

Police hostage negotiation and crisis management

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Hostage taking is not a new phenomenon. Several authors^{1,2} have highlighted its long historical roots as well as the serious psychological and physical ill-effects of being taken hostage³.

Ransom has been perhaps the most frequent motive but criminals may take hostages when caught *in flagrante delicto* to facilitate their apprehension; prisoners in penal institutions have taken hostages to highlight alleged grievances and, more recently, terrorists take hostages to advance religious, ideological and/or political aspirations. A burgeoning phenomenon is now maritime piracy conducted by Somalians in particular. The stakes are high. A premium, crewed vessel may attract a ransom of up to \$10,000,000. Such are the rewards that the pirates' threat extends to about 3,000 miles offshore. In contrast to Iraqi incidents (in which about 1 in 4 hostages are executed), hostages of the Somalians are very rarely injured and, it is believed, only one has so far been killed by the hostage takers.

The Authorities' tactics

The easiest way to resolve a ransom-driven incident is to pay the ransom. However, the UK Government, and other governments, are resolute: they will not pay up because it is believed this encourages more events of this kind. Most contemporary incidents in the Niger Delta, and those involving maritime piracy, are resolved by the payment of ransom by private individuals, organisations and insurance companies. Some incidents, inspired by unrealistic motives, cannot be met. For example, Iraqi insurgents commonly took hostages and demanded that the Coalition Forces evacuate Iraqi territory.

A seminal event which encouraged the authorities to revise their tactics was the deaths of the Israeli wrestling team, taken hostage by the "Black September" terrorist group during the Munich Olympic Games in 1972. Tragically, the deaths were at the hands of the rescuers. The use of overwhelming physical force sometimes described as the "Suppression Model"⁴ had been particularly popular as a means of ending prison sieges in the USA. However, the deaths of hostages at the hands of their rescuers is an unpalatable outcome. That event encouraged the USA Government to charge the FBI with the responsibility of devising another tactic. The FBI developed the "Negotiation Model" which has had an international influence. Its implementation requires skilled and highly trained negotiators, expert advisers, and, most of all, patience! It is however now recognised to be the first line of intervention. Even when the use of force is ultimately required (as was the case with the iconic and much heralded successful assault by the SAS on the Iranian Embassy in London in 1980), negotiation with the perpetrators was invaluable. Negotiation buys time: time for all those involved (the authorities, the perpetrators and the hostages) to "cool down"; to establish what lies behind the incident, and to gather intelligence regarding the hostages, the perpetrators and their motives, and the features of the "stronghold" (i.e., the place in which the hostages are being detained). A successful outcome, with or without armed force, always requires accurate intelligence.

Evidence-based training and practice

Complacency cannot prevail. Politico-religious and serious criminal groups who take hostages continually pose new challenges to the authorities. It is essential, therefore, that the authorities continue to develop evidence-based practices and produce quality research data which inform training. This was the principle which encouraged the research portfolio of the recently established Police (Special Operations) Research Group [P(SO)RG] which operates under the aegis of the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research ([ACTR] of the Robert Gordon University [RGU] now directed by Dr Susan Klein (following the retirement of Emeritus Professor David Alexander). Two senior police officers seconded to the Scottish Police College [SPC], viz, Chief Inspector Andrew Brown (formerly Northern Constabulary) and Inspector Craig Menzies (formerly Grampian Police), in conjunction with Dr Klein and Professor Alexander applied successfully to the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) for a small grant award. This award underpinned the first "epidemiological" survey in the UK (over the years 2005-2008 inclusive) of incidents to which Scottish police negotiators, from the eight Scottish constabularies, were deployed. (The data from the study included: when and where the incidents occurred; who was involved; were weapons and alcohol/drugs involved; what was the duration of the incidents, and what was the outcome of the negotiators' deployment?)

This rigorously analysed database has already influenced operational practices, recording procedures at such incidents, and, most importantly, the curriculum of the Negotiator and Crisis Management Course run at the SPC (on which Chief Inspector Brown, Inspector Menzies and Emeritus Professor Alexander have taught for many years).

There are few such databases in the police domain, and even the best known (the Hostage Barricade Database System [HOBAS]), maintained by the FBI has had its validity challenged⁵.

These Scottish data are undergoing more sophisticated statistical analyses by Professor Amanda Lee (Professor of Medical Statistics, University of Aberdeen). These analyses will identify which particular combination of factors predict successful outcomes whether or not hostages had been involved.

“Epidemiology” study: some key findings.

- Incidents peaked in June
- Incidents peaked on Monday
- Most incidents began between 22.00 – 07.00
- The median duration was 71 minutes
- Perpetrators most likely to be between 15 and 44 years
- Males were the perpetrators in 83% of incidents
- Firearms were present/suspected in 14% of incidents
- Non firearms were present/suspected in 43% of incidents
- Psychoactive substances taken/suspected in 64% of incidents
- Hostage present in 6% of incidents
- Suicide risk in 59% of incidents

Associated developments

Below are listed research and other developments which have been catalysed by this initial SIPR award.

- Inspector Menzies used a number of these data for his dissertation for his MSc in Emergency Planning, Leicester University (now successfully awarded).
- Both Chief Inspector Brown and Inspector Menzies have gained Practitioner Fellowships from SIPR to research further ideas deriving from these data. By means of semi-structured interviews, Chief Inspector Brown will identify the effectiveness of deployed police negotiators from the perspective of police personnel and perpetrators. Inspector Menzies is identifying “best practices” of Police Protector Liaison Officers (who employ negotiating techniques): a concept only recently endorsed by the British Police Service as a way of maintaining crowd control and preventing outbreaks of riots and crowd violence.
- Chief Inspector Brown, supported by a Fulbright Fellowship, is currently in the USA working with several Law Enforcement Agencies and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The purpose of his research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of police negotiators as perceived from different policing and cultural perspectives.
- Both police officers have now been appointed as Associate Lecturers at the RGU, and Emeritus Professor Alexander has been appointed as an Associate of the SPC and the SIPR.
- In December, 2010, Emeritus Professor Alexander and his two police colleagues were invited to deliver a lecture and a workshop at the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (Home Office), Whitehall, London. There they spoke about their negotiator and related research.
- In September, 2011, SIPR co-funded the Police National Negotiators' course hosted at the SPC. It was chaired by Chief Inspector Brown, and Emeritus Professor Alexander delivered the closing address in which he outlined the research portfolio of the P(SO)RG, and emphasised the importance of liaison and partnership between police personnel and academics, mediated by the SIPR.
- The team have written two chapters and two articles in peer-reviewed journals (details available on request), and a paper based on the “epidemiological” data is being prepared for an international peer-reviewed journal.
- Most recently, the team have been awarded two further awards. The first is to conduct a “before and after” comparison of the attitudes to and knowledge of negotiation displayed by trainee negotiators selected for the SPC course on Negotiation and Crisis Management. The second award, in association with Dr Penny Woolnough (Senior Researcher, Grampian Police) is to survey what factors attract police officers to or deter them from undergoing training as Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs). The latter are, of course, expected to use negotiating skills before their weaponry.

References

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