists for the police officer as for any other worker. This paper explores the issue of workplace violence from a police perspective, utilising a literature review, and recognising recent events affecting the Tasmania Police officers and civilian staff. Consideration is given to the evolving consequences of these events.

INTRODUCTION

The profile of occupational violence as an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) issue has been heightened over the last seven years, and to a greater degree more recently. Prior to that, although present within the work force, occupational violence was not considered to be a concern and historically has been neglected as an OHS issue. There are people who believe that the incidence of occupational violence has increased over time, bringing it into the view of the OHS arena, yet there are also people who believe that the incidence of occupational violence has not increased, but the effects in terms of both monetary cost and human suffering has been publicised. (Williams, 1989; Swanton, 1989)

WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL VIOLENCE?

As with any subject with a vast information base there are many definitions of a particular term, each may have a slightly different meaning or may be considered in a different context depending on the target audience. For the purpose of this paper I have adopted the following definition taken from a paper prepared by Annette Kappler (1993).

Kappler defines occupational violence as:

> "any situation arising out of employment where the health and safety of employees is deliberately breached or threatened by a third person(s); or where an employee perceives that their health and safety is at threat from a third person(s)."

This is a generic definition and could be applied and adopted in a large variety of circumstances or across a broad section of industry. When considered in the Policing perspective 1 believe there needs to be wider consideration given as a police officer is considered to be on duty 24 hours per day. There are occasions

where off duty police are required, by virtue of their role, to intervene in situations which are not normal. These obviously have an impact on their personal lives, and should be taken into account. A newspaper article stated;

> "New Zealand police do not routinely carry firearms but police were concerned for their safety after [off duty] Detective Brent Garner was overpowered, tortured and doused with petrol before being left to die... " (The Mercury Newspaper, 23/10/96)

THE RISKS OF POLICING

Policing is a high risk occupation by virtue of the necessity to maintain law and order. Police are considered the last line of defense when it comes to violence inflicted on another person or persons, and often little thought is given to what violence the police themselves are exposed to. It is the public's perception that when a violent act occurs the police will attend and deal with it. When researching occupational violence in a variety of databases and information sources, it was not until searching specific law enforcement journals that articles relating to occupational violence to police were discovered. A vast majority of articles consider occupational violence and also consider police to be primary response to the situation, the end point of consideration.

Policing has already been seen to be a high risk occupation, but what is risk. Risk is defined as;

> "the potential for the realisation of an unwanted, negative consequence of an event." (Rowe, 1977)

The acceptance of risk or the notion of "what is safe" is a subjective process based on what risks people are willing to accept at a particular time. If the risk a person is exposed to is acceptable it is deemed to be considered safe. This leads to the question, "How do you supply a police officer with a safe place of work?" The answer to this question is reliant on the perceptions of the police officers taking the risk, and as the perception of risk is an individual consideration, so is the definition of safe. (Viner, 1994)

As with any risk, the greater the duration of exposure, the greater the probability of an unwanted outcome. This is obvious when considering the response to the problems experienced in the United States of America, and in some cases, Australia. There are a large number of states in the United States that require off-duty police to be armed at all times. Essentially they carry two firearms, their off duty pistol and on duty pistol, and frequently both at work at the same time.

PERCEPTION VERSUS REALITY

The perception held by a person of a particular event or circumstance is reliant on the information they receive and the manner in which they interpret that information. A police officer may perceive that society is becoming more violent, or, if you like, that violence is being offered to them at a greater rate based on his or her perceptions. This may not be in line with reality. Research was conducted in Australia in 1987 which found that the perception of risk was actually out of kilter with reality. The perceived risks were actually higher than the real risks. (Swanton, 1987)

To be able to determine the difference between perception and reality accurate and unbiased data is required.

The data that trigger the research on which this paper is grounded was obtained from the Injury Surveillance Unit of South Australian Health Commission. This data was selected using areas of occupation, industry and incidence of occupational violence.

Occupational Groups	Percentage
police	21.8%
registered nurses	12.9%
guards and security officers	9.9%
enrolled nurses	5.9%
bar attendants	5.9%
prison officers	5.9%
sales assistants	5.0%

(Kappler, 1993)

The largest occupational group presenting to the casualty section between 1986 and 1993 were police officers, representing some 21.8% of the total of occupational groups. An assumption could be drawn from these figures that police were subject to occupational violence at a greater rate that other occupational groups, including that of health care workers and teachers.

