

A DANGEROUS

FROM STRANGLERS TO COP KILLERS

BY

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DEPUTY SHERIFF PETER HERRERA, 35, MADE A TRAFFIC STOP FOR A DRIVER'S FAILURE TO DIM HIGH BEAMS ON MARCH 22, 2019. After initiating the stop, he determined the car's registration was also expired. However, before Deputy Herrera could even write a citation, the driver got out of the car, said nothing, and opened fire, firing 15 times point blank at Deputy Herrera. Peter Herrera died hours later. His killer, Facundo Chavez, had a long history of domestic violence, including strangulation assaults, against women in his life. Deputy Herrera knew none of that when he made the traffic stop. Hours after the shooting, he would become one of the 23 law enforcement officers murdered in 2019 by men with a history of intimate partner violence and, often, strangulation assaults against women.

Men who assault and strangle women are the most dangerous men on the planet, but many professionals, including law enforcement officers, continue to be unaware of this threat.

Many news stories over the years have argued that domestic violence calls are the most dangerous of all calls for law enforcement. There is some truth to these stories. In 2017, there were more officers shot when responding to domestic violence calls than in any other type of incident involving firearms. Historically, this type of analysis does raise awareness about domestic violence dangers for law enforcement. From 1988 to 2016, 136 officers were killed responding to "domestic disturbances" according to the FBI. By comparison, 80 were killed during drug-related arrests for the same period. The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, news outlets, and many other law enforcement organizations have highlighted this type of data over the years. But the dangers of responding to domestic violence calls pale in comparison to the dangers of being on ANY call where the criminal suspect has a history of domestic violence, particularly if he has a history of strangling a woman.



LINK

The FBI says approximately 7–10 percent of officers are killed responding to domestic violence–related or “domestic disturbance” calls, but this analysis is inadequate because it focuses on where the killing occurs and not the background of the killer. Deputy Herrera did not die because he witnessed a high beam violation and then learned of expired registration on the car. He died because he unknowingly ended up in the presence of a misogynistic, rage-filled strangler. The majority of men who kill police officers in the United States are also domestic violence perpetrators, and many of them have strangled at least one woman in an intimate relationship before they kill a law enforcement officer. A history of strangulation assaults with women is not only the purview of cop killers. The majority of mass shooters, domestic terrorists, and domestic violence killers

in the United States have two things in common: a history of childhood trauma and a prior history of domestic violence, often including strangulation assaults, before they kill women, police officers, or others. The list is long: John Muhammed, the DC sniper; Omar Mateen, the Pulse Night Club shooter; Devin Patrick Kelly, the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs shooter; Stephen Paddock, the Route 91 concert shooter; and many other notorious shooters were all stranglers of women before they became mass murderers.

When stranglers apply pressure to a woman’s neck, they are raising their hand and saying they are killers. Why? What is the connection between strangulation and the mass shooters and cop killers? The reasons are complex but the rage of stranglers, soaked in misogyny, appears to produce what the authors call a “loaded God complex.”

The most dangerous domestic violence offenders strangle their victims. The most violent rapists strangle their victims.

It used to be thought that all abusers were equal. They are not.

Research has now made clear that when a man puts his hands around a woman’s neck, he has just raised his hand and said, “I’M A KILLER.” He is more likely to kill police officers, to kill children, and to later kill his partner. So, when you hear “He choked me,” now you know... **you are at the edge of a homicide.**

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Stranglers want their victims to know that the stranglers have complete control over whether their victims live or die. Stranglers literally hold victims' lives in their hands. It makes sense that such rage-filled entitlement increases the likelihood that a strangler will kill a police officer or attack others when his power is questioned or challenged. In failing to understand these complex connections, police officers, women, mass shooting victims, and others in the general public are dying because of failed interventions with stranglers.

Since 2013, the nonprofit organization, Alliance for HOPE International (the Alliance) has been identifying data that link men who strangle women with men who kill law enforcement officers. The early data analysis showed rates of nearly 50 percent. Then, in 2013, data began to emerge outside of the Alliance's own research. Then-Nampa Police Chief Craig Kingsbury agreed to look at the last 10 officer-involved critical incidents in Nampa, Idaho. Thankfully, no officers died in those incidents, but each involved the shooting of a criminal suspect by an officer or the shooting of an officer by a criminal suspect. Chief Kingsbury recruited a graduate student at Boise State University to pull and examine the last 10 such incidents. They asked two questions: (1) How many of the criminal suspects had a public record history of domestic violence before the incident? and (2) How many of the criminal suspects had a public record history of nonfatal strangulation against an intimate partner? The results corroborated the Alliance's early informal findings: 80 percent of the criminal suspects had a prior domestic

violence history and 30 percent had a prior history of nonfatal strangulation against an intimate partner. While a public records act search would miss many incidents, the data were easily accessible simply by searching all internet-based records and news stories. The Alliance's researchers did not have social or relationship histories of the perpetrators and did not have access to complete criminal background records. Nonetheless, Chief Kingsbury's research mirrored the Alliance's anecdotal findings—those willing to attack a police officer or pull a gun on an officer often had a substantial history of violence against women, frequently including strangulation.

Soon after the Nampa Police Department review was completed, Assistant District Attorney Jerry Fineman called to say he was going to conduct a similar public record search on killers of law enforcement officers in Southern California between 1993 and 2013. Assistant District Attorney Fineman's review found a similar 80 percent history of domestic violence in the background of cop killers and a 50 percent history of strangulation assault in the public record, leading him to conclude that there was a clear link between strangulation assaults of women and the intentional homicides of law enforcement officers.

