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RESEARCH ARTICLE



A measured response? Examining the use of specialty resources and tactics adopted by tactical officers

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ABSTRACT

The use of tactical officers, commonly known as Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), has become a contentious issue within contemporary policing. Problematically, most Canadian research has focused on de-contextualized call types (e.g. mental health call, traffic stop) to speak to the use of tactical officers. We move beyond this limitation by conducting a content analysis of incidents that received a response from tactical officers ($n = 1652$) using operational data from the Winnipeg Police Service. Our results indicate that a pair of tactical officers responded to approximately half of incidents ($n = 803$) and that the number of responding tactical officers increased when weapons were reported to be involved and when patrol officers requested tactical members to attend the call. Similarly, the use of tactics and other specialty units (e.g. K9) varied depending on the level of risk posed by the incident. Although tactical officers rarely used force ($n = 9$), most commonly this involved the use of less-lethal options on armed individuals. Taken together, our findings suggest that the use of tactical officers and their tactics are a measured response to risk posed by an incident in an attempt to minimize harm to officers and the public.

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Tactical officers, commonly referred to as Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), receive specialized training and equipment to reduce the risk posed to public and officer safety (Mijares & McCarthy, 2020). Due to the similarities in tactics and equipment used by police tactical teams and military special forces, some suggest that tactical officers are the embodiment of police militarization (Kraska, 2021). Based on this assumption, significant concerns have been raised about tactical teams responding to calls that are perceived as low-risk or 'routine', including the argument that some police equipment is intimidating and that tactical officers become primed to use force when interacting with the public (Kraska, 2021; Roziere & Walby, 2020; Towns et al., 2023). Given the lack of research examining concerns regarding police militarization (Koslicki, 2017; Koslicki & Willits, 2018; Koslicki et al., 2021), the current study uses police data from one police jurisdiction to explore incidents that received a response from tactical officers, the use of specialized police resources (e.g., armored vehicles), and the strategies used by tactical officers during calls (e.g., tactics adopted, use of force).

Literature review

Considering the contentious nature of police tactical teams, there is a surprising lack of research on the use of tactical resources. Problematically, most of the Canadian research is

undermined by two notable limitations: the lack of clarity regarding what a tactical team deployment is and the reliance on de-contextualized data to make claims about the nature of incidents that tactical officers respond to. Each of these issues will briefly be explained in turn.

The use of tactical officers does not equate to a tactical team deployment

Wanting to replicate Kraska's original work on tactical teams conducted in the United States (US), Alvaro (2000) completed a multi-method study examining the use of tactical officers in Canada. Throughout the process of requesting records on the number of tactical team call-outs it became clear that police agencies defined a call-out differently. Specifically, it was noted that:

Some police services consider a tactical call-out to be an entire unit deployment, others when any one member is deployed to a situation. For example, one tactical unit commander has a team of two officers on a six-week deployment conducting surveillance operations. Should this be considered a tactical call-out? (Alvaro, 2000, p. 95)

In addition to bringing attention to the fact that Canadian police agencies define call-outs differently, Alvaro (2000) also identified differences in the way that agencies use their tactical officers. For example, while all jurisdictions deployed their tactical unit as a full-team, approximately one-quarter of the police agencies ($n = 15$ of 54, 27%) used their tactical units proactively as they often break into 'two to four man teams spread out across a jurisdiction' in order to bolster resources within the service (Alvaro, 2000, p. 104).

Despite bringing these issues to light, subsequent research has conflated full-team deployments with situations where any tactical officer responds to a call (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). This is evidenced by claims that the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) Tactical Support Team (TST) was deployed as a full-team nearly 3400 times in 2016 (Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019). However, this would amount to approximately 10 full-team deployments every single day, which is not realistic given the number of TST members in Winnipeg (Lair et al., 2024). Furthermore, based on their analyses of 14 police agencies, Roziere and Walby (2020) state 'SWAT teams are now deployed for routine law enforcement activities such as warrant work, traffic enforcement and other routine tasks, as well as responding to mental health crises and domestic disturbances' (p. 704; emphasis added). These claims are unsubstantiated given that the data these researchers relied on does not distinguish between incidents where a pair of tactical officers respond to a call to assist patrol officers and a full-team deployment such as a protracted armed and barricaded event (Lair et al., 2024). It is important to highlight that in these two instances, the appearance of the officers drastically changes. For example, when tactical officers are supporting patrol, they are essentially wearing a different coloured uniform, and are not equipped with all the tactical gear that they would likely be wearing during full-team deployments such as hard body armour and a carbine.