Obtaining accurate data on incidents of occupational violence on police has been and still is difficult. As with many other data sets, inaccurate recording, under reporting and difficulty in defining occupational violence are continuing problems. The National Committee on Violence (1990) suggested that there was a time when assaults on police were considered just part of the job, and statistics were not maintained.

The increase of awareness of occupational violence and a trend not to accept these assaults as part of the job may lead to a perceived increase in violence. As with the perception of risk, the decision to charge an offender with assaulting a police officer is subjective and lies with what the particular officer is willing to accept.

When considering the data presented by the Injury Surveillance Unit there could be a number of reasons why police presented with a larger number of injuries compared with other occupational groups. When a police officer is assaulted, even if the assault is minor, the gathering of evidence to substantiate the charge of assault may be the officers motivation to attend the hospital for treatment, so that a record of the fact is created. A doctor's report may be presented in court for a minor soft tissue injury to corroborate the officer's allegation. In other occupations this motivation may not be present or may be a very low priority. The fact that a police officer reports an assault at the hospital may be more to do with processing the offence than concern over the assault itself, or even the need for treatment

This also relates to the ease with which a police officer can charge an offender with assault. In Tasmania, police have a power to arrest without warrant a person who assaults them. This is different to the process required of the public when they have been offered violence. More often than not, when the police arrive at the scene the offender has left. There may be insufficient evidence to identify the offender and there is a set procedure to be followed in obtaining and gathering evidence on both the part of the victim and the police officer. This may lead the victim to not pursue the matter or to obtain any medical evidence if they are uninjured, further compounding the data invalidity.

To be able to quantify the data of the number of assaults on police, the number of charges relating to that offence could be considered, although this may also be a biased data set, as not all police feel it necessary to charge an offender with a minor assault.

Data from the Annual Reports of the Department of Police and Public Safety in Tasmania have been considered. This data includes the actual number of charges of assaults on police as well as data which is encompassed by the definition of occupational violence, such as improper language to police and resisting arrest.

	84/85	85/86	86/87	87/88	89/90	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94
Improper Language	186	198	250	255	223	186	258	446	-
Resist Arrest	207	244	262	247	285	246	328	297	-
Assault Police	207	200	181	166	180	212	182	144	207

The data for 1993/94 relating to improper language to police and resisting arrest has been discounted as during that and subsequent years the criteria for collating the data changed. This is also true with all data relating to these fields for 1994/95.
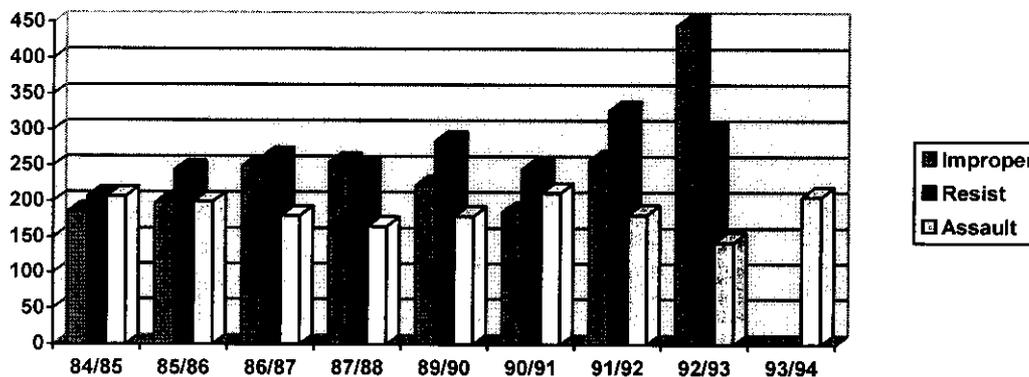
The data shows that the number of assaults on police have remained relatively static over the past 10 years.

An article from Tasmania's Mercury Newspaper by Whinnett (1996), "Tasmania has the nations worst gun toll", highlights that there were a number of shootings where 8 police officers have been shot over an 11 month period in Tasmania. This is in comparison with 6 police officers being shot around Australia during that time. Statistically this represents 57% of police shootings occurring in Tasmania which only has 2.5 % of the nation's population.

The perception of an increase of violence was further considered in an article by Swanton (1987) who found that there was no substantial evidence that police were murdered, shot or assaulted at an increasing rate. He continues to say that this evidence may not rebut the police community's perception that there is an increase in violence, but the lack of accurate data gives an impression there is no substantial increase. Compared with 40 populations of police in overseas countries, the police shooting fatality rates in Australia were found to be close to average.

