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BRINGING A GUN TO A KNIFE FIGHT

Cops carry guns. Some citizens flaunt knives. Are poor outcomes inevitable?



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “[Bringing a gun to a knife fight](#).” That provocative (some might say, *incendiary*) idiom is how the *Los Angeles Times* led off its recent analysis of fifty-six episodes since 2018 when LAPD officers fired at “people in crisis” who were flaunting “edged weapons”, killing thirty-five and injuring nineteen.

Two of these events took place only one day apart. We obtained the details from the [LAPD Newsroom](#):

January 2, 2023: Officers responded to a 9-1-1 call that Takar Smith was in an apartment in violation of a restraining order. Smith refused repeated requests to leave, and after a prolonged back-and-forth he grabbed “a large knife” from the kitchen (see right). Officers tasered Smith and doused him with pepper spray. Smith dropped the knife. But he then grabbed it again and “raised it above his head.” Officers shot him dead.



January 3, 2023: Only one day after the fatal encounter with Smith, officers in another beset LAPD Division were alerted that a suspect later identified as Oscar Sanchez threw a metal object at a passing car, then threatened its driver with a knife. When confronted in the abandoned home where he apparently lived, Sanchez quickly “stepped toward” the officers holding a “two-



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foot-long metal object with an approximate three-inch spike protruding from one end” (see right.) Officers simultaneously fired a gun and a “less lethal” weapon, inflicting a fatal wound.

LAPD reportedly ruled eight of these shootings “out of policy,” meaning that officers violated rules and procedures that are intended to prevent causing needless harm. (In two, police bullets struck aggressors’ intended victim.) As for the above examples, one was declared “in policy”, the other not.

Can you guess which?

[According to the L.A. Times](#), LAPD Chief Michel Moore and the Police Commission agreed that the first shooting, of Takar Smith, was “out of policy”. Less-lethal measures (bodycam image shows him being Tasered) did fail to keep the knife from Mr. Smith’s hands. But he had barricaded himself with bicycles, and reviewers thought that there was enough time to summon a mental evaluation team that could defuse things. Chief Moore felt that the officers should have backed off and come up with a better game plan.



Click on the image for the video (officer interaction with Mr. Smith begins at 1:02). What do *you* think? *Should* the cop have fired?

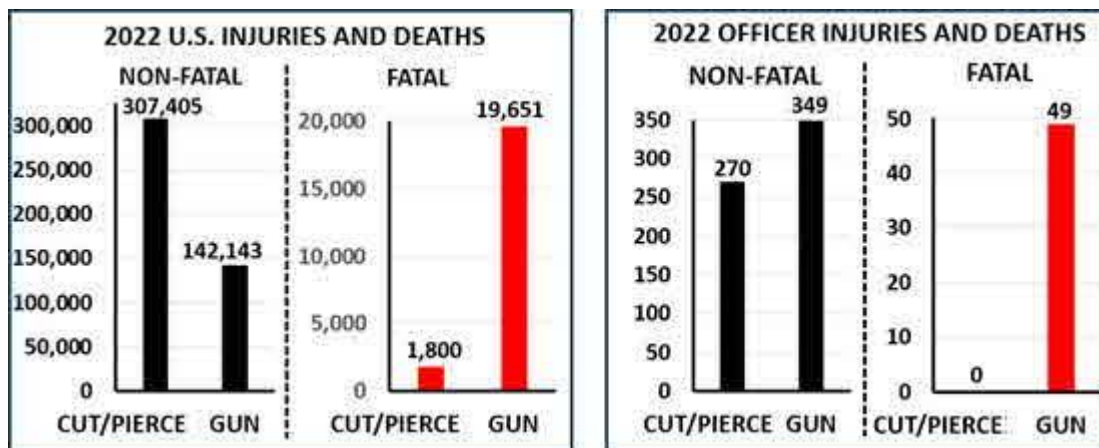


Now compare that to what happened to Mr. Oscar Sanchez on the very next day. That’s him at the top of the stairs, by the door to his pad (click on the image for the LAPD video.) [According to the Chief and the Commission](#), his shooting, while not the best outcome, was nonetheless “in policy.” There *were* some notable differences from what happened with Mr. Smith on the previous day. Several officers and a supervisor had repeatedly tried to gain Mr. Sanchez’s compliance, but he resisted them all. And when he suddenly wielded that nasty spiked object, there were no bicycles between him and the cops.

In our gun-beset land, shootings are always in the news. Stabbings typically draw far less attention. While knives and other cutting instruments are far less likely than guns to inflict a fatal injury, there’s no denying that they also pose a grave risk. We used the

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CDC's [WISQARS database](#) and the UCR's [Crime Data Explorer](#) to probe injuries and deaths from shootings and stabbings in 2022, the most recent year for which full data is available.



We'll start with the graphs on the left. According to the CDC, 161,794 victims of violence sustained gunshot wounds in 2022. About 12 percent proved fatal. During the same year, domestic emergency rooms treated 309,205 persons who had been violently cut or stabbed. Fewer than one percent of these injuries were fatal. Our graph on the right uses UCR data to show how law enforcement officers were affected. During the same year about 47% more officers (398 v. 270) were injured by firearms than with cutting instruments. About 14 percent of gunshot injuries to officers proved fatal; none who were cut or stabbed died.

