

Posted 11/16/07

ASSISTED SUICIDE IS *NOT* POLICE WORK!

Less-than-lethal weapons can keep cops from becoming executioners

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Four nights ago, after menacing family members with knives, an 18-year old New York City psychiatric outpatient with a violent past confronted officers responding to his mother's frantic 9-1-1 call. In the dark, the youth drew an object from his clothing, pointed it in the cops' direction and demanded to be killed. Four uniformed officers and a plainclothesman fired twenty shots. Ten struck and killed the boy.

The item turned out to be a hairbrush. An emergency response team with less-than-lethal weapons had been summoned but was not yet on scene. The shooting continues to be heavily criticized by angry residents but is being staunchly defended by the Police Commissioner, who said that the officers were reasonably in fear of their lives.

After a heavy night of partying, an 18-year old Huntington Beach, California girl stumbled home, slashed at her mother with a knife, then ran around the neighborhood, brandishing the weapon at passers-by and stabbing a tree. When two officers approached, the woman yelled "I'm on drugs, just ... kill me". Ignoring orders to drop the knife, she charged the cops. They fired, striking her fifteen times. Later, the coroner confirmed that the youth had been high on meth.

When the shots rang out a third officer, who had just arrived, was loading a pepper ball launcher; a fourth was on the way with a beanbag shotgun. Citizens protested the killing as senseless but it was ruled justified by the D.A., who said that the officers were caught by surprise and had no alternative.

Occurring at opposite ends of the U.S. fifteen months apart, these remarkably similar incidents are unusual only in their tragic ends. Thanks to deinstitutionalization, a lack of funding and widespread NIMBY'ism, the streets of our cities are awash with the drug-addled and mentally ill, and guess who gets to be their "counselors"?

Police routinely defuse potentially violent situations without hurting anyone. Some of the credit goes to a new generation of hardware, from projectile launchers to the ubiquitous Taser. (Forget aerosol sprays, which have a very limited range and immobilizing effect.) Yes, less-than-lethal weapons can be misused (shades of [MacArthur Park](#).) Sometimes they cause serious injury and occasionally even kill.

But their benefits are on balance so compelling that no modern law enforcement agency should go without them.

So why aren't they available to those who most need them -- the cops on the beat? A few progressive agencies (Irvine, California comes to mind) go so far as to equip every patrol car with a projectile launcher. Others like LAPD and Miami strive to insure that each officer has at least a Taser. But in many agencies, including the colossal NYPD, less-than-lethal hardware is considered too specialized to distribute. Instead, these critical tools of the trade get locked up in SWAT vans and the trunks of Sergeant's vehicles, to sit and rust.

Policing is an unpredictable business, where events can -- and frequently do -- turn on a dime. If officers have nothing at hand other than a baton, a lousy can of pepper spray and a gun, what do you think's going to come out when things get dicey? Look, it's a no-brainer: effective less-than-lethal weapons must be readily available to every street cop.

Either that, or keep using officers as executioners.