

## Coding Manual for Threat Assessment

5.11.21

### Introduction

Fatal Encounters is a database of incidents in which an individual meets death during an encounter with law enforcement officials. The majority of encounters occur as a result of police homicide, as when officers shoot a person who is presenting a lethal threat to them or others. However, there are other types of Encounters that do not involve acts of police homicide, but in which police are otherwise involved or are present. Examples include a vehicle crash during a police chase or a suicide in a barricade situation.

A Fatal Encounters record includes numerous data points, including Subject, Date, Age, Location, Police Agency, and several others. The data are available on the Fatal Encounters site in two formats: a searchable database and a downloadable spreadsheet.

The Threat Assessment project gathers additional data that serve to “Assess the Threat”--to identify specific circumstances surrounding the Subject’s death.

### Coding

Coding is done on a separate Threat Assessment spreadsheet (and periodically added to the public sheet). There are four Categories:

\* Armed or Unarmed

\* Alleged Weapon

\* Aggressive Physical Movement

\* Fleeing/Not Fleeing

Coding for Threat Assessment data involves selecting among multiple possible codes. Choosing among them often requires diligent research and careful interpretation.

(Note: Column letters may change as the spreadsheet is updated.)

#### Armed/Unarmed

**Armed**

**Unarmed**

**Uncertain**

This is generally an unambiguous choice, but some considerations will arise. The weapon must clearly be in the physical possession of the Subject, or in the immediate vicinity (arm's length), such as resting beside on a car seat, i.e. close enough that the Subject can *immediately* retrieve it. Reports will occasionally describe a weapon alleged in the vicinity of the Subject, as in the case of a “dropped” gun or knife. These must be treated with a degree of skepticism. There is the documented practice by police of using a “throw-down”--a weapon carried to “throw down” for the purpose of demonstrating threat upon the part of the Subject. If there is substantial doubt that the Subject was in fact “Armed,” then code “Uncertain.”

The Subject must also be “Armed” at the moment of the encounter itself. Encounters often have multiple stages: fleeing by vehicle and then on foot, fleeing and struggle, etc. Sometimes Subjects are armed at one stage and lack possession of the weapon at a later one. Code for “Armed” only if the Subject is in possession of the weapon when death actually occurs.

A special category are cases of “Alleged Vehicular Assault Cases.” See below.

#### **Alleged Weapon**

**Blunt Object**

**Edged weapon**

**Firearm/Gun**

**Firearm/Handgun**

**Firearm/Long gun**

**Firearm/Pellet gun**

**Firearm/Replica firearm**

**Firearm/Rifle**

**Firearm/Shotgun**

**None**

**Other**

**Stun gun**

**Uncertain**

**Vehicle**

Firearms are coded by type, including for replica weapons. Handgun, Rifle, Shotgun, and Long gun are used when identified. Long Gun is used when its type--Rifle or Shotgun--is unclear. Otherwise use Gun. Source documents will often imply that the firearm is a handgun, even if not specifically stated. Nevertheless, use Gun unless type is specifically indicated. Note: determination of firearm type often requires consulting multiple sources. There are often multiple sources for a case; many will simply mention "gun," but one or a few may indicate type, and it's important to seek them out.

Replica firearms are similarly coded by broad category. Replica firearms are true "replicas" that do not fire dangerous projectiles, such as Airsoft and paintball products. Pellet gun is used for weapons that do fire potentially harmful projectiles: pellets and BBs.

There are many kinds of non-firearm weapons. Most of these are not technically weapons but can be used as such, including knives, bats, etc. These use a two-level code. The first level includes three broad categories: Blunt object, Edged weapon, and Other. "Blunt object" includes weapon-like items such as bats, but also any heavy, solid item, such as a rock. "Edged weapon" includes obvious items such as knives and machetes, but also any sharp item. Finally there is "Other," an undifferentiated category that includes items that do not fit well in the other two. "Other" includes harmless objects that police allegedly perceive as a weapon, including cell phones. Code all of these using the wording from the Source Document. Note the format, including capitalization: Blunt object/Bat; Edged weapon/Garden shears; Other/Cell phone.

Subjects may be armed with multiple weapons; code for the weapon that most closely corresponds to aggressive or threatening use (See "Brandished weapon" and "Used weapon," below).

If "Armed/Unarmed" is "Unarmed" -> "Alleged Weapon" has "None." If "Armed/Unarmed" is "Uncertain" -> "Alleged Weapon" has "Uncertain."

