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## SOMETIMES A DRUNK WITH A KNIFE IS JUST THAT

### *Feel-good rhetoric can't substitute for deadly-force alternatives and frequent training*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Only days after posting [last week's blog piece](#) about LAPD's shooting of a drunk with a knife we learned of a remarkably similar incident that had taken place a week earlier. On August 30 John Williams, 50, an Indian craftsman, was walking the streets of downtown Seattle, carrying a 3-inch folding knife and whittling on a wooden board. His life was in shambles. After a string of arrests for misdemeanor offenses, some serious, Williams had been convicted of felony indecent exposure. In an interview with a reporter a [staff member](#) at the shelter where Williams lived painted a disturbing picture of a deeply troubled man who could be explosively aggressive when drunk:

John's life experiences were complicated. They cannot be simplified to say he was a harmless individual and therefore he should not have been shot by the police. Maybe he should not have been shot, but it's not because he never hurt anyone in his life.

A Seattle cop with two years on the job caught sight of Williams. What then transpired took less than a minute. Exiting his vehicle (the patrol car camera came on with the roof lights) [the officer approached Williams](#), whom he didn't know. From about ten feet away he repeatedly ordered him to drop the knife.

As it turns out Williams is hard of hearing. He turned towards the officer but held on to the knife. Whether he then advanced on the cop, as the officer apparently claims, hasn't been confirmed, but in any event Williams was soon lying dead with four bullet wounds to his chest.

And no, the cop wasn't carrying a Taser.

[One week later](#) a like set of events played out in Los Angeles. This time the dead man was an illegal alien from Guatemala, his knife blade was twice as long, and there wasn't one cop but three – again, none with a Taser.

Both shootings led to angry demonstrations and, in Los Angeles, three evenings of disturbances and arrests. Politicians and police tried to calm things down by staging press conferences and community meetings. As usual, most of the thrust was on building better relations. Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn and Police Chief John Diaz [vowed to change the department's culture](#) and bridge the gap with minority communities (they even created a deputy chief's slot for that purpose.) Tim Burgess, the councilman in charge of public safety, applauded the reorganization and its focus on "building effective relationships in every neighborhood."

Who can be against that? Still, Williams and Jaminez didn't die because of failed police-community relations. Their problems were well known to friends and relatives, but no one could get them to change

their self-destructive ways. Tolerated when sober, they were left for someone else to deal with when not. And as so often happens, that “someone else” wound up being the police.

Experienced officers know that when it comes to drunks and the mentally ill it's sometimes best not to intercede, as gaining voluntary compliance may be impossible and things can quickly escalate. Clearly there was no choice as to Jaminez, whom passers-by said had threatened them with a knife. As to Williams the need to step in isn't as clear, but one would guess that most cops would want to talk to a large, tipsy man openly walking around with a knife.

If these situations had to be handled, and by all appearances they did, the only question was *how*.

That's where Seattle seems to be demonstrating a bit more sophistication. Los Angeles authorities tried to have it both ways, calling for better police-citizen relations while stridently defending the cops (Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa went so far as to call them “heroes,” thus essentially rendering the internal investigation moot.) Seattle police chief John Diaz seems headed in a more promising direction. Calling for a thorough outside review of practices and procedures, he vowed that his department would strive to “do it right 100 percent of the time.” He's already moved to revamp training, including crisis intervention. He also promised to increase the deployment of Tasers, which are not presently carried by all patrol officers.

So far so good. We're for taking it a step further.

Americans have always been armed; consequently, so have their police. Marksmanship consumes huge chunks of academy time. And while cops are far more likely to use lesser levels of force, such as hands, clubs and pepper spray, once they leave the academy they mostly practice with firearms.

It's no surprise that when officers face a threat they instinctively reach for their sidearm. Muscle memory gained through endless practice and repetition has even led some to [accidentally deploy their handgun](#) instead of a Taser, with tragic consequences. The old police adage of “don't draw a gun unless you intend to shoot” now seems almost quaint, with many cops pulling their weapons during a wide range of encounters. Of course, once that happens the odds of a shooting increase exponentially.

Being a practical sort, and recognizing that armed citizens do present a threat, we don't suggest that cops train with firearms any less. But by all means give equal time to Tasers. [As we noted last week](#) CED's have been successfully used to neutralize knife-wielding suspects, avoiding the loss of life and sparing officers needless psychological trauma.

Yet merely putting more Tasers in the field, as Seattle apparently intends, isn't enough. To keep cops from automatically reverting to their handguns, Tasers must be issued from the very start, meaning at the academy, and fully integrated into pre-service and in-service training. Beyond simple paper targets, use mannequins that can take darts, and instead of simply lining up trainees at simulators and projecting “shoot-don't shoot” scenarios, give them handguns and Tasers and let them figure out which weapon is more appropriate, and when.

There's one more thing. If we're serious about reducing civilian deaths cops must be able to work together. Patrol shifts across the U.S. have been trained in active-shooter scenarios. If they would also

practice responding to the far more frequent episodes that involve drunk and disturbed persons the use of lethal force might well become a rarity.

It may seem impolitic to say, but it's not always about ethnicity, community relations or the cycle of the moon. Sometimes it's just about a drunk with a knife. So let's dig deep into the craft of policing and come up with an appropriate, professional response. As we wait for the big group hug that will settle all differences between society and the police let's see if we can save some lives along the way.