

Hostage-Taking in the Context of Domestic Violence: Some Case Examples

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Initial reports of domestic violence are generally made to law enforcement officers who must respond and intervene. A subset of these episodes involves cases in which the victim, and, in many instances her child(ren), have been taken hostage by her husband or partner. Moreover, there are indications that the number of such incidents is growing. The purpose of this project was twofold: (1) to provide one of the first reports on the prevalence and characteristics of these events, and (2) to more closely analyze domestic crisis (hostage) situations using actual case examples. All information was obtained from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS) of the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit. HOBAS is a postincident information collection tool which stores historical data from law enforcement agencies across the nation on hostage/barricade incidents. An examination of this database yielded different types of domestic hostage-taking acts and outcomes (e.g., tactical vs. negotiated resolutions, survival vs. death/injury of perpetrator and/or victim[s]). Implications of the findings, for future crisis negotiation efforts directed toward nonviolent resolution of these high-risk critical incidents, are discussed.

KEY WORDS: crisis negotiation; domestic violence; hostage; barricaded subject; HOBAS.

Domestic violence is a burgeoning social problem with significant public health implications. And at a time when interpersonal aggression is our most profound challenge as a culture, the potential contributions of domestic violence loom especially large (Graham, 1994; Kaufman-Kantor & Jasinski, 1997; Van Hasselt & Hersen, 1999; Walker, 2000). In particular, there is evidence that younger (ages 19–29) and poor (annual income below \$10,000) women are more likely to be victims of violence by partners and intimate acquaintances (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995). These data also reveal that victims

more frequently are of minority status, with several small children and limited job skills.

Evidence also has been accrued over the past several years documenting the deleterious impact of domestic violence on children in these families (Starr & Wolfe, 1991; Warner-Rogers *et al.*, 1999). Of particular importance is the substantially greater potential for child abuse where relationship aggression is occurring (Briere, 1992; Rosenbaum & Gearen, 1999). Further, it is now apparent that children who witness domestic violence (but who are not directly physically harmed themselves) display a wide range of maladaptive emotional (e.g., anxiety, depression, social withdrawal) and behavioral (e.g., aggression, noncompliance) sequelae that often make them indistinguishable from physically abused children on measures of short- and long-term adjustment (Ammerman *et al.*, 1986; Falshaw *et al.*, 1996; Kashani & Allan, 1998).

Historically, initial reports of domestic violence have been made to local law enforcement, who must respond and intervene with a potentially wide range of violent behaviors. Indeed, in the United States, a woman

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is more likely to be assaulted, injured, raped, or killed by a male partner than by any other type of assailant (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1995). Consequently, these situations constitute some of the most dangerous that police must handle, occasionally resulting in injury, or even death of responding officers (Pinizzotto *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, in recent years, there has been a burgeoning number of domestic violence incidents in which the victim, and in many cases her child(ren), have been taken hostage by her husband or partner. A significant number of these events have ended with the injury or death of the hostage(s) and/or victim(s) (Flood, 2003).

Hostage-taking is defined as the holding of one or more persons against their will with the actual or implied use of force (Lanceley, 1999). According to Noesner and Webster (1997), hostage-taking, in the context of domestic violence, refers to an individual engaging in an "expressive" response, which "involves those behaviors designed to communicate the subject's frustration, outrage, oppression, power, passion, significance, despair, anger, etc. These acts appear illogical and often highly emotional, in that there is no substantive demand or obvious way in which the hostage-taker could stand to gain anything" (p. 13). A major development in the field of law enforcement, however, has been the utilization of hostage negotiation to diffuse and peacefully resolve such situations. Through incorporation of psychologically based crisis intervention techniques (e.g., rapport-building, use of active listening skills), this approach is now widely referred to as "crisis negotiation" to reflect a broader strategy in conflict resolution (Hatcher *et al.*, 1998; McMains & Mullins, 2001; Vecchi, 2002).

According to Regini (2002, p. 1), "Crisis negotiation is one of law enforcement's most effective tools. The successful resolution of tens of thousands of hostage, barricade, attempted suicide, and kidnapping cases throughout the world repeatedly has demonstrated its value." This contention is supported by data from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS) maintained by the Crisis Negotiation Unit (CNU) of the FBI (Flood, 2003). HOBAS serves as a database on hostage/crisis incidents through the systematic collection of cases (postincident) from law enforcement agencies across the country. In an analysis of HOBAS data from 2002 to 2003, results indicated that approximately 82% of reported incidents were resolved without death or injury to the subject or the victim (Flood, 2003).

