Deadly Paradox of Self-defense

Rodger E. Broome, PhD, *Utah Valley University*

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There are many police shows on television and a multitude of films dramatizing the work of law enforcement officers in the United States. Early programs like Dragnet and Adam-12 idealized Los Angeles police officers under the banner of “Serve and Protect.” After a few decades, these depictions of police became more realistic by the use of retired cops as consultants for shows like Hill Street Blues, NYPD Blue, and Colors, which showcased the daily challenging work of big-city police working in the urban streets. After the reality TV series COPS aired, many similar programs followed in its footsteps providing a “ride-a-long” type of experience for the viewer. As well as these artistic impressions could approximate the themes and dilemmas of modern American cops, there is nothing like a first-person perspective to give one the qualitative feel of our blue knights.

As a public safety psychologist who is still a certified peace officer, I took a volunteer patrol position with a small local community’s police department about 20 miles north of my home. I patrol about 12 to 24 hours a month with two objectives in mind. First, to keep current within a profession that is ever changing in its technology and procedures and also to keep my place among a tribe of people with whom I was initiated over 23 years ago. Second, I work alongside officers that can use an empathetic ear that truly understands their challenges and coach them through some rough spots, when all they need is support.

On a day I went to patrol, one of my sons went along to pass some time, see what it’s like, and get the viewpoint as my real-life partner. The day began before dawn with fresh coffee and a cold winter’s drive into the small city. We loaded my equipment into my patrol car, chatted with my fellow officers making all the proper introductions, and then out to drive around “looking for trouble.” Today was a bit different though. I was issued a brand-new Glock .40 caliber pistol and given orders to get to the shooting range in the afternoon for training and qualifications. Like any other cop, we love police gadgets, and a new issued weapon can be extremely special. We don’t anthropomorphize our weapons, but we realize that the “trust y’ol’ sidearm” can be the difference between going home at the end of the tour and not. Police officers spend many hours acquiring and maintaining proficiency in using various firearms. We come to know first-hand that guns are not toys, even though a challenging day at the range can be fun.

So, after a number of hours of neighborhood patrols, alarm responses, and traffic stops, we went to the range with the firearms instructor. I asked the instructor to give my son a lesson in shooting after the serious work was done, and he enthusiastically agreed. Up to this point, I have been pretty factual and nonchalant with my description of the events. The raw reality was that after having patrolled in a marked police car for hours, at the ready for anything from a parking problem to a violent crime, we set out the range to practice using lethal force with machines engineered to kill very efficiently.

When we got to the range, we began loading the handguns with ammunition and talking about the use of deadly force. My colleague had used deadly force not too long ago and related the experience to my son. In this account, there were aspects of his experience that he had not told me before. He described the complexity of perceiving, anticipating, and fearing the armed suspect while ever-hoping that the young man would simply surrender. The perpetrator did not...
surrender, and after pointing his gun at my colleague and pulling the trigger, my peer returned fire, and the young man did not survive his injuries.

My son listened intently and did not say much as my colleague wrapped up the story with a summary of conclusions about what it all meant to him. We left the armorer’s bench to step out on the range so I could get my qualification shoot completed. My shot as I quick-drew, fired, and had different drills in which to demonstrate competence. Unbeknownst to my son, I had to mentally put myself into the drills and engage in each shot as if it would be the one to save my own life. For two decades, I participated in this biannual firearms training that is ritualized practiced so as to increase the possibility of my surviving an armed assailant for real. As my son grew up, he never really thought much about his daddy being a police officer that might really have to fight a criminal to the death. As I stood in my uniform drawing and shooting, the concussion of the gun shots, the smell of the powder and the flash of fire from the muzzle brought him more into focus. He used his smartphone to capture a few drills on video. When I was done, he nervously but excitedly accepted his turn.

The instructor was amazingly caring and patient with his instructions to my son. I felt a new appreciation for him as he gently but firmly explained how the weapon was to be held and managed for safety purposes. Phrases like, “Don’t point the gun at anything you don’t intend to destroy” is more than an aphorism. “Keep your finger out of the trigger” and other directions were given and reinforced as my son stepped to the firing line. On the go ahead, bang! The first shot rang out as the pistol jumped in his hands. After a few shots, there was more instruction and encouragement by my colleague. Knowing this was a significant event, I also took the opportunity to capture some video. When the shooting was done, the bullet holes in the human shaped silhouette target showed great marksmanship. The holes in the paper represented hits to the vital organs of the human body. “That’s a great grouping!” said the instructor. “That’s better than I’ve seen some real officers do,” he said.

Police deadly force is not intended to kill, but its purpose is to stop a violent person from hurting others. It is a desperate measure to bring someone physically under control, even at the risk of taking his or her life. In my research, the officers’ lived experience with shooting another person was paradoxical. Each shot fired by the officers was the most horrible thing they had ever done while being vital to surviving the encounters. Every bullet that hit its mark improved the likelihood that the officer would live while each bullet extinguished the life of the adversary. The sights and sounds of the gunshots, the smell of the gunpowder and blood, and the after-shooting inspection of their own bodies for gunshot wounds were surreal. The experiences changed their worlds and transformed them as people. It was not like training, even though the draw stroke, trigger pull, and other aspects were the same actions and thought processes. However, the real-world version pushed them out to the edge of their own existences.

We concluded the training and later I asked my son what he thought. We were driving home and he had taken his shot-up target home as a souvenir. He told me the gun recoiled harder than he had imagined. He added how he tried to implement the instructions he was given to do well. We talked about the mechanics of the psychomotor skills involved in firing the weapon. The instructor had invited him back in the future, and we talked about what that might entail. After a long silence, my son said to me, “It is strange to think that each one of the holes in this paper was actually made the same way that someone is killed. These are just little holes in the paper, but they do major damage to people’s bodies.” He had learned something new.

— Rodger Broomé

Today’s guest contributor, Rodger Broomé, is a public safety psychologist who graduated from Saybrook University following a 23-year career in police, fire, and emergency medical care.

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