## **Vehicle**

See Special Topics: Alleged and Intentional Vehicular Assault Cases, below.

## **Aggressive Physical Movement**

**Advanced toward officer(s)**

**Brandished weapon**

**Intentional vehicular assault**

<b>None</b>
<b>None/Police alleged vehicular assault</b>
<b>Reached to waist</b>
<b>Self-inflicted injury</b>
<b>Sudden threatening movement</b>
<b>Struggled</b>
<b>Uncertain</b>
<b>Used weapon</b>
The precise “Physical Movement” of a Subject is key to understanding the exact nature of the Encounter. Aggressive Physical Movements--real or perceived--are key to interpreting police responses. As with “Alleged Weapon,” it is often necessary to consult multiple sources in an effort to reach a consistent account and to obtain elusive details. Multiple Physical Movements often occur in a single incident; code for the Movement that most closely precedes, or leads to, the death of the Subject.
<b>Advanced toward officer(s)</b>
is a deliberate movement toward officers in a threatening manner: lunging, running, walking quickly, etc.
<b>Brandished weapon</b>
means physically handling a weapon in a threatening manner, whether to police or others: waving it, pointing it, raising it, pulling it from a holster, etc. If a weapon is unthreatening, as in a holster or sheath with no threatening movements, it is not being brandished.
<b>Intentional Vehicular Assault</b>
is coded when the Subject--with unambiguous intent--attempts to strike officers with a vehicle.
See Special Topics: Alleged and Intentional Vehicular Assault Cases, below.
<b>None</b>

is coded when the Subject is clearly not engaged in any aggressive or threatening physical movement. “None” is most commonly used for vehicle crash deaths, whether driver, passenger, other car occupants, or pedestrians. “None” also applies when an innocent or uninvolved person is killed, as with the victim of a murder-suicide, a person accidentally struck by stray gunfire, etc.

**None/Police alleged vehicular assault**

is coded when the Subject is driving a vehicle in proximity to police officers or vehicles and intent is ambiguous. The Subject may be only attempting to flee or, as police may allege, deliberately attempting to strike them or their vehicles.

See Special Topics: Alleged and Intentional Vehicular Assault Cases, below.

**Reached to waist**

is commonly alleged by police. This code (as with all others) can be ambiguous; when a person is running, “reaching to waist” may be to pull up baggy pants rather than to get a weapon.

**Self-inflicted Injury**

is coded for cases of suicide. In the course of the incident, there may have been other preceding Physical Movements--Brandished weapon, etc.--but these do not apply because they did not directly result in the Subject’s death.

**Struggled**

describes any direct physical altercation. These include obvious examples like punching and grappling, as well as trying to pull a Subject from a vehicle or forcefully applying restraints.

**Sudden threatening movement**

covers any sudden movement, especially in tense situations, which threaten--or are perceived or claimed to threaten--police or others. Examples include reaching for an officer’s weapon and reaching under a car seat.

**Uncertain**

is coded unless none of the others is reported, in ambiguous cases, or simply when they don't apply. "Aggressive Physical Movement" needs to be credibly observed and reported by police or witnesses. If information is absent or very strongly in doubt, Uncertain can be coded.

#### **Used weapon**

Applies when the Subject escalates from "Brandishing" a weapon to actually using it to cause harm. Examples include firing a gun or striking directly with a knife at a person.

See also **Special Topics: Coding Aggressive Physical Movement and Fleeing/Not Fleeing**, below.

#### **Fleeing/Not Fleeing**

##### **Fleeing/Bicycle**

##### **Fleeing/Foot**

##### **Fleeing/Motorcycle**

##### **Fleeing/Vehicle**

##### **Not fleeing**

##### **Uncertain**

These are generally unambiguous. It is important, however, to differentiate "Fleeing" from simply moving from one place to another. In multi-stage encounters, a Subject may commit some action, drive to another location, and then encounter police; this is not "Fleeing," which requires intent to escape. Multiple types of fleeing may occur in a single encounter; code for the one that most closely precedes, or leads to, the death of the Subject. Note that in crash deaths from fleeing vehicles, all occupants--driver and passengers--are coded as "Vehicle."

#### **Fleeing/Bicycle**

is generally self-evident.

#### **Fleeing/Foot**

generally means running, but could include walking, if it's escaping.