While the dangers inherent in domestic violence hostage-taking incidents are considerable, little is known about: the background and characteristics of persons who carry out such acts, intrapersonal and environmental factors affecting the probability of these critical inci-

dents, and the conditions under which they take place. Such information would be of considerable value to crisis (hostage) negotiators in their efforts to resolve these volatile situations without violence (see Van Hasselt *et al.*, 2003). The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to identify cases from the HOBAS system of the FBI to examine characteristics of perpetrators, situational variables, and outcomes of domestic violence incidents involving hostage-taking, and (2) to provide case illustrations of actual hostage-taking events that have occurred in families characterized by domestic violence.

METHOD

Procedure

Case study material was obtained from the HOBAS, a postincident data collection tool which stores historical data from participating law enforcement agencies across the nation on hostage/barricade, suicide, kidnapping, and attempted suicide incidents (Flood, 2003). HOBAS was developed by the FBI's CNU of the Critical Incident Response Group (FBI Academy, Quantico, Virginia), and is a component of the Law Enforcement Negotiation Support (LENS) system available to law enforcement personnel.

The following five cases are illustrative of the type and magnitude of domestic violence cases compiled by HOBAS, in which a partner and/or other family member were taken hostage. Further, these cases include: (1) background information concerning the perpetrator and victim(s) in each event, (2) the nature of the law enforcement response (tactical [SWAT] or negotiated intervention), and (3) the manner in which the incident was eventually resolved. The cases presented below are representative of those necessitating a law enforcement response nationwide.

Case Examples

Case 1: Domestic Homicide; Negotiated Resolution

On February 17, 2000, in Hillsboro County, Oregon, a police crisis negotiator was dispatched to assist police detectives who were attempting to contact a subject at a rural farmhouse following complaints of gunshots heard earlier by neighbors. The suspect, a 36-year-old, white male with a history of substance abuse, prior (minor) criminal offenses, and possession of firearms, was barricaded in the residence with his wife of 6 years, a 32-year-old Asian (Pacific Islander) female. She had recently obtained

a restraining order following several months of physical and emotional abuse by her husband. As a result, he was no longer living in their home, and was now staying at a low budget motel in town. They had been separated for nearly a month; and she had recently informed him (through her lawyer) of her intention to divorce him. The victim's parents also lived at the residence, but were not home at the time of the incident. However, they soon arrived on the scene, and were interviewed by police for any information that might prove helpful in any subsequent negotiations with the suspect.

During the interview, the parents received a call from the suspect on their cell phone, which was immediately handed over to the police crisis negotiator. The negotiator talked with the subject, who, despite sounding intoxicated, was "calm and wanted to know what was wrong." He indicated a willingness to come out and talk with police, but expressed that he did not understand why they wanted to talk with him. Also, he was unwilling to discuss his wife or her status/condition, and refused to allow police to have telephone contact with her. Despite considerable reluctance, primarily due to his stated belief that his parents had been arrested, he agreed to come out. Upon leaving the residence, he was immediately apprehended by members of the SWAT team who had surrounded the perimeter of the location.

In searching the house, police found the suspect's wife dead from a gunshot to the head. The Medical Examiner's findings indicated that she had been killed several hours prior to arrival of police on the scene.

Case 2: Domestic Battery; Tactical Response

On November 15, 2001, in Orange County, Florida, a 25-year-old white female contacted the Sheriff's Office via 911 and advised that she had been a victim of an aggravated assault and domestic battery by her ex-boyfriend. The latter was a convicted felon (aggravated assault, carrying a concealed weapon, resisting arrest) and a known crack addict. The two had an "on-again, off-again" relationship over the previous 6 years, but had been living together for the past 6 months; he was also the father of her two children, ages four (male) and five (female). On the day of her call to the police, she related that he had "gotten high," came over to the residence, and proceeded to grab her by the hair and slap her several times about the face. He then threatened to kill her and pointed a handgun at her. The victim convinced him to let her go to get some take-out food and pick up her daughter from a nearby bus stop. After leaving, she notified the police by cell phone.