WHAT CONTROL MEASURES ARE APPROPRIATE?

When considering a hierarchy of controls in respect to occupational violence, there are perhaps a number of novel or creative ways we could reduce the risk and lessen the outcomes. But, this is reality and any controls measures need to be realistic and achievable.

There is a move in the policing community towards having a less aggressive approach to dealing with violent offenders. Perhaps a good example of this is Project Beacon, initiated by Victoria police in 1994 after a number of police shootings. This project was aimed at retraining police officers in Victoria to maximise their safety and the safety of the public and people they have dealings with. Techniques used included operational risk management, non-lethal force techniques, conflict resolution and training to understand some principles behind mental illness and other associated problems. This approach to operation safety has been adopted by a number of states in Australia and there is some interest from outside of Australia. By the end of 1995 all 8500 operational police in Victoria have taken part in Project Beacon.

TRAINING AS A CONTROL MEASURE

The training received by Police Officers must be as realistic as possible. Lopez (1994) suggests that training is an essential part of the Police Officers repertoire of skills. Training such as that given in Project Beacon also has the added benefits of increasing confidence and moral, and instils an awareness of safety related issues in the workplace. There is also a need to maintain the level of training, as over time the effect of the initial training deteriorates. Frequent refresher programs assist in increasing officer confidence levels, reduces the risk of injury to both the officer and the offender and also reduces the risk of litigation from both police and offenders. This continued training is essential to comply with training aspect of Occupational Health and Safety legislation. Safety training is now regarded as mandatory in most areas, with a requirement to document the training and for the person who has been trained to acknowledge it has been completed, as required by the common law duty of care.

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The use of computer technology to reduce the risk of occupational violence is becoming common place as computer technology invades almost every work place. The current Command And Control System (CACS) used by Tasmania Police is not state of the art but is effective in the supply of warnings when dealing with particular people or residences with a known history. Radio operators are able to supply operational police with details of any warnings, such as propensity towards violence and if the person has a history of using knives or firearms. Combine these factors with local knowledge, and the operational police officer is able to make an assessment of risk and request resources accordingly (Barry, 1996).

This use of technology and associated research is an example of what can be achieved and what direction is needed in the future. According to Symons (1995, p. 15) total reliance on the use of sophisticated equipment to entirely reduce the risk experienced by police is naive. The use of this equipment, together with further research and training will help eliminate some risk, or make the risk more manageable.

PSYCHOLOGY - AN EFFECTIVE VIOLENCE REDUCING TOOL

The use of interpersonal skills has been seen as an effective tool to reduce the risk of occupational violence. The awareness of body language, the use of verbal skills, and an understanding of basic conflict resolution techniques and negotiating skills are becoming common place in most areas of police training.

Conflict resolution is mentioned by Boatman (1995) using the term "tactical communication". When a police officer arrives at the scene of an incident there is instantaneous communication, both in verbal and non-verbal forms, flowing between all parties involved. Tactical training should include a basic understanding of body language and physical reactions under stress, allowing an assessment to be made on what the offenders are likely to do. The use of verbal commands is seen by Symons (1995, p. 15) as generally having a subduing effect on the aggressive manner of an aggressor. Training is again needed to develop and refine these verbal commands, so they are forceful and expressed in a non-aggressive manner.

DISCUSSION

The job of a police officer is said to be one of the hardest in the world. There is no really defined role, apart from that of core duties. There is an expectation by society that police will prevent violence; if it does occur, there is an expectation that they will end it. This places the police officer in the firing line, so to speak. In many articles on occupational violence in general, a large number of occupations are mentioned, and the main recommendation is that if any form of violence is inflicted upon employees during their employment, the police should be called to deal with it. There is little suggestion that this violence will be an OHS issue for the police.

The profile of occupational violence has been raised within the OHS community over the past few years, but there still needs to be an overall awareness of the occupational violence topic within this fraternity. A move away from criminal actions against the offenders towards civil action against employers may direct some effort in prevention rather than damage control.

There is a general problem between perception and reality in determining the incidence of occupational violence, particularly with policing. This difficulty is also present in the maintenance of accurate definitions and data on the incidence of occupational violence. This lack of accurate data is causing delays in recognising the extent of the problem and how best to develop prevention strategies.

Is the most effective method of controlling occupational violence to arm all police, to supply training and body armour, or to develop psychological models to reduce the probability of violence?

To prevent all violence to police is a nonsense. It is not achievable. What is achievable, is the reduction of the incidence of violence and the severity of the outcomes.

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