

# Separating Hollywood's myths from reality on the street

I recently watched a TV remake of a famous police show that takes place in Hawaii. In one scene the heroes used a helicopter to block the fleeing kidnappers' car. The kidnappers jumped out with guns, and the police leaped from the helicopter skids and quickly and accurately gunned them down. After releasing the bound

woman in the trunk of the car they abruptly took off to find the rest of the kidnapper's gang.

## STREET BLUES

Robert Pickett



Robert Pickett has been a Portland Police Officer for eight years. He has spent most of that time working in inner Southeast Portland, first as a patrol officer, and more recently as a Neighborhood Response Team officer working on neighborhood livability issues.

We all know that Hollywood isn't real. But with the overwhelming number of cop shows on TV these days, sometimes I wonder if the general public becomes desensitized or misled by the ease in which officers seem to accomplish their jobs. I wish the Mythbuster guys would devote an entire show to the Hollywood depiction of police. Some of the segments I would suggest:

**Myth:** Officers can identify a suspect in seconds by simply punching a partial credit card number and eye color into an incredible telephone number/credit card/license plate/passport/street address/biometric database.

**Bust:** There is no magical-everything database that will cross reference all the various pieces and spit out a name and photo. For databases that do exist, partial numbers are often useless as they return too many matches. Furthermore, many of these databases, such as for credit cards and telephone numbers, are held by private companies, defended by lawyers, and require a lengthy, carefully-worded subpoena process to access. This can take weeks. Whenever I see a quick database identification from scant information on TV, I realize it is the director saving time.

**Myth:** Each agency has a fully-staffed, glass-walled, computerized crime lab ready to analyze and return DNA results while you wait.

**Bust:** The State of Oregon has one lab that processes DNA samples from all law enforcement agencies in Oregon. Depending on the priority of the case in question, it might take over a year for results of DNA submitted to the lab to come back. Again, that would make for a long TV episode!

**Myth:** Everybody leaves fingerprints.

**Bust:** Criminals worry about fingerprints because on TV they are all caught via

fingerprints. So most wear gloves. Regardless, one has to be almost intentional in their bare-handed, careful up-and-down grip of something very smooth in order to leave a print that is clear and large enough to be lifted and compared to others.

**Myth:** Knives aren't dangerous.

**Bust:** Take a few quick jabs at your Thanksgiving turkey next November and see how deep that knife can go with little effort.

**Myth:** Cops can shoot to wound if necessary.

Police are specifically trained not to shoot to wound for a reason: so that they are never shooting unless it is of critical importance that a suspect stop what they are doing immediately, such as threatening with a weapon, pushing someone off a bridge, or any other behavior that could easily result in the maiming or death of someone else. The reasoning for this lies in two practical realities of guns, bullets and anatomy, neither of which are usually realistically portrayed in TV. First, even the best-trained shooter cannot reliably hit an extremity, or some other "woundable" body part (such as that place in the shoulder, right below the collarbone, where everyone on TV seems to take a bullet with very little medical consequence) attached to someone who is probably moving, particularly in a swiftly-developing, high-stress situation. In fact, officers across the country are trained to shoot at "center mass," which usually means the chest, as it is the largest and easiest target to hit. Second, even if an extremity could be hit, there is no guarantee that an artery or other critical part will be magically avoided. Bottom line is that any time an officer shoots a gun at someone, there is a chance that person will be killed. Therefore officers should never shoot unless that outcome can be justified.

**Myth:** It should only take one or two bullets to stop a dangerous suspect.

**Bust:** It stinks to rain on Clint Eastwood's .44 magnum action, but handgun bullets do not cause bodies to fly back through glass windows. (This is a matter of physics—bullets are small and bodies are big.) Most handgun shots are not immediately disabling, and in fact, the vast majority of people shot by a handgun survive (a rate that has increased dramatically with modern emergency medicine). Accordingly, officers are taught that if they need to immediately stop a suspect from doing their dangerous behavior, they may need to shoot multiple bullets in quick succession. Along these lines, officers are also taught that if they

themselves are shot, even multiple times, they are probably not out, and should keep fighting.

**Myth:** Police shootings are common, and not a big deal. (Heck, there were at least two in that one-hour episode!)

**Bust:** Most officers will end 25-year careers without ever shooting their gun on duty. If officers are involved in a shooting, everyone and their cousins show up, from line officers to commanders and chiefs. A crime scene is taped off for hours, the officers involved are sequestered and ordered not to talk with each other. They are homicide suspects and are investigated by homicide detectives. Every possible witness is interviewed, and the investigation delves into every minute detail and second of the encounter, generating pages and pages of reports. A grand jury eventually listens to officer and witness testimony and decides if their decision was criminal, and a use-of-force board reviews the investigation to decide if it was within police bureau policy.

Hundreds of hours of professional effort is invested in analyzing and judging a decision usually made in a few seconds under intense stress. It is obviously a decision that can end someone's life. It is also a decision that can define, or end a career. It can result in vilification by the media, legal proceedings lasting years and emotional trauma lasting decades. It is, to put it lightly, a big, big deal.

I worry, sometimes, how my psyche and my family would be affected were I to use deadly force on duty. I also know that if I were ever in a position where I should have shot but didn't, I would never forgive myself for any harm that came to people who expected me to protect them. And I, and my family, would certainly regret harm that came to me.

If only reality were as easy as writing an episode of a police drama, officers would never have to make decisions about the use of force in quick, complicated and scary situations. Then after it was over, instead of spending years dealing with the aftermath, we could just fly away on a helicopter, or better yet, simply cut to the next scene.

**I worry, sometimes, how my psyche and my family would be affected were I to use deadly force on duty. I also know that if I were ever in a position where I should have shot but didn't, I would never forgive myself for any harm that came to people who expected me to protect them.**



**MIRADOR COMMUNITY STORE**

*Natural Kitchen & Home*

2106 SE Division  
503•231•5175  
miradorcommunitystore.com  
Mon-Sat 10-6 • Sun 11-5

**Canning jars & equipment, cookware, kitchen tools & appliances**


**Organic cotton sheets, towels, & blankets**

**Food dryers**

**Juicers**

**Books on meat-free cooking, gardening & sustainability**

## Take Action. Get Tested.



*"Where to go, so you know"*



**\$20 value**

Multnomah County Health Department's HIV Community Test Site offers **confidential** HIV testing with or without your name at these locations:

**Downtown Community Test Site**  
Call 503.988.3775 for an appt.  
Mon | Thurs | Fri  
426 SW Stark St., 6th Floor, Portland, 97204

**Northeast Health Center**  
Just walk in  
Tuesdays | 5:30 - 7:15 pm  
5329 NE MLK Jr. Blvd, 2nd Floor, Portland, 97211

**"Free with this coupon"**

Se habla español: other interpretation by appointment.

All of our vendors send a special thank you to all of the amazing readers who support them, come rain or shine!