The victim believed the suspect was still in her apartment because she observed him at the front door when the first officer arrived. There were no rear doors to the apartment and it did not appear that he exited the apartment rear windows. Hostage negotiators and a SWAT team were dispatched to the scene. Attempts were made to contact the suspect by telephone and bullhorn, but to no avail. During this period, a neighbor, in an adjoining apartment, did manage to make contact with him. The suspect told the neighbor that he would shoot police if they came in. After nearly 3 hours of unsuccessful attempts by negotiators to make contact, the SWAT team fired gas into the apartment. Upon entry, they found the apartment unoccupied, although the handgun was found in the victim's attic. An arrest warrant was issued for the suspect who was now "at large." He was apprehended 6 days later.

Case 3: Double Homicide; Negotiated Resolution

On February 15, 1995, in Ogden, Utah, a police dispatcher received a 911 call from a 41-year-old father of five who stated that there was a double homicide at his home. He further claimed that he had killed his wife and stepdaughter. Arriving police officers found a child standing on the sidewalk in front of the residence, who indicated that she was one of five siblings in the family. The dispatcher still had the caller on the phone while police approached. She continued to talk to the caller until being relieved by a police negotiator. The negotiator was directed by the caller to "talk to the children" in order to find out what happened. The negotiator spoke with one of three children (a 10-year-old girl) in the residence at the time, who stated that her parents had gotten into an argument, in which she overheard her father tell her mother that "she was going to ruin his life by serving him with a divorce." He then pulled a handgun and shot her mother and 18-year-old stepsister who was in the room at the time. The girl stated that she and her two younger sisters (ages 3 and 9) were also in the house when the shooting occurred.

The negotiator was able to get the subject on the phone. The subject explained that his wife had come to the (correct) conclusion that he was having an affair; he also contended that he was thinking about divorce and had already met with an attorney for that purpose. However, his wife had determined the identity of his girlfriend, a co-worker of his, and had been making threatening comments to her in recent days. Before police arrived on scene, the subject had called his girlfriend, telling her about the shootings, very emotionally, stating "I did it because she would never leave me alone; I did it for us because she

would ruin your life; I did it to help you.” After several hours of negotiation, the subject surrendered to police. Prior to being interviewed, he was advised of his Miranda Rights. The subject responded that he knew them because he had been a police officer years ago.

Case 4: Child Hostage; Negotiated Resolution

On May 24, 1998, in Orlando, Florida, police were contacted by a 38-year-old white female, who told responding officers that she and her husband had an argument concerning his extra-marital affairs. Her 6-year-old son from a previous relationship was also in the residence at this time. During the argument, her husband, a 39-year-old white male, with an extensive prior arrest history for domestic violence toward several previous partners and his current wife, punched her in her right eye. The argument continued, and her husband began throwing furniture while she and her son sat in a corner of the room nearby. After about an hour of such behavior, the suspect indicated that she “might want to leave because I might want to kill you.” The victim then observed her husband remove two handguns from the bedroom dresser, at which time she quickly exited the home (leaving her son) and notified the police. When officers approached the door of the residence, and indicated their need to talk with him, he told them to “get lost.”

After several unsuccessful attempts by the first responding officers to have the suspect exit the residence and release the child, crisis negotiation and SWAT teams were called in. After several hours of negotiating, the suspect left the residence, only to place both handguns on the driveway area, and then retreat back into the home. Following another hour of negotiation, the suspect finally released the child without harm; shortly thereafter, he turned himself in as well. The child was then reunited with his mother and was found to be in good health.

Case 5: Emotional Abuse; Suicidal Behavior; Negotiated Resolution

On June 23, 2001, in Suffolk County, New York, a 40-year-old white female called the police department stating that her husband was suicidal and “had a knife to his neck.” When officers arrived on the scene, the victim told them that her husband had an argument with his 78-year-old mother; however, they argued in Spanish that she did not understand. When she attempted to intervene, her husband, a 44-year-old Hispanic male, started to argue with her, yelling that he was angry because he had not been invited to his stepdaughter’s graduation earlier that day.

On the basis of his behavior and speech, combined with empty bottles she found around the house, she believed that he had been drinking beer and liquor much of the day. The suspect was also diabetic and had not been taking his prescribed insulin. The argument escalated and he picked up a kitchen knife and held it to his neck and chest, threatening to commit suicide. She and her mother-in-law then left the house and called 911.

