



No.94

Police Custody & Self-Inflicted Firearms Deaths

Vicki Dalton

Almost half of the firearm-related deaths in police custody between 1990 and 1997 were self-inflicted suicides. In 33 cases over these years a person, when confronted by police, shot himself dead. As was shown in a previous Trends and Issues (no. 89) police were not dealing with traditional criminals in these cases. More than two-thirds of these victims were depressed, or had some form of psychiatric history. Alcohol or drugs were contributing factors in half of the cases and, in almost half, a domestic altercation had preceded police attendance and the suicide.

Preliminary analysis shows that firearms were readily available, or in 60 per cent of cases the firearm was not a weapon that could be prohibited or restricted under new firearms regulations, though more stringent licensing may limit access. Further work at the Australian Institute of Criminology will test this proposition.

Adam Graycar
Director

Trends and Issues No. 89 (Dalton 1998b) examined those deaths in police custody and custody-related operations that occur when civilians are fatally wounded by police officers. While fatal shootings by police account for more than half (55 per cent) of all firearms deaths in custody, gunshot suicides by persons confronted by police are worthy of analysis.

During the period 1 January 1990 to 30 June 1997 there were 33 self-inflicted firearms deaths in police custody/operations representing 45 per cent of the total 75 firearms-related deaths in custody that occurred during the period. This report closely examines the characteristics and precipitating factors leading up to these incidents, highlighting the very significant role that depression, domestic altercations and alcohol have contributed. The report also aims to put in place a procedure for monitoring and reporting on the impact of new firearms regulations introduced in 1996-97 by State and Territory Governments; specifically their availability and their use in confrontations with police.

Suicide, whether by firearm or any other means, is a serious issue for the criminal justice system and society as a whole. It is a major social and public health problem requiring not only the efforts of the criminal justice system, but collaborative work with other agencies to provide preventive programs (Hassan 1996). The 33 firearms suicides in police custody discussed in this report are but a small part of this wider phenomenon often regarded as arising from mental illness; the principal causes of suicide being depression and aggression (Hassan 1996). Australian studies show that "relational" problems (unhappy love, family/marital problems, shame and guilt), "instrumental" problems (financial and unemployment problems, a sense of failure in life) and "health" problems are some of the principal circumstances preceding suicide (Hassan 1996).

Too often we read about homicides, suicides, murder-suicides or massacres involving firearms. It is not unusual for the homicide or multiple massacre offender to turn a firearm upon himself

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
OF CRIMINOLOGY

trends

&

issues

in crime and criminal justice

August 1998

ISSN 0817-8542

ISBN 0 642 24080 9



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(Carcach & Grabosky 1998). Sometimes police arrive all too late and the offender has already fled. Otherwise he (in all of the cases reported in this study the perpetrator was male) may shoot himself after police have arrived; in these circumstances the death is defined as a "death in custody" (see Dalton 1998b, p.2, for definition of a "death in custody"). In some instances, the offender may plead with police to shoot him and with enough provocation may achieve this outcome (better known as "suicide by cop"). Prevention strategies, whether they comprise risk assessment, mental health monitoring or firearms limitations, require urgent attention.

From the data collected and analysed by the National Deaths in Custody Monitoring and Research Program at the AIC we are able to report on these patterns and trends and hopefully contribute to the types of policy responses that are required to reduce the incidence of such deaths occurring in custody around Australia. Other significant work on deaths by firearms has already been completed or in progress at the AIC, much of the data collected by the Institute's National Homicide Monitoring Program established in 1989 (see Mukherjee & Carcach (1996), Mukherjee (1997), Carcach & Grabosky (1997; 1998), James & Carcach (1997) and Carcach (forthcoming)). Some of this work has been in response to the Port Arthur tragedy and the new firearms regulations introduced in its aftermath.

Circumstances

In many situations, police are called to a private residence, public place or other location. Often a siege or stand-off may follow, and negotiations may continue for lengthy periods. Police will either be in close proximity to the person, have visual contact and be able to converse with the person, or will

have established a perimeter around the premises in which the person is located. The person is therefore in the process of being "detained" by police; he is not free to leave, and when or if he surrenders he will be taken into police custody for questioning or arrested. If he fatally injures himself at this time he is a "death in custody". Police may be in attendance because an offence has been committed. The suspect or suspects may be holding a hostage, may already have shot and killed a family member or a number of others in the street or other location, or police may be there to take him (or her) into custody for another offence.