Interviews with Canadian police officers from three agencies similarly mentioned the distinction between tactical team deployments and calls where a handful of tactical officers respond to support patrol (Jenkins et al., 2021a). According to some participants, tactical team deployments occur when patrol supervisors are relieved from the inner perimeter¹ and give control of the call to tactical officers. Furthermore, participants also highlighted that the gear that tactical officers are equipped with varies as a function of the risk posed within the incident. Taken together, it appears that at least from the perspective of the police, previous research does not accurately capture the important delineation between tactical team deployments and tactical officers augmenting patrol resources.

Favouring de-contextualized data and ignoring context

The second major limitation of attempts to understand the use of tactical resources in Canada is that relevant context has not been considered and analyses rely on de-contextualized call-type data

(e.g., domestic dispute) to draw conclusions about the nature of the incident that tactical officers are responding to (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). This approach is problematic as the call type may give an incident the appearance of being low risk (e.g., traffic stop) by masking the presence of risk factors within the call (e.g., the driver was just involved in a targeted shooting) that may justify the use of tactical resources. Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) characterize the incidents that tactical officers often respond to as low risk or 'routine' and have called for the elimination of tactical responses to such calls. However, the mischaracterization of certain incidents as 'routine' based solely on the call type becomes apparent when the presence of risk factors is considered.

When re-analyzing the data released by the WPS that Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) used to claim that tactical officers frequently respond to 'routine' calls, Jenkins and colleagues (2021b) came to significantly different interpretations about the level of risk posed within the incidents. For example, within the incidents where we could gather additional contextual information ($n = 1019$), at least one weapon was indicated to be involved during most of the incidents ($n = 610$, 60%). In addition, less than half ($n = 190$ of 460, 41%) of the incidents where firearms were believed to be involved were originally classified as a firearms-related call (e.g., Shots Fired). Furthermore, firearms were noted to be present during approximately 45% of incidents that previous researchers have portrayed as 'routine' (e.g., Suicide Threats, Domestic Disturbances, Warrants; Roziere & Walby, 2020).

Police tactics during search and arrest warrants have increasingly come under scrutiny, with the focus of this criticism centered on the use of dynamic entries in which the police gain the element of surprise by rapidly entering a structure such as a house, usually through the means of forcing entry (e.g., Dubinsky et al., 2021; Trinh et al., 2021). Re-examining WPS data from 2013 and 2016 that was used by Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) highlights that the use of de-contextualized call type not only masks the level of risk posed to public and officer safety, but it also hides important contextual information regarding the use of police resources as well as tactics adopted by the police. For example, an analysis by Jenkins and colleagues indicated that TST members frequently responded alongside canine (K9) officers ($n = 160$, 15.7%; Jenkins, 2019). Furthermore, within the coded files, Incident Commanders (ICs) were on scene 66 times (6.5%). While this is relatively infrequent, ICs are only used during incidents that pose significant risk to public safety and require the use of specialized resources (Jones & Hinds, 2002; Ontario Provincial Police, 2006). Overall, *dynamic entries* were the most used tactic that was reported ($n = 73$ of 171, 42.7%). However, the tactics adopted by police were associated with an indication that weapons were involved such that *surround and call outs* were significantly more likely to be used when weapons were on scene than when they were not (Jenkins et al., 2021b). Saying this, the data regarding police tactics are nearly a decade old and are likely not reflective of current practices within the Winnipeg Police Service.

The current study

Researchers have recently sought to provide a more informed understanding of the incidents that tactical officers respond to (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2021b, 2023). Most of this research has focused on the identification of risk factors to speak to the level of risk posed to public and officer safety. Despite the value in this approach, there is more information that can be gleaned from police data, such as the use of specialty units and tactics adopted by police. However, previous attempts to record this information has relied on an informal tracking mechanism used by the WPS. Given this, the current study uses operational police data to provide a more informed understanding of the police response to incidents that TST members assisted with. By leveraging this data, we were able to capture important information regarding the use of tactical resources such as the number of TST units responding and the amount of time they spent on scene. This information is important in distinguishing between full-team deployments and incidents in which a handful of TST officers responded (Alvaro,

2000; Lair et al., 2024). Given the value in moving beyond the call type to capture the use of specialty resources and tactics adopted by tactical officers, the current study will examine the following research questions: (1) is the use of speciality resources associated with characteristics of the call?; and (2) do the tactics used by TST vary depending on the risk factors within the incident?

Methods

The Winnipeg Police Service

As the current research relies on data provided by the WPS, we will provide some important contextual information regarding the Service and the city of Winnipeg. The population of Winnipeg is approximately 767,000, and the WPS has nearly 1,350 officers. Coinciding with a decrease in the ratio of officers to residents has been a gradual increase in the overall number of dispatched calls for service (234,058 dispatched calls in 2021 as compared to 200,499 in 2015 Winnipeg Police Service, 2020, 2022a). Additionally, the Crime Severity Index for violent crime of 173.3 is nearly double the Canadian average of 92.5 in 2021 (Government of Canada, 2022; Winnipeg Police Service, 2022a). Notwithstanding the increased rate of violent crime, the use of force rate in 2021 was slightly below the 5-year average, and there were no officer-involved shootings (Winnipeg Police Service, 2022b).