Numbers alone can't enlighten us about the nature of violent citizen-police encounters. What brought on the carnage? Might it have been averted? A July 8th. Google query of "officer stabbed" generated ten episodes for 2024, nine in the U.S. and one in Canada. Here are four (incident dates shown):

May 8, 2024: A West Virginia trooper was stabbed twice with a knife while pursuing a man (depicted on right) who fled on foot from a traffic stop. A fellow trooper shot and killed the assailant. The trooper was seriously injured but is recovering.



May 18, 2024: According to D.C. police, an ill-behaving man being taken into custody to be evaluated for a mental health issue pulled a pocket knife and stabbed an officer in the neck. A Taser had no effect,



and another officer wound up shooting the assailant. Fortunately, everyone survived. (Click [here](#) for the MPD news release)

July 7, 2024: “An individual acting bizarrely” walked up to a Kansas City police officer in a parking lot and, without warning, produced a “sharp object” and stabbed him twice. The assailant ran off; the officer is recovering.

February 11, 2024: Tragically, not every officer survived their encounter. Las Cruces, New Mexico police were alerted about a man who trespassed on a business. As Officer Jonah Hernandez approached, the suspect suddenly attacked with the knife he was carrying in his right hand (see bodycam image). Officer Hernandez suffered fatal wounds to his head and neck. An armed passer-by shot and killed the assailant. Armando Silva, 29, had “[a long history of violent crime and mental illness.](#)”



So what's to be done? What *can* be done? As your blogger learned during the many conflicted situations he and his colleagues encountered, gaining citizen compliance is definitely Job #1. But complications abound. Clashing officer perspectives can easily lead to poor endings. What officers observe – or think they observe – depends on *when* they arrive, *where* they wind up, and *how* they interpret what they see (or “think” they see). In the quickly-evolving, conflicted atmosphere of the streets, promptly – and *accurately* – figuring out who's “good” and who's “bad” is essential.

Gunning down the mentally disturbed is an inherently repulsive thought. And in our post-Floyd atmosphere, there is undeniable pressure to blame the cops, and only the cops. So while we don't hesitate calling out poor policing – see, for example, “[Confirmation Bias Can be Lethal](#)” – retrospective analyses are invariably fraught. Given the complexities of what the officers faced, and the rapidly evolving nature of the encounters, is it possible to accurately assess, post-facto, whether the shootings of Takar Smith and Oscar Sanchez were avoidable?



Consider the notorious killing of Tamir Rice, the 12-year old who was shot dead in November 2014 by then-Cleveland police officer Timothy Loehmann. We delved into that incident in “[Working Scared](#)”. Loehmann wasn't disciplined over the shooting. After all, Tamir had been flaunting “a realistic-looking pellet gun” (image on left) and the circumstances of their encounter were decidedly

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complex (click [here](#) for a detailed news account and [here](#) for a video.)

Inquiries into officer Loehmann's background turned up some disquieting information. Loehmann had been turned away by several agencies before being hired by Cleveland. A small department *had* taken him on, [and its deputy chief said he came to regret it](#): "He could not follow simple directions, could not communicate clear thoughts nor recollections, and his handgun performance was dismal...I do not believe time, nor training, will be able to change or correct the deficiencies..."

[Cleveland fired Loehmann in 2017](#), not for the shooting but over alleged "inaccuracies" in his employment application. Loehmann then kept bouncing around agencies. On July 1, 2024, "public outrage" over the decade-earlier killing of Tamir Rice led him to resign [from a small police department in West Virginia](#). Here's how its Chief explained Loehmann's hiring:

Just as a person, I looked at the whole situation. I did a background check. I researched everything. It's just a sad situation. Does any police officer in the world stand a chance when they're involved in a shooting? Do they deserve to never work again as a police officer, or is it just this shooting?

Here's what [Tamir Rice's mother recently said](#):

I just don't get it. This system is so broken. It's like this man is haunting me. How can any department trust him? I don't think anything has changed in the last ten years.

And here's what [her lawyer recently said](#):

Timothy Loehmann should be radioactive to any responsible community or law enforcement organization.



Cops who bounce around agencies continue to be in the news. As does their handiwork. Most recently, there's [the July 6th, 2024 shooting death of Sonya Massey](#), a troubled Springfield, Illinois woman who called 9-1-1 about a prowler. For reasons still unclear, Ms. Massey apparently threatened then-deputy sheriff Sean Grayson with a pot of boiling water after he entered her home. She then reportedly apologized. But Grayson, who kept his distance

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throughout, opened fire, killing her (click on image for the bodycam video). He then discouraged his partner from rendering aid. Grayson, who's been jailed on 1st. degree murder charges, [bounced around six agencies during his four-year law enforcement career](#). Three were as a part-timer at small police departments, which hired him despite a driving record that included two DUI's. His most recent job, as a Sangamon County deputy, began in May 2023. It followed on a year-long stint with the Logan County sheriff, a position that he resigned after issues over his performance arose.

Here's an extract from the IACP's message to its members about the killing of Ms. Massey:

While the facts are still being gathered, and the former deputy is entitled to due process, the killing of Sonya Massey was a devastating and avoidable tragedy. The shooting again underscores the critical need for police agencies to thoroughly vet potential hires. The pattern and nature of frequent job changes by a police officer should raise flags about their suitability for the policing profession.

And here's what we wrote, um, [eight years ago](#):

Alas, the hiring process isn't infallible. Even good screening measures fail. That's why it's essential to closely monitor recruits in the academy and during their first years in the field. That's not foolproof either. Every working officer knows cops who have poor people skills or are prone to overreact, leaving messes for colleagues to clean up. Fortunately, no one usually dies and things get papered over until next time. Occasionally, though, there is no "next time."

Until next time!