There are other situations where the person has contacted police, often distressed, perhaps threatening suicide and shortly before or after police attendance has fatally wounded himself. These cases would be excluded as "deaths in custody". No offence has been committed. Similar exclusions apply to search and rescue operations.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the 33 deaths that occurred during the period and also provides information on the rate of deaths per 100 000 population by jurisdiction.

Precipitating Factors

Table 2 reports the type of weapon used in the 33 deaths, including details about the jurisdiction in which the incident took place, the location of the incident, whether alcohol or drugs were involved, whether a domestic altercation had taken place prior to the incident, whether the person was depressed or had a psychiatric/mental illness and a brief description of the incident, including details on the most serious offence leading up to the deceased's death.

Unfortunately, complete information on all precipitating factors and characteristics of each incident is not available. In particular, information on deceaseds' employment status and criminal histories is patchy. However, it can be seen that in at least eight of these incidents the deceased was the subject of, or had breached, a restraining/domestic violence or intervention order. It would also appear that in many of the cases the deceased was recently separated from his wife or de facto and seriously depressed or agitated about the termination of the relationship. From the information available, it would also appear that a

Table 1: Australia, Deaths resulting from self-inflicted gunshot wounds yearly totals, by jurisdiction and rate per 100 000 population, 1 January 1990-30 June 1997

Jurisdiction	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	Overall Total	Deaths per 100 000 population	% of total
NSW			2	2	3	1	4	1	13	0.27	39%
Vic.		1	1			1		1	4	0.11	12%
Qld		1		1	2	1			5	0.19	15%
WA							1	1	2	0.15	6%
SA		1						1	2	0.17	6%
Tas.			1	1		2	1		5	1.50	15%
NT		1							1	0.78	3%
ACT				1					1	0.46	3%
Aust.		4	4	5	5	5	6	4	33	0.23	100%

Notes:

1. Excludes the death of one female offender who was shot by her husband during a siege situation.
2. Does not include deaths currently excluded pending receipt of Coroner's Finding determining whether the death meets the criteria of a "death in custody".
3. Sources for population data: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997, *Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age: States and Territories of Australia*, ABS Cat. No. 3201.0, ABS, Canberra.

significant number were either unemployed, on illness benefits or unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Examination of the 33 deaths reveals:

- In all cases the deceased was male.
- In all but one case, the deceased was non-Indigenous.
- The ages of those who died ranged from 15 to 66 years, averaging 36 years.
- More than half of the deaths occurred at a private residence, either inside or outside.
- In almost half of the cases, a domestic altercation (in most cases involving an intimate partner, e.g. wife, de facto or estranged partner) had preceded police attendance. In many of these cases the partner/ex-partner was threatened with a firearm.
- In four cases the deceased had turned the firearm upon himself after fatally wounding either his wife or de facto. In at least one other case the partner survived being wounded.
- In one case, the deceased had murdered five people before shooting himself.
- Alcohol (and to a lesser extent drugs) may have been a contributing factor, with almost half those who fatally shot themselves being under the influence of alcohol (or drugs) at the time of the incident.
- In a significant proportion (more than two-thirds) of the total, the deceased was reported to have been either "depressed" or to have had some form of psychiatric history requiring treatment.
- 39 per cent of the firearms used were weapons now deemed to be illegal under national firearms regulations.

Types of Firearms Used

Mukherjee (1997) noted that in one-third of all firearms deaths between 1990 and 1995, the type of firearm was not known be-

cause the information on the death certificates was missing or not clear. However, data are available for all 33 cases reported here. Another problem noted was the lack of uniform procedures and criteria across Australia's jurisdictions for recording and classifying deaths and being able to determine whether the firearms used in suicide, homicide, and crime are registered or whether the user was licensed.

New firearms legislation and regulations agreed to following the Australasian Police Ministers' Council meeting on 10 May 1996 restrict the availability of certain types of firearms. The AIC's National Deaths in Custody and Homicide Monitoring Programs classify firearm homicides and firearm-related self-inflicted deaths in custody according to the type of firearm and then to the new regulations introduced following the 1996 Police Ministers' meeting (*see* Carcach & Grabosky 1997). (Data relating to firearms deaths prior to this time were reclassified to be consistent with these new classification categories.)

Sixty-one per cent of the firearms used in self-inflicted deaths in custody were legal weapons (Categories A & B). The remaining 39 per cent were basically prohibited or restricted except for occupational or official purposes, with handguns being responsible for nearly one-tenth of all firearm-related deaths in custody.

