Handling People Who Are ..UNDER THE INFLUENCE"

By Gerald w: Garner

Whether they happen to be under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, prescription medications or a combination of all, they pose the potential of danger. "TheY't" are the dazed, drunken, confused people who are under the influence, and they make up a good part of your job. Although man are sad, tragic people, they can hurt or kill you if you are not careful. Consider the following recent, real life incidents in which these individuals murdered officers:

A state trooper with eight years of law enforcement experience stopped a traffic violator at approximately 9 pm. Shortly thereafter, a citizen used the officer's radio to report that the trooper had been shot. Responding officers found the trooper fatally wounded with multiple hits from a 9mm handgun. The killer, arrested the next day was believed under the influence of alcohol at the time of the attack.

Just before noon a 38-year old patrolman stopped a vehicle observed leaving the scene of a burglary. The lone officer ordered the driver out and attempted to handcuff him. A struggle for the officer's weapon began, and the officer Fired one round which wounded the subject in the shoulder. A second subject exited the vehicle and joined the struggle, during which the officer was forced to the ground and struck in the head with a rock. The first suspect, who was under the influence of alcohol, picked up the fallen officer's handgun and shot him fatally in the head.

An officer arrested an intoxicated male for creating a disturbance in a business and took him to the police station. The officer had confiscated one handgun she found on the man, but missed a second weapon concealed in a pouch on the front of his waist. At the station, the unsecured man produced a .22-caliber derringer and killed the officer with a shot to the head.

A man, later determined to be under the influence of both alcohol and drugs, was reported firing a rifle at passing cars on a residential street. As the first patrol car arrived, the 32-year old male stepped out of the bushes and Fired seven shots into the passing police vehicle. One round hit the patrolman in the back of the head, mortally wounding him.

A state trooper was killed as she left the patrol office shortly after 11 pm. She was confronted by a male in the station's parking lot and a struggle ensued. Eventually a gunfight erupted in which the officer and her assailant hit each other with multiple handgun rounds. When the trooper fell to the ground, the subject stood over her and fired a fatal bullet into her head. Captured shortly thereafter, the killer was found to be under the influence of narcotics and alcohol.

As every veteran officer knows, the individual who had his judgment and inhibitions impaired by alcohol or drugs may do something he would never even contemplate while sober - something like attack a peace officer, for instance. Every year, the FBI's "Officers Killed and Assaulted" statistics include accounts of cops murdered by drunks and druggies. Some of these officers may well have died because they made bad assumptions about just what a "diminished capacity" person was capable of doing. They may have missed the danger signs, and grossly underestimated the danger.

Fortunately, as every safety-conscious peacekeeper also knows, there are timeand experience-proven survival tactics to lessen the danger of contact with an "under the influence" person. Practiced without exception, they can help assure that you come home safely at the end of a shift full of "under the influence" subjects. Safety begins with recognizing what you are up against.

Recognizing people who are ..under the influence. ..

Although the signs and symptoms can vary from person to person, frequently a person who is "under the influence" will display some of the following:

· WaterY't bloodshot eyes
· Clothing disarranged and/or soiled By urine or vomit
· Loud, boisterous and perhaps profane language
· Dilated or (to the other extreme) pinpoint pupils of the eyes
· Strong smell of alcohol on the breath and/or person
· Smell of an inhalant on the breath or person
· Poor motor skills or balance
· UnexRlained belligerence in attitude, speech or actions
· Slurred, hard-to-understand speech
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- Alcohol, drugs, paraphernalia or containers for these nearby
- Visible needle tracks on the body
- Abnormally passive or aggressive behavior
- Stumbling, staggering or lurching gait
- Hallucinations or delusions; bizarre statements or actions
- Difficulty in following verbal instructions
- Difficulty in performing fine tasks, such as removing a license from a wallet.

No single indicator, or even a group of them, proves conclusively that your subject is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. But their presence does indicate a need for you to investigate further.

Be alert for the presence of ..false positives...

Any or all of the preceding indicators may point in the direction of a drunk or drugged individual. But many of them also may warn of the presence of a serious, perhaps life-threatening, injury or medical condition. The man with the slurred speech, poor balance and apparent inability to follow your instructions may have suffered a brain injury. The teen with the bad attitude who is seeing things that are not there may be having a reaction to a prescription drug (legally taken) that resulted in an unexpected reaction. Yet another person may be having a seizure or diabetic reaction. An alcoholic may be suffering from the "DTs" or delirium tremens; an addict may be displaying withdrawal symptoms. Either could prove life-threatening in a worst-case scenario. IT you have the slightest doubt about whether or not something besides alcohol or drug intoxication is affecting the person you are contacting, get him to medical attention right away. Depending upon the signs and symptoms, this may require you to summon emergency medical help to the scene. Getting your subject cleared medically before you detox or jail him is simply good street sense. It serves to protect both your subject and yourself. And remember: never place an unconscious person into a lockup facility. Doing so is a great way to find yourself involved in an in-custody death investigation.

Observe and test for intoxication.

Beyond your initial observations there are various tests for intoxication. The most reliable consist of chemical tests of breath, blood or urine. Beyond these time-tested means are the less-than-certain field sobriety tests that measure balance and motor skills. Or, if you are trained in the technique, the results of a horizontal-gaze nystagmus test can tell you a great deal. Nevertheless, the old-fashioned heel-to-toe walk can be very informative, as can the "stand with one foot off the ground" routine and the "touch your nose with your finger from an outstretched arm" number. Reciting the alphabet remains popular with some officers, as does the count one to 20 and 20 back to one exercise. Resist the temptation to get too clever or exotic in your testing process, however. You don't want to stumble, figuratively or otherwise, when demonstrating your test, either on the street or in the courtroom!

Follow basic officer safety practices.

