

Men Who Strangle Women Also Kill Cops

by Casey Gwinn*

***Editor's Note:** This sobering report, like the article preceding it, underscores the crucial life-or-death implications of adopting and applying severe sanctions against any act involving choking or strangulation. Given what we have recently learned about the prevalence and lethality of this abusive act, you may not be surprised to learn what author Casey Gwinn reports in this piece: that a man who strangles his partner also is more likely not only to kill his partner, but also to kill a police officer who tries to stop him.*

In September 2008, Martinez Police Department Sgt. Paul Starzyk was killed by Felix Sandoval outside the Elegant Hair Salon in Martinez, CA. Paul was 47 years old and married with three children. I did not know Paul, but the story of his tragic death and the death of Catalina Torres, a volunteer advocate at a local domestic violence shelter, came up on a Google Alert I had that documented officers who were killed in the line of duty in domestic violence-related incidents. Paul gave his life trying to save Felix's estranged wife, Maria, and her three children. He and Catalina both died as heroes: laying down their lives to save others.

Less than a month later, I visited Martinez, CA, during a planning meeting for a Family Justice Center in nearby Richmond, CA. I went to pull Maria's restraining order application at the courthouse. In her declaration, months before she died, she described a history of domestic violence including prior strangulation assaults by Felix. It was not the first time I had seen cases where an abuser had strangled his partner and then later killed a police officer. But I could not get this case out of my head.

National studies have found that 14% of officers killed in the line of duty are killed in domestic violence or "domestic dispute" incidents.¹ But what if

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¹ See http://www.policiechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=2378&issue_id=52011. Retrieved May 20, 2014.

we have been asking the wrong question? Instead of asking how many officers die in domestic violence incidents, perhaps we should be asking, what is the relationship history of the cop killer? What are his prior relationships like? Is there a correlation between domestic violence history and later homicide of law enforcement officers? And because of our focus at the National Family Justice Center Alliance on the lethal nature of strangulation assaults, why not look at the cop killer's relationship history and see if we can find strangulation in his history? We know that a man who strangles a woman once is 800% more likely to later kill her.² What if men who "choke" women are most dangerous to police officers as well? What if a strangulation assault is not only a lethality marker for female victims, but is also a lethality marker for police officers?

It was time to challenge friends to look at the issue. First, Nampa Police Chief Craig Kingsbury agreed to look at the last ten officer-involved critical incidents in Nampa, Idaho. Thankfully no officer died in those incidents, but each involved the shooting of an officer or the shooting of a criminal suspect by an officer. He recruited a graduate student at Boise State to pull the last ten incidents where an officer shot someone or someone shot an officer. They asked two questions: (1) how many of the criminal suspects had a public re-

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records act history of domestic violence; and (2) how many of the criminal suspects had a public records act history of non-fatal strangulation assault against a prior partner? The results got our attention: 80% of the criminal suspects had a

prior domestic violence history and 30% had a prior history of non-fatal strangulation against a partner. And this was only a public records act check. We did not have a social or relationship history of the perpetrator. We did not interview all his prior partners. But clearly those willing to attack a police officer or pull a gun on an officer had a substantial history of violence against women.

Soon after the Nampa review was completed, Supervising Riverside County Deputy District Attorney Jerry Fineman called to say he was going to conduct a public records act check of the killers of law enforcement officers in Riverside County California. Jerry has a long history of specialized prosecution work around gender-based crimes and has served as the Chair of the California District Attorneys Association's Domestic Violence Legislative Committee. He is a true advocate and zealous prosecutor. Jerry's review is now complete and posted on the Training Institute for Strangulation Prevention's online Resource Library.³ The findings clearly show the danger to law

² Nancy Glass et al., "Non-Fatal Strangulation Is an Important Risk Factor for Homicide of Women, 35 J. Emergency Med. 329 (2008).

³ See <http://strangulationtraininginstitute.com/index.php/library/viewcategory/843-scholarly-works-and-reports.html>. Retrieved May 20, 2014.

enforcement officers of men who strangle women and should promote more research on this topic.

Jerry Fineman identified eight law enforcement officers who died in the line of duty from intentional homicide between 1993 and 2013. His review of the killers' histories was limited to public records. Significantly, he found that 50% of them had a public records act history of strangulation assault and each of them had a history of domestic violence. A fifth officer was killed by a man with a history of domestic violence but no public record was found to document strangulation history. A sixth officer was killed by a man whose prior girlfriend had warned other women to stay away from him, but there was no public records act history of domestic violence or strangulation. The five officers killed by men with a history of domestic violence and/or strangulation assault deserve to be remembered:

1993: Deputy Kent Hintergardt

1997: Deputy James Lehmann, Jr.

1999: Deputy Eric Thach

2001: Officer Doug Jacobs III

2010: Officer Ryan Bonaminio

Fineman concluded that there does appear to be a link between strangulation assault and intentional homicide of police officers. Though the sample size for research purposes was small, he also pointed out that these numbers were found with only a public records act check and newspaper articles.

More research is needed, and a comprehensive relationship history of the killers, including interviews with prior partners, would be extremely important. But the evidence is clearly building to conclude that a majority of law enforcement officers killed in this country are killed by men with a history of domestic violence and by men with a history of strangulation assault against women. The next time you hear the phrase, "He choked me," make sure it gets your attention. The victim's abuser has just raised his hand and said, "I'm a killer." We can and must start treating strangulation assaults more seriously. If we do, we have the opportunity to save the lives of women, children, and law enforcement officers. It has become a passion for me. Indeed, I am convinced that even if we never prosecuted another man who punched or slapped a woman and instead went after *every* man who strangles a woman, we would reduce domestic violence homicides and officer-involved deaths in this country by more than 50%.



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