The suspect refused to talk with the first patrol officers on the scene. Therefore, the police department’s hostage negotiation and ambulance units were called out to the location. The subject was observed sitting in a chair in the kitchen, facing the front door of the residence, and holding a knife pressed against his chest. A negotiator began to talk with him “face-to-face” from an open doorway in an effort to persuade him to put the knife down and come outside. While he would not give up the knife, he continued to speak with the negotiator, reiterating that he was upset about not being invited to his stepdaughter’s graduation ceremony. He further confirmed that he had been drinking heavily and was not taking his medication. He also told the negotiator about recent work and financial setbacks. Several times, the subject indicated his intent to either kill himself, or have the police shoot him (“suicide by cop”).

After a couple more hours of discussion, the subject’s speech slowed dramatically as he appeared to be slipping in and out of consciousness. Eventually, he lapsed into a state of semiconsciousness, dropped the knife, fell from his chair, and was quickly taken into custody by police. The subject was then transported to a local hospital for medical care and a psychiatric evaluation. He had no known criminal or psychiatric history, but had been verbally abusive toward his wife, mother, and stepdaughter for several months before this incident.

RESULTS

The above case examples demonstrate the range and complexity of challenges encountered by law enforcement personnel responding to hostage situations in the context of domestic violence. Further, these cases illustrate the salient role of several risk factors identified in previous spouse abuse research (e.g., Bixenstine, 1999; Saunders, 1995). These include: substance abuse, possession of a deadly weapon, prior history of domestic violence, other criminal activity, and threats of (or actual) separation or divorce.

In the five cases presented, three of the perpetrators (Cases 1, 2, and 5) were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the incident (see Table I). This

Table I. Summary of Significant Factors and Outcomes in Five Cases of Hostage-Taking in Violent Homes

Cases	Factors						Event outcome
	Substance abuse	Possession of deadly weapon	Prior Hx. of domestic violence	Other known criminal activity	Threatened separation/divorce	Communications established with negotiator	
1	X	X	X	X	X	X	Murder of spouse; negotiated resolution
2	X	X	X	X			Aggravated battery of spouse; tactical entry; suspect missing
3		X			X	X	Murder of spouse; and stepdaughter; negotiation resolution
4		X	X	X		X	Aggravated assault of spouse; false imprisonment of child; negotiated resolution
5	X	X	X			X	Suicidal threat/gestures; negotiated resolution

finding is consistent with previous data showing strong correlations between alcohol and/or drug use, and the likelihood of marital violence (e.g., Leonard & Senchak, 1996; Pan *et al.*, 1994), although any etiologic role of substance abuse in domestic violence is equivocal (Van Hasselt *et al.*, 1985). All five cases involved possession of a deadly weapon (four with guns, one with a knife). Two of the cases (1 and 3) resulted in death of victims by firearm, with threats to kill the partner expressed in two of the other incidents (2 and 4). Indeed, possession of firearms has been implicated as one of the strongest predictors of spousal homicide in the United States (Bixenstine, 1999). And as mentioned earlier, a woman is more likely to be injured or killed by her partner than by any other assailant. In fact, approximately 70% of murdered women are killed by a husband, partner, or estranged same (Campbell, 1992; Wilbanks, 1986).

Four of the cases (1, 2, 4, and 5) also involved prior histories of physical and/or emotional abuse, with previous arrests for domestic violence in at least four of the cases (1, 2, 4, and 5). This is also consonant with previous research establishing prior relationship aggression as a significant predictor of future violence (Saunders, 1995; Straus *et al.*, 1980). Moreover, there are indications that nearly two-thirds of women murdered by intimate partners (or ex-partners) had been physically abused before they were killed (Campbell, 1992; Wallace, 1986).

In addition, threats of divorce, a restraining order, and disclosure of knowledge of a partner's extramarital affairs appear to have had possible catalytic effects in the seemingly desperate actions of men in three of the cases

(1, 3, and 4). Along these lines, the increased danger for women who inform their abusive partner of their intent to terminate the relationship is well documented (Walker, 2000). Interestingly, one of the men (Case 5) indicated a desire to be killed by law enforcement, a growing trend in suspects who are suicidal and unwilling to surrender to authorities. This is a phenomenon now widely recognized in law enforcement circles as "suicide by cop" (Mohandieh & Meloy, 2000; Parent, 1998).