Never forget that a drunk or drugged individual is just as apt to hurt or kill you - perhaps more so - than any other person you handle. Apply all of your safety and survival skills in dealing with him. Never lose track of his hands and what he is doing with them. Assume nothing other than what you know as a rock-solid fact. Do not relax before the threat has passed. Keep watching for danger signs, such as multiple subjects, verbalized threats, the presence of a weapon or a sudden change in demeanor. Always keep looking for the next threat. Expect the unexpected. Do not get too close, too soon. Watch your positioning in relation to your subject. Practice excellent weapon retention skills. Be just as careful with a person who is "under the influence" as you would with a known murderer. Don't give the former an opportunity to turn into the latter with you as his victim.
Always have help on hand.

As every veteran law enforcement officer knows, a person's judgment and inhibitions are among the first to go as he loads up on drugs and/or alcohol. As a consequence, the man or woman who wouldn't dream of even sassing a police officer while straight may become a virtual tiger when fueled with alcohol or other chemicals. It is unwise for you to take on one of these people alone. From a purely psychological aspect, having a cover officer on hand may prevent you from having to get into a struggle in the first place. If your subject is too far gone to figure out that he is now at a disadvantage, having the extra set of muscles on hand should help you gain control without harm coming to anyone.

Be prepared for the unexpected.

One of the problems with people who are "under the influence" is that they do not necessarily think or respond in a reasonable way. That may help explain, for instance, why the flying-high druggie is willing to fight with four cops instead of submit to arrest. Unpredictability is one of the greatest dangers you face when dealing with a party under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Take nothing for granted. Remember that a compliant drunk may turn into a spitting, clawing, biting monster with no apparent provocation or warning. Also know that a promise made by a person in this condition is absolutely worthless. The guy who swore he wouldn't get behind the wheel or return to his girlfriend's apartment may even have meant it 10 minutes ago. Now, unfortunately, he no longer recalls his promise or its meaning.

Realize that a normally reliable pain compliance hold or comealong may have no effect at all on a subject whose pain sensitivity has been dulled by booze or drugs. Chemical defense sprays may fail for the same reasons. That's why it is vital to have plenty of help and an alternate plan of action ready just in case Plan A fails.

Remain calm and patient.

An intoxicated subject can be nasty, belligerent and uncooperative. He may be
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ignoring you because he's acting like a jerk. But there may be another explanation for the failed communication. His chemically-influenced view of the world may simply be keeping him from comprehending and complying with your instructions. A calm, quiet, yet firm voice may prove helpful to you in gaining compliance from an initially uncooperative subject. Maintain your self-control and be prepared to repeat your questions or directions, perhaps several times. You will have to be the best judge of when to abandon your communication attempts and move on to other options. But take your time and be willing to accept some verbal abuse, if necessary. Now's the time to demonstrate your capacity for professionalism and restraint. A slowly and grudgingly compliant subject is easier (and safer) to contend with than one you must battle into custody. It's always worth a try.

Follow proper prisoner handling procedures.

Any person you take into custody who is "under the influence" should be carefully handcuffed and searched for his protection and yours. This primary safety rule applies whether your subject is under arrest for a criminal violation or is on a protective hold for transport to a medical or detoxification facility. (Check your jurisdiction's statutes to ascertain that they protect your safety and those of your officers.) Have a cover officer present to protect you as you carry out these prisoner control duties. Remove from your subject's person anything with which he might harm himself or someone else. That may include smoking materials, pocketknives, belts and ballpoint pens. Be sure to keep him under careful observation at a booking or lodging facility. You are watching for sudden changes in his medical condition as well as looking out for a surprise attack. Stay alert and stay safe.

Take him seriously.

Accept that a person who is "under the influence" may carry out the verbal threats he makes to harm you or himself. Believe him and be on highest alert if he says he intends to harm you. If he is threatening to make you kill him, realize that he may be attempting to force you to help him commit "suicide by cop." Never trivialize or ridicule his threats. Assume that he means them until you prove otherwise. Be extremely cautious and have help with you throughout your handling of this individual. True, it may be "just the booze talking." But unless you have mind-reading powers, you do not know that for a certainty. Take him at his word and proceed with care.

Whether they are operating under the influence of alcohol, drugs or some combination of the two, these people are a threat to themselves and others with whom they come into contact, including you. Through the judicious application of common sense, keen skills for observation and basic officer safety practices, you can greatly reduce that threat.

A Safety Checklist for Handling People Who are ..Under the Influence"

1. Be sure you recognize the symptoms of "under the influence" behavior seen in persons who are affected by consumption of alcohol or drugs.
2. Realize that all of these people are unpredictable in their behavior. All pose potential danger to you.
3. Always obtain a cover officer while dealing with this type of person.
4. Recognize that the attitude of an "under the influence" subject can change radically and without warning.
5. All people you take into custody who are "under the influence" should be handcuffed and searched carefully.
6. Carefully and continuously monitor the condition of any "under the influence" person in your custody. You are watching for violent or self-destructive behavior as well as indications of illness or injury. 7. Treat all of these people with professionalism and courtesy. You may make them easier to handle in the process.
8. Never let down your guard around a person who is "under the influence." He is as capable of harming you as anyone else you take into custody. Do not underestimate the hazards posed by these people.
9. Apply all of your officer safety training when dealing with an "under the influence" person. The same, careful tactics that protect you on a "man with a gun" assignment can help save you on a "man on drugs and booze" call.

In summary.

Safely and properly handling a person who is "under the influence" can prove a major challenge for the most skilled, experienced law enforcer. You can expect to encounter a great number of these sometimes sad, often violent, always unpredictable people during your career as a peacekeeper. Allow yourself to get careless in your attitude or tactics and the encounter could end very badly for you.

About the Author:

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