The Idaho and California data were published in 2014 in the Civic Research Center's *Domestic Violence Report*. Though the trend of officers being killed by individuals with domestic violence histories continued, researchers did not publish again for a number of years. But, in 2018, they again began looking at the backgrounds

of cop killers more systematically. The approach was straightforward: (1) Identify all officers killed in intentional homicides in 2017 from the Officer Down Memorial Page; (2) Identify the suspected and or identified killer of each officer; (3) Search the internet for the killer's criminal history noted in the public record (newspaper articles, court filings, press releases, or social media posts); and (4) Look for any reference to domestic violence, choking, or strangulation of a prior intimate partner. It was difficult to identify specifically “choking” or “strangulation,” but the research team generally found references to prior “domestic abuse,” “domestic disturbance,” or “domestic violence.” In limited cases, if the team knew a local law enforcement officer or prosecutor in a jurisdiction where an officer had died, they made contact to see if the jurisdiction had any other information about the relationship history of the killer. In some cases, the contacts had seen the killer's criminal history, and in others, they had talked to family members or friends who had information about whether the perpetrator had ever assaulted or strangled a woman. In cases where this information was obtained, it was included, even though it was not always public record information.

The research found that 33 out of 44 (75 percent) officers killed in the line of duty were murdered by men with a history of domestic violence. It was not always possible to find strangulation assaults in the public record, but nearly every time additional information about the offenders was available, they often had not just domestic violence histories, but specifically histories of strangling or suffocating women in intimate relationship or sexual assault contexts.

This research is now performed annually by the staff at the Alliance. This analysis was replicated with officers killed in 2018 in intentional homicides and found 66 percent of the cop killers had domestic violence histories. The analysis of officers killed in 2019, 2020, and 2021 has recently begun, and the first public records show histories of domestic violence in over 50 percent of the killers of officers. However,

the Alliance is also finding less and less being written about the criminal history of the killers in news accounts, making it progressively more difficult to replicate the analysis from 2017. The media appears to be reporting less on the killers and endeavoring to honor the officers more. While this trend does offer honor to the victims and minimizes the glorification of the killers, it is hampering the organization's ability to continue to document the link between domestic violence perpetrators and the killers of police officers in the United States.

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Awareness is rising about strangulation assault among law enforcement leaders and its importance in predicting homicides of victims of domestic violence, but there is a long way to go in raising awareness about the relationship to officers killed in the line of duty. The International Association of Chiefs of Police passed a resolution in 2014 calling on law enforcement agencies to treat nonfatal strangulation more

seriously, including increasing training, implementing protocols, engaging emergency medical services personnel at the scene, and treating it as a felony offense. However, the resolution did not include findings about officers killed in the line of duty because the Alliance's data had not yet been published.

More research must be done, and the Alliance is seeking the support of the U.S. Department of Justice to run full criminal histories on each law enforcement officer killer in the United States in order to better identify past domestic violence and strangulation assault incidents.

Still, the data gathered to date should help drive public policy in the United States, and these findings challenge the inaccurate data being put out by FBI and, related to mass shootings, the Department of Homeland Security. In 2016, for example, the FBI said that seven officers were killed responding to “domestic disturbance calls.” In 2017, the FBI did not break out the data on “domestic disturbance calls” in their press release at all but noted one officer died on such a call. In 2018, the FBI said one officer was killed responding to a “domestic violence call.” And in 2019, the FBI said two officers were killed in “domestic disturbance calls.” These data fail on many levels to paint the full picture. First, the FBI is looking at where the incident happened instead of who the perpetrator is and what his relationship violence history is with intimate partners. And when the FBI does look at criminal history, it looks only at felony criminal history. In contrast, most domestic violence incidents are treated as misdemeanors by law enforcement professionals, and few end up with any criminal conviction to even be recorded on the perpetrator's record. Based on the Alliance's public records research, how many officers were killed by men with a history of domestic violence in 2017? 33. How many officers were killed by such men in 2018? 31. How many officers were killed by such men in 2019? At least 23.

Police chiefs themselves are dying at the hands of stranglers, not just their officers. Chief Steven Eric Disario in Kirkersville, Ohio, was killed by a domestic violence strangler while

responding to a radio call of a man with a gun outside of a nursing home in 2017. Chief Disario was a married father of six children with a baby on the way when he died. He did not know he was dealing with a strangler when he arrived. It took months for the system to determine that the killer, Thomas Hartless, had a history of domestic violence with strangulation assaults. Imagine the benefit of knowing Hartless was a strangler and the significance of that information before Chief Disario arrived at the scene. Could it have saved his life? Would it have mattered if strangulation, or “choking” as it was called by the victim, had been treated seriously by the criminal justice system before May 12, 2017? Perhaps Chief Disario's children, family, and friends would not have lost him if Hartless had been held accountable when he had raised his hand and said he was a killer.

Every law enforcement officer in the United States has a right to know when he or she is dealing with a man with a history of domestic violence, particularly a strangler. Officers are in more danger and are more likely to die when dealing with a misogynistic, rage-filled man, no matter the type of call or contact. Men who slap, punch, or kick women are abusers, men who strangle women are potential killers, and officers have a right to know when they are coming into contact with them in any setting. ♡

IACP RESOURCES

- Police Response to Violence Against Women
- Response to Non-Lethal Strangulation Report Review Checklist

theIACP.org

- Stalking, Strangulation, and Shootings: The Value of Domestic Violence Data in Predicting Officer-Involved and Mass Shootings

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