Self-inflicted Gunshot Deaths and Police Shooting Deaths

Police response, training, and negotiation skills for dealing with armed, violent, agitated or depressed individuals were discussed in Dalton (1998b) and will not be repeated here. Persons shot by police are almost inevitably in close proximity, will have visual contact and the ability to communicate with police officers. Police will have assessed the circumstances and employed whatever other methods are

available to them to manage the situation before resorting to the use of "deadly force".

It is important, however, to recognise that with respect to self-inflicted firearms deaths in police custody, police rarely have the same degree of control over the situation. For example, many of these deaths occur during a siege or raid situation, with the offender often closeted inside a private residence. In these cases police may have sealed off the area, established a perimeter around the residence, but possibly not have any visual contact. They may or may not be able to communicate with the offender. The offender may or may not be willing to talk with a negotiator. There is no doubt that the assistance a specially trained negotiator can offer is critical in these situations (Fuselier 1986). In some cases the offender shot himself immediately or shortly after police arrived at the scene; in other cases a lengthy stand-off and period of negotiation preceded death. Ultimately, in all of the 33 deaths covered by this report, police were not able to prevent the offender from turning the firearm upon himself.

A comparison of the incidence, circumstances and precipitating factors surrounding both self-inflicted firearms deaths and those inflicted by police reveal some central as well as quite distinctive characteristics. A very small number (5 out of 75) of firearm-related deaths in custody (either inflicted by police or self-inflicted) involved Aboriginal people. Only one Indigenous death by firearm was self-inflicted. This is consistent with Carcach and Grabosky (1997; 1998) who reported that Indigenous Australians rarely resort to homicide by firearm and are even less likely to be involved in a murder-suicide.

Similarly, the number of women to die in custody as a result of gunshot wounds was also small (n=5); one of these was Aboriginal. No female gunshot deaths in police custody/operations were self-inflicted.

Table 2: Australia, Year of death, Jurisdiction, Weapon, Location, Self-inflicted Firearms Deaths in Custody-related Police Operations, 1990–97

State	Year	Type of firearm	Location of incident	Domestic	Alcohol	Depressed or psych history	Employment status	Criminal history	Incident and offence details
NSW	1992	.22 sawn-off rifle	inside public building	Related to child custody dispute	no	Yes – both he & wife	Invalid pensioner	Previous imprisonment for break, enter & steal	Deceased and wife distressed over child custody issue with Dept Family & Community Services. Took hostages inside building. Police negotiators called in during 18-hour siege; deceased shot his wife then himself.
NSW	1992	.22 rifle	private residence	yes	yes	yes	Unemployed		Shot wife in hand before she and daughter fled house.
NSW	1993	.410 shotgun	remote country homestead	no	no	Yes – previous suicide attempt	Not known	Indecent assault two girls 13 & 14	Deceased (and two accomplices) kidnapped and shot 5 victims; shot himself following 26 hours siege.
NSW	1993	.22 calibre rifle	private residence	Related to altercation at previous employment	Drugs	yes	Quit 5 weeks earlier	Break, enter & steal & possess proh. plant offences	Deceased broke into former work supervisor's residence; held hostage with firearm & sexually assaulted; refused to communicate with police; shot himself following 14-hour siege.