Finally, the perpetrator of the double homicide (Case 3) was a former police officer. While perhaps an unexpected finding to practitioners less familiar with law enforcement professionals, research has shown a disturbingly high prevalence of marital discord and domestic violence in police families (Sheehan & Van Hasselt, 2000; Neidig *et al.*, 1992).

DISCUSSION

While the dangers inherent in attempting to resolve hostage situations are considerable to victims, emergency responders, and suspects, alike, no investigative efforts are available concerning domestic violence perpetrators who take a partner hostage. The lack of activity in this area is surprising given that: (1) domestic violence incidents comprise a significant portion of calls to which police are dispatched, (2) they are universally viewed as dangerous for first responders due to frequent high levels of emotional volatility and physical aggression (Pinizzotto *et al.*, 1997), and (3) nearly 80% of all hostage situations

are "relationship-driven" (Flood, 2003; Romano, 2003). Specifically, perceived relationship difficulties and resentments (e.g., abandonment, rejection) appear to serve as precipitants to a majority of such critical incidents in the home.

Interestingly, a voluminous body of research has emerged concerning the police response to domestic violence as it relates to recidivism (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996a; Fagen, 1988; Maxwell *et al.*, 2001; Sherman & Berk, 1984), and the effects of restraining orders on rearrest rates (Buzawa & Buzawa, 1996b). However, we have been unable to find any reports on the law enforcement response to an important subset of these incidents: those involving the taking of a significant other as a hostage. This is a serious void given the potential for serious emotional trauma, injury, or death likely to ensue from these crises if law enforcement intervention efforts (i.e., crisis negotiations) prove ineffective.

The present case series represents a pilot project for a more comprehensive analysis of crisis (hostage) negotiation strategies to reduce harm to victims of domestic violence. The investigation is currently being conducted by the CNU of the FBI (Van Hasselt *et al.*, 2003) and will be accomplished through in-depth evaluations of domestic violence perpetrators who have taken a spouse, partner, and/or child(ren) hostage. Evaluations will include: (1) broad-spectrum assessments of a wide range of subject/background, victim, and (where relevant) child variables, and (2) determination of factors associated with successful or unsuccessful crisis negotiation and resolution. It is predicted that this analysis will yield data that will be of crucial importance to crisis negotiators in their efforts to effectively and peacefully resolve high-risk critical incidents (i.e., hostage/barricade situations) occurring in the home.

The specific goals of the project are threefold: (1) to refine assessment techniques that will improve our ability to identify subjects at high-risk for taking a hostage in the home setting; (2) to increase the knowledge base and skill level of crisis negotiators in domestic hostage situations where rapid and accurate classification are paramount in formulating the most appropriate negotiation strategy; and (3) to enhance crisis incident commanders' decision-making in the management of domestic crisis situations. Participants will include incarcerated males who have confessed or pleaded guilty to taking their spouse, partner, and/or child(ren) hostage. All will be identified using the FBI's HOBAS system described earlier.

The methodology to be employed in this study is an adaptation of the approaches utilized by the Behavioral Science and Behavioral Analysis Units of the FBI with serial killers (e.g., Burgess *et al.*, 1986; Ressler *et al.*,

1986) and serial rapists (Hazelwood & Burgess, 1995; Rugala & Beyer, 2002). Specifically, in-depth structured interviews and retrospective record/chart reviews will be conducted with the incarcerated hostage-takers. In addition, personality assessment of these individuals will be carried out. Through these activities, we anticipate obtaining useful data regarding: (a) characteristics of hostage-takers, (b) the manner in which they committed their offenses, and (c) how the critical incidents were resolved. We are particularly interested in ascertaining, from the perspectives of both hostage-taker and police negotiator, the negotiation techniques that were most useful in resolving the crisis situation.

Finally, we are planning to compare and contrast various subgroups (e.g., married vs. unmarried, suicidal vs. nonsuicidal) and event outcomes (e.g., tactical vs. negotiated resolution, death vs. noninjury). Ultimately, it is our hope that this project will allow us to identify variables, subject/event characteristics, and behavioral patterns that may have heuristic value in determining the most efficacious strategies for achieving nonlethal negotiated resolutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Preparation of this paper was supported, in part, through a Nova Southeastern University President's Faculty Scholarship Award (Grant No. 338339) to the first author. The authors would like to thank Marianne Bochicchio, Renee Johnson, Aimee L. Perera, and Justin A. Rigsbee for their technical assistance.

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