A man wielding a knife charges a law enforcement officer and is subdued and taken into custody. In another case, a law enforcement officer arrests a felon in possession of a firearm, averting a possible “suicide by cop.” Incidents such as these happen routinely in Riverside County, yet seldom make the news.

Every day, sheriff’s deputies and police officers successfully de-escalate confrontations with combative suspects. And they perform this work at great personal risk: Last year, 117 officers nationwide lost their lives at the hands of criminal suspects, and more than 15,000 were injured.

Any discussion of police shootings requires this context and more. In few other professions is there such pressure to instantly evaluate and mitigate the aggressive behavior of strangers. Most officers in most cases do, in fact, quell any conflict. When that cannot or does not happen, and an officer-involved shooting occurs, the courts have directed us to determine what was reasonable in – quite literally – the moment, instead of judging with “20/20 hindsight.” Moreover, every incident differs in its particulars, and each demands review on its own merits.

It might produce good headlines to treat fatal cases collectively and form generalizations. But comparing raw numbers from one county to another tells us nothing about what precipitated each unique officer-involved shooting. Moreover, simple numerical comparisons isolate a single variable in a complex calculus. What about the counties’ varying socioeconomics, for example, or their disparate rates of drug use and/or mental illness, which often contribute to conflicts with
police? Academic studies on officer-involved shootings address a wide range of variables, including differences in weather from one region to the next, but we can never get away from a case-by-case review of each of these incidents.

What does not vary – and is not in question – is the use-of-force policy of the Riverside Sheriff’s Department. The only justification for use of deadly force is an officer’s fear for his or her own life or that of another.

Each and every incident is critically probed by the Sheriff’s Department, with close scrutiny through simultaneous and separate investigations: criminal (did the deputy follow the law?); administrative (did the deputy follow departmental rules and regulations?); and risk analysis (liability and appropriateness of rules, training, equipment and reasonableness). Other agencies, including the Riverside County District Attorney’s Office, also review the evidence and are independently involved in that process from the very beginning.

Every investigation is conducted in painstaking detail, with many sets of eyes, operating from numerous perspectives or disciplines and meticulously dissecting each incident of deadly force. These multiple layers of review help reveal truth, ensure accountability and, to the extent possible, bolster preventative training going forward.

Preventative training is comprehensive and ongoing for every Riverside County Sheriff’s deputy. It meets or surpasses all state requirements and deploys a full array of state-of-the-art training mechanisms on use of force – including modern simulators that test decision-making skills on the force options available. Most recently, the department in 2013 created additional deadly-force training on tactical options for patrol deputies and their supervisors. This program, fully implemented as of May 2015, includes in-depth, interactive group discussion with experts in critical-incident response, as well as intensive scenario-based instruction on how to defuse and de-escalate threats in a spectrum of high-stress situations.

The reality is, even if this training is followed to the letter, a suspect’s choices can prove fatal. A recent academic study of officer-involved shootings concluded that in the vast majority of cases of officer-involved shootings, the suspect’s own actions in the given circumstances ultimately precipitated or created the conditions for deadly force employment by the officer. And we must not forget
that each law enforcement officer carries, on his or her person, the very weapons that “unarmed” suspects often try to take and use in any struggle.

Regardless of suspect behavior, any loss of life is tragic and weighs heavily on the community. Deep human suffering moves us and touches us emotionally in ways that logical appeals cannot. That is why juries sometimes award damages to those who are hurt after confrontations with officers, even if deputies did nothing wrong. It is also a primary reason the county settles officer-involved shooting lawsuits. Riverside County’s attorneys and insurance carriers often urge settlements, as a practical matter, to avoid risk and reduce ongoing litigation costs. As a result, county payouts tell us little about how well an incident was actually handled.

The bottom line is that we test, hire, train and equip the best to serve as deputy sheriffs in our communities. Every day, they enter harm’s way by the very nature of their job. When force is used, invariably, some will second-guess officers’ split-second reactions to erratic behavior. And while broad scrutiny is necessary and constructive, so is critical context and exacting expert review. Riverside County residents should be skeptical indeed of simplistic narratives about difficult tragedies.

*Stan Sniff is sheriff of Riverside County.*

**WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR:** Letters to the Editor: E-mail to letters@pe.com. Please provide your name, city and telephone number (telephone numbers will not be published). Letters of about 200 words will be given preference. Letters will be edited for length, grammar and clarity.