#### **Fleeing/Motorcycle**

is generally self-evident.
<b>Fleeing/Vehicle</b>
includes, basically, anything that's not a motorcycle or bicycle: car, truck, SUV, ATV, etc.
<b>Not fleeing</b>
is used when the Subject is not attempting to flee from any fixed location: building, vehicle, etc. Individuals may be "moving"--driving, walking, etc.--but if they are not attempting to escape, they are not fleeing.
See also <b>Special Topics: Coding Physical Movement and Fleeing/Not Fleeing</b> , below.
<b>Uncertain</b>
applies when there is insufficient information to determine.
See also <b>Special Topics: Coding Physical Movement and Fleeing/Not Fleeing</b> , below.
<b>Other Topics</b>
<b>Researching Later Information</b>
The original FE record is based on information available at the time. Each FE record contains a link to a Source Document, most of which appeared soon after the Encounter. In almost every case, new reports appear--in days, months, and even years afterwards. These often contain more accurate or more detailed information for Threat Assessment.. In addition, they may provide new information that corrects or significantly updates the original record itself (See Questions/Notes, below). Thus, unless the Source Document seems to be completely informative and accurate for all four Threat Assessment columns, it's necessary to conduct a new search.
The basic search query: <i>Subject's Full Name, City, State</i> .
See <b>Special Topics: Research Techniques</b> , below.
<b>Replacing Links</b>

Numerous links in Column Z--Link to Source Document--need to be replaced because they are dead, or because later sources provide important corrections or new information. Sources from password-protected sites should be replaced with open ones, if possible. When there are several later reports, choose the one that seems to be the most complete, and which provides information that's used in coding the Threat Assessment columns. For replaced links, change the fill color to Red (the top left Red in the Google Drive color palette).

### **Rewriting Brief Descriptions**

Brief Descriptions should be rewritten for two reasons:

- \* The original Description is seriously inaccurate.
- \* The original Description lacks key data for the Threat Assessment columns.

Rewriting Descriptions is not a high priority for the Threat Assessment Project, so it should not receive excessive time and attention. For example, it's not necessary to rewrite for minor composition errors, etc. For rewritten Descriptions, change the fill color to Red (the top left Red in the Google Drive color palette).

See **Special Topics: Sample Rewrite of a Brief Description**, below.

### **Questions/Notes**

**Questions:** At times, despite diligent work, it just seems that there is no assured way to code an item. If so, note the question for referral.

**Notes:** Access to later Source Documents may provide information that corrects or expands the original record. Examples include discovering the Subject's name, changing Cause of Death, etc. When corrected or important new information is discovered, it should be noted for referral.

Questions and Notes are recorded in the **Notes** column. (See next entry.)

### **Review and Notes**



Fatal Encounters is a collaborative project, and uses mutual cross-checking to maintain accuracy and credibility. These columns record instances where the coder includes a note of explanation, and one person's work is checked by another. *Review* has the checker's initials. *Notes* has questions or notes from the coder and the checker. Participants are encouraged to compare notes, discuss coding choices, etc.

### Threat Assessment Coding: Sample Record

1. Read the name of the Subject.
  2. Read the Brief Description, taking note of the sequence of events.
  3. Read the Source Document. Read carefully, following the sequence of events. Look diligently for specific data for the four Threat Assessment categories. Refer to the Coding Manual as needed.
  4. Take note of missing data points, contradictions, or discrepancies.
  5. If the data in the Source Document are in any way lacking or suspect, or if the link is dead, do a Google search for Subject name, City, and State.
  6. Scan search results, looking for later documents or those that might be highly informative.
  7. If a better source than the original Source Document is found, copy its link, paste it into the Supporting Document Link column, and color fill it red.
  8. Read and cross-check multiple sources to arrive at the most credible data for each column.
  9. Insert data into the corresponding Threat Assessment column(s).
  10. If needed, rewrite the Brief Description.
  11. If there are unresolvable questions, or If the research finds items that should be corrected elsewhere in the record--Subject's name, Cause of Death, Address, etc.--make note in the Notes column (See above).
- See also discussions in **Special Topics**, below.

### Special Topics

#### Sample Rewrite of a Brief Description

#14268

Raason Shaw

[www.chicagocopa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Log1068271-OCIR-1-of-2.pdf](http://www.chicagocopa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Log1068271-OCIR-1-of-2.pdf)

### Original Description

Shaw reportedly fired a shot at officers while they were picking him up with an arrest warrant. Ultimately, officers shot and killed Shaw.

