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SPEED KILLS

Acting swiftly can save lives. And take them, too.

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On April 20, 1999, two high school seniors staged an elaborately planned massacre at Colorado's [Columbine High School](#). Before committing suicide they shot and killed twelve students and a teacher and wounded nearly two dozen others. When it comes to police strategy, Columbine changed everything. Criticism that lives would have been saved had officers moved in more quickly – they awaited SWAT, which took forty-five minutes to arrive – led the [Governor's review commission](#) to suggest a new approach:

Clearly, rapid deployment poses risks to innocent victims but, even so, immediate deployment by teams of responding officers to locate and subdue armed perpetrators seems the best alternative among a set of risky and imperfect options in a situation like that at Columbine High School. (p. 67)

Dubbed IA/RD ("[Immediate Action/Rapid Deployment](#)"), the new strategy marked [a shift in response philosophy](#), from containment to prompt intervention. To be sure, IA/RD doesn't simply mean "barging in." Officers are supposed to be trained in this approach, and when the opportunity comes form small teams and move in a coordinated fashion. Yet when things get "hot" in the real world time is at a premium, and the one thing that cops must have to make good decisions – accurate information – is often lacking.

Reacting swiftly can save lives. As events regularly demonstrate, it also creates "risks to innocent victims" that cannot be easily dismissed. During the early morning hours of July 31, Aurora (CO) patrol officers responded to [a report of intruders](#) at a private residence. They came upon a chaotic scene. Within moments gunfire erupted inside the home. An adult male came into view holding a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other. When commanded to drop the weapon he raised the flashlight. An officer not yet identified shot him dead. Inside the residence cops found a naked dead man and an injured 11-year old boy. It turned out that the person whom the cop killed – Richard "Gary" Black Jr., a decorated Vietnam vet – was the lawful resident. [He had fought with and shot the naked man](#) – a known gang member and ex-con – after the intruder broke into the home and tried to drown Mr. Black's grandson in the bathtub.

Hasty responses have also proven tragically imprecise. On June 16 Los Angeles police officers were summoned to [a stabbing at a homeless shelter](#). It turned out that an angry

resident had cut his ex-girlfriend's hands with a knife (her injuries were not critical.) When cops confronted the 32-year old assailant on the sidewalk he grabbed a disabled person, Elizabeth Tollison, 49, and put the knife to her throat. Officers opened fire, killing both.

Five weeks later, on July 21, a man who shot his grandmother led LAPD officers on a wild car chase. He eventually crashed his vehicle by a Trader Joe's. [Firing at officers, he ran inside](#). Police fired back. One of their rounds fatally wounded a store employee, Melyda Corado, 27. After a prolonged standoff, the suspect, Gene Atkins, 28, surrendered peacefully.

Sometimes there is no need to intercede. On September 6, Dallas police officer Amber Guyger, 30, finished her shift and drove to the apartment building [where she had been living for a month](#). On arrival she parked one level higher than usual and inadvertently wound up at the apartment directly above her own. It so happened that its brand-new tenant, PricewaterhouseCoopers employee Botham Jean, 26, had left his door unsecured. Officer Guyger knew something was amiss but nonetheless walked in and reportedly issued loud "verbal commands." But [they failed to have the desired effect](#). Apparently thinking herself in peril, she fired twice, killing Mr. Jean in his own apartment.

Over the decades law enforcement experts, academics, interest groups and the Federal government have recommended ways to make policing more effective while preventing needless harm to the law-abiding. "[Making Time](#)," a key tactic that skillful cops have always used, has been incorporated into organizational directives and training regimes, essentially becoming an official tool of the trade.

So what's holding things back? Why is *Police Issues* revisiting the same concerns *ad nauseam*?

On October 20, 2014 [Chicago officers responded to a call](#) about a teen trying to break into parked vehicles. Patrol cops soon encountered 17-year old Laquan McDonald. He was walking down the street, reportedly "swaying" a knife. As our [original post](#) indicated, and as the officers likely assumed, the teen had lived a hard life. So they called in for assistance to peacefully corral the troubled youth. A half-dozen additional units soon arrived:

'We were trying to buy time to have a Taser,' Officer Joseph McElligott testified Monday in a hushed Cook County courtroom. '(McDonald) didn't make any direct movement at me, and I felt like my partner was protected for the most part inside the vehicle...We were just trying to be patient.'