NSW	1994	sawn-off shotgun	outside residence	yes	no	yes	yes	Bail for sexual assault; DVO	Attended home of sexual assault victim; pursued by police to son's residence; shot himself when surrounded by police.
NSW	1994	9mm machine pistol & silencer	private residence	no	no	Yes – suicide notes found	Psch. patient	Carnal knowledge; breach of probation; malicious damage	Deceased absconded mental patient located at his home; police & negotiators attended but no response; deceased located shot inside residence.
NSW	1994	7mm bolt action magnum rifle	private residence	yes	Yes and steroid abuse	Yes, possibly due to steroid abuse	Manager/mechanic		Deceased believed wife to be having affair and had installed a listening device in bedroom. After arguing killed wife with hammer. After police attended scene, deceased was observed to load a rifle inside house and then shot himself.
NSW	1995	.22 bolt action rifle	caravan on private property	no	yes	Yes – suicide letter	Invalid pensioner	Bail for aggravated sexual & indecent assault	Deceased borrowed acquaintance's rifle. Police established perimeter around caravan and attempted negotiation without success.
NSW	1996	shotgun	private residence	yes	no		Crane driver		Deceased shot and killed wife in street outside residence. Retreated inside residence. Negotiation attempts unsuccessful. Deceased located several hours later with gunshot wound.
NSW	1996	double barrel shotgun	in car, Great Western Highway, during course of police pursuit	yes				Ex Mercenary assassin; threats to estranged lover resulting in Restraining Order	Shot and killed estranged lover. Rammed police vehicle during pursuit and then shot himself.
NSW	1996	410 guage shotgun	in stationary motor vehicle	Yes	yes & drugs	Yes – reported by psychiatrist to be both suicidal & homicidal	Farmhand	DVO; breach of Firearms Act	Police had confiscated all known firearms from the deceased when DVO taken out by recently estranged wife. Unbeknownst to police, deceased still retained one firearm. Deceased argued and pointed gun at estranged wife on Christmas Day. Police pursuit and when vehicle stopped, attempted to negotiate with deceased without success. Deceased shot himself whilst seated in car; police had surrounded vehicle.
NSW	1996	.22 calibre rifle	shed on private property	yes	no	yes	Invalid pensioner		Deceased threatened to shoot wife's dog; she reported this to police, and his possession of firearms. Police located deceased in shed on property holding firearm. Negotiations took place for 2 hours until deceased shot himself.
NSW	1997	shotgun	residence on property	yes	yes	yes	Sickness benefits	On bail; breach of bail and DVO	Deceased recently separated from wife. Set fire to shed and house on property; lengthy siege (28 hours) and negotiations followed; deceased became more agitated by media reports; fired shots at police; located deceased in bathroom.
Vic	1997	.22 calibre	in stationary motor vehicle outside residence	yes	yes	Yes – previous suicide attempts	Not known	Not known	Threatened to shoot himself because estranged wife wouldn't return to live with him; police negotiators attended scene; shot himself 5 hours later.
Vic	1992	.222 rifle	private property	no	no	no	15 years	On Good Behaviour Bond; Intervention Order taken out by mother	Deceased & accomplice broke into house, confronted resident with stolen firearm, left in resident's vehicle; shot himself when confronted by police following day.
Vic	1995	pen pistol (.22)	private nursing home (shot himself in hotel on 22/1/92, died as a result of wounds in 1995)		yes				Attempted murder of police with pen pistol.
Vic	1997	possibly accidentally shot himself with handgun/pistol	front yard of unknown residence, following police pursuit		yes	yes			Police pursuit of deceased driving stolen motor vehicle; fired shots at police and fled; confronted by police who negotiated with deceased for about 45 minutes before he accidentally shot himself.