### Rewritten Description

Officers observed Shaw in a possible narcotics transaction. Allegedly, Shaw fled on foot and brandished a handgun, when police shot and killed him.

### Analysis

The original link to the original Source Document was dead. A search produced the police report, which was substituted for the old link. The report enabled the Description to be rewritten for both of the reasons mentioned above.

The original Description mentioned that officers were seeking Shaw for a warrant. The police report, as well as news reports, instead state that officers observed a possible narcotics transaction.

The rewritten Description, working from the police report, mentions the information coded in the four Threat Assessment Columns:

Armed

Firearm/Handgun

Brandished weapon

Fleeing/Foot

### Notes

Note the use of the word “allegedly” in the description of Shaw’s movements. This is because the information was “alleged” by police in their report.

The Cell is filled in Red to indicate that it has been rewritten.

### Additional Guidelines

Be super-careful with the spelling of names. If the first name isn't mentioned in the short description, and you're rewriting for other reasons, please add it.

All events take place in the past. We write in past tense.

Spell check is located under Tools. I can't emphasize this enough.

We try to write the short descriptions to add context to the coded data, for example, if the officer was off-duty. We don't need to repeat ages, agencies, or whether the police alleged vehicular assault, etc.

We generally write in active voice.
Wrong: Steven Valenzuela led police into the Eldorado Casino
Right: Police pursued Steven Valenzuela into the Eldorado Casino
Wrong: Steven Valenzuela was shot and killed by police.
Right: Police shot and killed Steven Valenzuela.
If there's a complete sentence following an and, a comma goes before the and, except in a series. If there's not a complete sentence, there's not a comma.
Wrong: According to police, she then backed up in the direction of officers, and was shot and killed.
Right: According to police, she then backed up in the direction of officers, who shot and killed her.
Words we don't use because they are so frequently misused as to be meaningless or misleading: Suspect, authorities, law enforcement, claimed, scene (in all its variations), K9 or K9 unit (preferred is police dog)
Don't use "fired upon" or "returned fire." Instead use "exchanged gunfire."
If police make a claim of their own action, add the adverb "reportedly." If they're accusing someone of a crime, it's allegedly.
<b>Research Techniques</b>
Google has shown to be the most useful among the popular search engines, but Bing will sometimes have sources that Google does not. See also Texas Custodial Death Report, below.
Alternate search queries can be useful if the initial search-Subject, City, State--is unproductive:
- Try variations on the Subject's name: dropping middle and nicknames or separating compound names.
- Drop or change the city name (if nearby locations have been mentioned).
- Add the Year.
- Add uncommon words from the incident information, such as officer names, SWAT, police, etc. This can be particularly useful for records in which the Subject isn't identified.
Later sources often have data that the first ones don't. Check dates.
Certain types of source are often more detailed than others:
- Investigative reports from District Attorneys or state investigative bodies.
- Sources reporting that police were justified in the Encounter.
- Lawsuits and news reports about them.

## **Coding Aggressive Physical Movement and Fleeing/Not Fleeing**

### Aggressive Physical Movement

A single Fatal Encounter often has several stages. For example, a Subject may commit a crime, flee by vehicle, then flee on foot, and is finally killed. A weapon may be used in multiple stages: a Subject might fire a handgun during a robbery and then, after a foot chase, point the gun at officers.

The correct Aggressive Physical Movement code is that which leads directly to the Subject's death. In the previous example, The Subject at first used the gun, but this didn't cause death. It was only in the later stage, when the Subject brandished the gun, that death occurred. Thus "Aggressive Physical Movement" would be "Brandished weapon."

The same practice applies to the distinction between "Brandished weapon" and "Advanced upon officer(s)." A Subject may be brandishing a weapon, but that Physical Movement itself doesn't necessarily lead directly to death. A common case is when the Subject has a raised knife, but is several yards away from police. The Threat Assessment is much less serious than if the Subject had a raised firearm at the same distance. But if the knife-brandishing Subject lunges or runs at the police, the Threat Assessment suddenly becomes much more serious and the Subject might be shot. Again, it's the Physical Movement that most directly results in the Subject's death that is coded in Col. T.

### Fleeing/Not Fleeing

As well, it's helpful to think of fleeing as a "stage" in a Fatal Encounter. And there may be multiple fleeing stages, most commonly Vehicle and then Foot. The question arises about when the flight ends. For example, a Subject is fleeing by vehicle, crashes, and then quickly emerges from the vehicle, brandishes a weapon, and is shot by police. Yes--literally--the "flight" has stopped, but the Encounter is still in the fleeing "stage." A similar example is when the Subject is fleeing on foot, and then suddenly turns, brandishes a handgun, and is shot.

