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## **Poor training and bad tactics to blame for police shootings**

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It's been 27 months since the last fatal police shooting in Victoria. This is part luck and part design.

According to senior police, Victorian police are called to situations involving people in severe distress three or four times a week. About once a week on average, the person is suicidal and seeks to provoke a situation where police shoot them.

We know the mentally ill are significantly over represented in police shootings. A recent study found that more than half of Victoria Police fatal shootings since 1982 have involved people with mental disorders and the proportion of shooting victims with mental illness has increased over time.

These figures confirm both the failings of our mental health system and the need to equip police to deal with these situations.

Families of mentally ill people who have been fatally shot by police typically want one key thing – to ensure what happened to them never happens again. Coroners, the Office of Police Integrity and non government agencies can all highlight the need for better police responses. But perhaps most important is the need for Victoria Police itself to recognise and embrace change.

In this vein, following the fatal shooting of 15 year old Tyler Cassidy in 2008, Victoria Police commissioned a review of ten police shootings, including three fatal shootings, between 2005 and 2008.

Completed in 2009, the review report was only yesterday made public after our organisation fought a difficult 14 month freedom of information case. We did this work because of the high public interest in the report's contents.

The report reveals a range of failings in the police responses to the ten incidents, including a "must resolve quickly" style accompanied by "yelling" commands that presumed rationality and that "may inflame the situation". In many of the incidents, command and control by the relevant supervisor was "generally non existent or ineffective" and inadequate information handling and communications featured in others. The report also identifies significant failures in police training.

These issues matter deeply. Over the past three decades, Victoria has had more fatal police shootings than any other state. Not because Victorian police are encountering more mentally unwell or dangerous people than their interstate counterparts, but because their training, culture and tactics have not equipped them properly.

Good training, culture and tactics reduce police shootings. In 1994, Victoria Police initiated Project Beacon to address the high number of shootings in the late 80's and early 90's. The number of fatal police shootings halved in the decade after the project.

This focus on safety and minimising force then atrophied. In a 2005 report, the Office of Police Integrity urgently warned that an increase in police shootings from 2003 had been fostered by a diminution in training. Three more fatal shootings, culminating in the shooting of Tyler Cassidy, would occur before the police conducted their internal review.

No incident that police respond to is the same. Some are spontaneous. Some involve exceptional bravery by officers putting themselves at risk to protect the public. Yet, many can be resolved safely by good planning and control, appropriate communication and by setting up a cordon and waiting for support, including specialist units. The more time officers have to resolve an incident, the more likely it is to be resolved peacefully.

At the end of the review report is an examination of almost forty incidents across a three month period where police attended critical incidents involving weapons such as knives and guns and resolved the situation without firing a shot. The average duration of "siege" incidents was 103 minutes, and the average duration of "public place" incidents was 23 minutes. In contrast, Tyler Cassidy was shot within 73 seconds of police approaching him.

These incidents never get the attention they deserve. At most, a few lines in newspaper: Siege resolved after two hour stand off with police. A better narrative would be about police saving the lives of people in crisis.

Victoria Police is taking steps to address the issues identified in the report. Improvements in training are reducing the risk of avoidable shootings. Yet, the process is fragile and faces a number of hurdles.

Victoria Police culture is resistant to change and external scrutiny. The difficulty it took in making this report public testifies to that. Victoria Police rarely, if ever, invites public input into or publicly releases reviews of crucial issues such as firearms, capsicum spray or Taser use. Victoria Police does not report publicly on how often its officers use force on Victorians, who they use force on and what force they use.

New semi-automatic handguns currently being rolled out give police greater firepower. The political fixation with having officers on the street puts pressure on resources devoted to training. A two day mental health course has been available since 2006, yet only around 10% of police have so far undertaken the course.

Perhaps most concerning is the employment of 900 new protective services officers. These PSO's will be armed with guns and put on the coalface of public interaction - the train system at night - but will receive only around a third of the training of police officers.

The findings of the review report have life saving potential. The question is whether Victoria Police has the resolve and the political support to fully address them.

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