Officers retained their approach even when McDonald ignored commands to drop the knife and slashed a police car's tires. Then officer Jason Van Dyke and his partner pulled up. According to his colleagues, Van Dyke, a 14-year veteran, emptied his pistol at the youth within *six seconds* (his partner stopped him from reloading.) More than a year later, following public protests and a court-ordered release of officer bodycam video, officer Van Dyke was charged with murdering McDonald. (Van Dyke is presently on trial. For compelling details about the case see the [special section in the Tribune website.](#))

This wasn't the first time that a cop's unwelcome intrusion undermined a promising response. "[Routinely Chaotic](#)" discussed the notorious October, 2016 killing of Deborah Danner, a mentally ill 66-year old woman. While she was being successfully contained a late-arriving supervisor butted in, causing Ms. Danner to flee to the bedroom and pick up a baseball bat. Sgt. Hugh Barry promptly shot her dead. He was tried for the killing but acquitted by a judge. (Sgt. Barry remains on limited duty awaiting departmental action.)

In the uncertain environment of the streets, outcomes are shaped by many factors, including the availability and accuracy of information, police and mental health resources, and officer knowledge and experience. Officer personality characteristics, though, typically receive scant attention. Yet all who have worked in law enforcement (including your blogger) know that its practitioners are human: they have quirks, and their behavior can deteriorate under stress.

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"[Three Inexplicable Shootings](#)" suggested that "cops who are easily rattled, risk-intolerant, impulsive or aggressive are more likely to resort to force or apply it inappropriately." Violent experiences – and in our gun-saturated land they are deplorably common – undoubtedly play a major role in fashioning the lens through which officers perceive and respond to threats:

- One year before blundering into the wrong apartment, Dallas officer Guyger (mentioned above) [shot and wounded a parolee](#) after he took away her Taser. Her actions were deemed justified and the suspect, who survived, was returned to prison. (An unidentified "police official" [attributed officer Guyger's recent, lethal lapse](#) to the effects of an excessive long shift.)
- One *month* before killing Richard Black, the unnamed Aurora cop shot mentioned above [shot and killed an armed pedestrian](#) whom he and a partner confronted during a "shots-fired" call. Although the shooting seemed justified, a

lawyer for Black's family questioned whether the officer should have been returned to regular duty so quickly.

Our "sample" is infinitesimally small. It's also not lacking for contradictions. Chicago cop Jason Van Dyke, for example, testified that [he had never fired at anyone other than McDonald](#) during his 14-year career. (Officer Van Dyke did amass a not-inconsequential record of citizen complaints, including one that triggered a large monetary award.)

According to the [National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial](#), thirty-one officers were shot and killed during the first half of 2018, while twenty-five fell to gunfire during the same period in 2017. Los Angeles, where your blogger is based, has been beset with shootings of police. On July 27 a gang member on probation [shot and wounded an LAPD officer](#) who told him to exit his vehicle during a seemingly "routine" traffic stop (the assailant was shot and killed by her partner.) On September 19 two L.A. County Sheriff's deputies [were wounded during a firefight](#) with assault suspects. One suspect was killed and another was wounded.

When streets teem with guns and with evildoers willing to use them, risk-tolerance can be "[a very hard sell](#)." But there's no arguing that rushed police decisions can needlessly kill. What's the solution? PERF's "[Guiding Principles on Use of Force](#)" suggests that keeping distance, taking cover and "de-escalating" can provide a safe middle-ground:

...rushing in unnecessarily can endanger the responding officers...When officers can keep their distance from a person who is holding a knife or throwing rocks and attempt to defuse the situation through communication and other de-escalation strategies, they can avoid ever reaching that point where there is a significant threat of death or serious physical injury to anyone, including themselves.

Still, considering the dynamics of street encounters, there's no guarantee that time, cover and distance will be available. In the uncertain and often hostile environment of the streets, officers can find it impossible to quickly choreograph and implement a peaceful response. Bottom line: "slowing down" requires that cops occasionally accept considerable risk. Should their judgment be off, they can be easily hurt or killed. That's not ideology: it's just plain fact. And it's the fundamental dilemma that well-meaning "experts" have yet to address.