### Choice of Code

As with every coding choice, it can be difficult to select what code to apply. This is particularly true when the Source Document and other research are ambiguous or silent on the question. When there is simply not enough information to make an assured, data-based choice, “Uncertain” is the applicable code. And, of course, don’t hesitate to refer via

### **Texas Custodial Death Report**

The Texas Custodial Death Report (CDR) is a database of deaths resulting from encounters with Texas law enforcement officials. Its records are very detailed and often provide more information than can be found in news reports. As such, they are often preferable to the original FE Source Document. For any Texas Fatal Encounter, unless the original Source Document provides complete information to code the Threat Assessment columns, it’s necessary to check the CDR and, if its record is better, replace the original Source Document with the CDR record.

FE has a wider range of death types than CDR, so not all FE Subjects will have a record in CDR. For example, CDR doesn’t have pursuit crash deaths. Instead of simply linking to the CDR record, the coding practice is to capture it and then link to the saved document, to assure long-term availability.

Replacing Original Source Document with a CDR Record

Go to the CDR database.

Enter the Subject’s full name.

Examine the record, especially the “Summary of Incident” at the end.

Download the record (they are PDFs).

When prompted to save, rename as “Unique ID/Subject’s Full Name.”

Upload the CDR record into the “Fatal Encounters - Case Records” shared drive.

Highlight the link and, from the Command list at the top of the page, click on “Get link.”

Copy the link and paste it into Col. Z.

Color fill the cell with “red” from the Color fill palette (hover over color for name).

There is one other query that can be useful in CDR: If the FE record’s Subject’s Name is “Name withheld by police.” This applies because the CDR can be searched by date.

In CDR, enter the data in MM/DD/YYYY format.

If there are hits, scroll to corresponding County (there are usually only a few).

Check the record for matching FE record details, especially location and time.
If the CDR record and the FE record are for the same incident, save and replace as above.
Send the Unique ID to Mick, for referral to Brian to update the main FE database.
<b>Alleged and Intentional Vehicular Assault Cases</b>
These are perhaps the most complex and ambiguous types of Fatal Encounter. They are also very common, with dozens of cases annually.
Beyond the basic facts, a vehicular Assault encounter raises complex and sometimes unanswerable questions of intent and perception. Was the Subject deliberately attempting to strike the officers, or making a desperate attempt to flee? Was the vehicle driving straight at the police, or in their “general direction”? Did police legitimately fear threatened by the suddenly moving vehicle? Did police allege “Vehicular Assault” without real cause?
Coding Vehicular Assault cases is particularly ambiguous because all of these questions may lie beyond answer. The Subject is dead, and so intent can only be inferred. The Subject is often in a chaotic state: having just committed a crime, intoxicated (especially by stimulants), in possession of weapons or drugs, or having outstanding warrants or previous incarcerations. Thus it’s inferrable that the Subject is making a panicked escape attempt. The Subject drives along the only escape route--and the police just happen to be in that location. (It’s noteworthy that it’s rare for the Subject to actually make contact with an officer in these alleged assault attempts.)
The police, in proximity to a suddenly speeding vehicle, may genuinely perceive that it is attempting to strike them. On the other hand, there are cases where evidence indicates that the vehicle was not moving at them, and that they had no legitimate fear of danger.
A typical encounter:
* A Subject is pulled over by police.
* The police are positioned in proximity to the vehicle, sitting in police vehicles or standing nearby the Subject vehicle, often in the street in front of it or beside it.
* The vehicle accelerates along the street.
* Police shoot and kill the Subject and the vehicle crashes to a halt.

\* Afterwards, police may claim that the Subject was deliberately trying to strike them (Vehicular Assault).

Without clear evidence of intent (see below), these cases should be coded: Unarmed; None; None; and Vehicle. If reports indicate that police are alleging vehicular assault, this aspect is noted by adding "Police alleged vehicular assault" to None." Also, the Brief Description usually must be rewritten. Language such as "drove at officers" or "tried to run down officers" should be replaced by "drove in the general direction of officers."

When information overwhelmingly indicates intent by the Subject, generally demonstrated by multiple attempts, or an unambiguously deliberate attempt, to strike an officer or police vehicle, code: Armed; Vehicle; Intentional vehicular assault; and Not fleeing.

Mick O'Leary