Table 2: Australia, Year of death, Jurisdiction, Weapon, Location, Self-inflicted Firearms Deaths in Custody-related Police Operations, 1990–97 (con't)

State	Year	Type of firearm	Location of incident	Domestic	Alcohol	Depressed or psych history	Employment status	Criminal history	Incident and offence details
Qld	1991	assault rifle	private residence	No	yes	yes	Recently retrenched	Not known	Discharging firearm in public place causing fear; shot himself following nine hour siege.
Qld	1993	assault rifle	rodeo grounds	Yes – over relationship break-up	Not known	Yes – wrote suicide note	Not known	Not known	Deceased roamed bushland shooting at police to prevent arrest; shot himself in front of father 3 hours later.
Qld	1994	.22 calibre rifle	public street during police pursuit on foot	no	yes		Plasterer	Bail for drink driving	Deceased and accomplice involved in police pursuit; accomplice discharged firearm at pursuing police; abandoned vehicle and shot himself when challenged by police attempted murder with firearm.
Qld	1994	sawn-off .22 calibre bolt action ten shot magazine rifle	in motor vehicle during police pursuit	yes	no – but known alcoholic	yes			Deceased being sought by police for attempted murder with firearm. Shot himself in the head during course of police pursuit and vehicle crashed into semi-trailer.
Qld	1995	rifle	private residence	yes					Entered residence of ex-girlfriend's parents armed with a rifle. Ex-girlfriend and child fled, leaving the parents. Shortly after police arrival deceased shot himself in toilet cubicle.
WA	1996	Bentley pump action 12-gauge repeating shotgun	sand dunes		yes & drugs	Yes – left suicide notes			Police pursuit following report of deceased firing indiscriminately from vehicle. Deceased abandoned vehicle. Upon police arrival and their requests to give himself up, deceased fired shots at police. Deceased later located in sand dunes with gunshot wound inflicted.
WA	1997	rifle	private residence			yes		Numerous traffic offences; Breach of restraint order; Fraud; Assault; Assault of wife	Police called to disturbance; told police was in possession firearm and did not want to go to prison; negotiated for nearly 2 hours before shooting himself.
SA	1991	.223 calibre	Public street		no		Very erratic		Armed robbery followed by taking hostages in a private residence; when confronted, shot at police who returned fire; deceased shot himself after being shot by police.
SA	1997	.22 rifle	private residence						Deceased set alight his vehicle; barricaded himself inside house; made threats against police and relatives; 15 hour siege before deceased shot himself.
Tas	1992	12-gauge shotgun	private residence	yes	yes	yes	unemployed	Recent threats to kill ex de facto and himself	Deceased attended ex de facto's residence in breach of an existing restraint order; opened window and shot at ex de facto and police officers inside house before shooting himself.
Tas	1993	.22 rifle	public street	yes	yes	Yes – previous suicide attempt	unemployed	Stealing & traffic offences	Shot dog and dumped in girlfriend's yard; threatened suicide; threatened police with firearm before shooting himself.
Tas	1995	.22 calibre rifle	private residence	Yes – child custody dispute	yes	yes	unemployed	Restraining order	Argued with ex de facto's boyfriend and damaged his car. Armed with firearm, deceased took his 2-year-old child hostage; following negotiations with police he released child 2 hours later then shot himself.
Tas	1995	.22 sawn-off rifle	private residence						Police attended to interview deceased in relation to sexual assault and rape of female family member. Deceased went to rear room in house and shot himself.
Tas	1996	.22 calibre rifle	outside school gymnasium			Yes – lengthy history & threatened suicide 2 days earlier	unemployed		Deceased unlawfully obtained firearm from friend. Requested meeting with police re providing information on a case. Following lengthy five-hour discussions, the deceased shot himself.
NT	1991	303/25 sawn-off rifle	CIB interview room	no	yes	yes	Road show amusements	Not known	Deceased being interviewed in relation to stealing; took firearm from his unchecked baggage and discharged firearm at police officer before shooting himself.
ACT	1993	single barrel 12-gauge shotgun	inside Jolimont Centre	yes	no	yes	Maintenance worker	Recent threats to estranged wife, former lover and male friend of former lover	Shot and wounded male at swimming pool; drove motor vehicle into estranged wife's workplace building & discharged firearm; set vehicle on fire inside building.

Alcohol consumption by the offender is highly associated with all firearms deaths in custody, self-inflicted and inflicted by police, as is a history of mental illness/depression. Domestic altercations between estranged intimate partners also feature prominently.

Conclusion

The central issues emerging from the data contained in this report are that the male offender who turns a firearm upon himself when confronted by police is significantly more likely to have been involved in a domestic altercation prior to the confrontation than the offender who is shot by police. He is also more likely to have murdered his partner (or estranged partner) prior to his own suicide. Similarly, he is more likely to have been depressed or to have had some history of mental illness. The fact that the most common form of murder-suicide is that occurring in and around intimate relationships and the breakdown of such relationships requires appropriate policy interventions and prevention strategies to prevent further such tragedies. While the availability of firearms should not be overlooked, major focus needs to be directed towards strategies and interventions to deal with the depression and mental illness resulting from the breakdown of these intimate relationships.

Current legislation determines on what grounds a licence may be refused or cancelled and a firearm seized. These include circumstances where the person has been the subject of an Apprehended Violence Order, Domestic Violence Order, restraining order or conviction for assault with a weapon/aggravated assault within the past five years; or has a mental or physical condition which would render the applicant unsuitable for owning, possessing or using a firearm. The cases included in this report repeatedly

highlight the need for much tighter controls to help prevent these types of death.

In nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) of all self-inflicted firearms deaths in custody the offender shot himself with a "legal" weapon. Other work at the AIC has already demonstrated that "legal" weapons were used in 54 per cent of all firearm homicide incidents and feature prominently in firearm suicides and firearm-related violence generally.

We know that firearms availability is thought to be a major factor contributing to the increased number of deaths which occur as a result of suicide and homicide attempts, and, of course, firearms are more lethal than other methods. Seventy-six per cent of firearm deaths in Australia are suicides and 15 per cent are homicides (McDonald & Brown 1996).

Would stricter gun laws and the availability of such weapons have avoided some of the tragedies included in this report? Will stricter laws punishing such offences deter others? Restrictions on access to firearms by those who may be at risk of aggressive or violent behaviour as a result of mental illness, or with a history of any such behaviour, must be enforced and maintained at an appropriate national level.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due to Dr Peter Grabosky, Director of Research, Australian Institute of Criminology, and Mr David McDonald, NCEPH, Australian National University, for their encouragement and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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