The Tactical Support Team (TST) of the WPS is a full-time tactical team with approximately 37 officers. Their mandate is to provide frontline support to other members of the WPS such as patrol and investigative units (Griffiths & Pollard, 2013). When not training or deployed as a full team (e.g., hostage taking), TST officers serve a patrol-like function and respond to high-risk calls including those in which weapons are involved. Additionally, TST members also augment patrol resources and assist with queue management when the demands for police response is beyond the capacity of patrol. Within the context of the current study, a TST unit is an unmarked police vehicle that can be assigned to calls, akin to patrol units. Most often a TST unit consists of a pair of TST members; however, a shift supervisor may occasionally respond alone.

Data sources

The WPS provided us access to two sources of operational data for the year 2021. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, all access was completed on a secure server within WPS headquarters. Each of these data sources will be briefly explained below.

Computer aided dispatch

We were provided with a list of all occurrence numbers for incidents that TST members responded to in 2021, which was extracted from the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system as an Excel file. Each incident included the initial and final call type (e.g., Shots fired) and priority level, which range in severity from 1 (danger to life or GBHD is present) to 7 (calls where delayed response will not affect the safety and wellbeing of any individual). Additionally, the CAD extraction included the number of TST units who responded to a call. Within the context of WPS, a TST unit is not an entire team but instead a pair of tactical officers who respond to calls in the same vehicle.

Daily occurrence reports

In addition to the CAD data, we were also provided access to Daily Occurrence Reports (DORs), which are an informal tracking mechanism of incidents that tactical officers assist with. The purpose of the DORs is to allow TST supervisors to keep up to date with the calls that TST have been involved in as they provide brief synopses of the incident. Therefore, we relied on the narrative

of the DORs to supplement the CAD data for pre-planned events such as warrants and assisting other units, which provide little context in the CAD database.

Coding manual

To capture the nature of incidents that TST members are involved in, the occurrence number of incidents was searched in the CAD Viewer. This provided documentation of the incident from when the file is started by a call taker or officer until the call is resolved and cleared. The narrative of the incident included dispatch information (e.g., what the complainant reported) as well as details pertaining to the responding units such as the unit number and disposition (e.g., on scene, cleared call). All information within the CAD report is timestamped, which allowed for the calculation of the time spent on scene. Specifically, we noted the time that elapsed from when the first TST unit arrived on scene until the last TST unit cleared the call. We also recorded if other specialty resources such as K9 or the WPS helicopter (AIR1) responded to the call alongside TST, the level of force, and the tactics used by TST officers.

Additionally, we coded the presence of risk factors that increase the threat to public and officer safety (see [Appendix A](#)). Among other things, these risk factors related to the presence of weapons and relevant history of the individuals involved in the incident (e.g., known to be violent, known to carry weapons). We also coded the level of violence within an incident (e.g., property was damaged, an assault occurred) and whether the call had the potential to cause grievous bodily harm or death (GBHD) to the public or responding officers. The coding of these variables was based on our understanding of an officer's risk assessment process. We classified an occurrence as posing GBHD if any of the following characteristics were present: weapons were indicated to be involved,² instances where a complainant called for police assistance and the line went dead or the complainant states that someone is attempting to kick down the door to their residence, some cases of assault (e.g., someone repeatedly being kicked in the head), and cases where the environment threatened the safety of an individual (e.g., person standing on a ledge of a building). See Jenkins et al. (2023) for an overview of risk factors within all TST incidents.

Analytic strategy

The first author spent 5 weeks in the Organizational Development and Support Division of the WPS accessing the CAD data stored on the secure server to conduct a content analysis of the calls that received a response from TST members. To provide a representative portrayal of incidents that TST members respond to, the first author coded at least one-third of incidents from each call type, which were randomly selected. However, as part of our research, we oversampled certain call types that have been previously described as low risk or 'routine' (e.g., Domestic Disputes, Wellbeing Check). This resulted in an under-sampling of gun calls ($n = 90$ of 561, 16%). Finally, to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of an incident, we also coded files in which a DOR was available, but the file had not been randomly selected. When examining the time TST spent on scene, we used the final call type and priority level as it more accurately reflects the situation that officers responded to.

Using the available information in the CAD history and DORs, the first author coded the presence of any risk factors or relevant context (e.g., the tactics used by police) using dichotomous or categorical variables (i.e., present vs. absent; level of tactic used). Given that the first author conducted the content analysis alone, a potential limitation to the current study is that we were unable to calculate inter-rater reliability. Saying this, these concerns are mitigated as a content analysis using a very similar manual produced very high levels of agreement between two coders (Jenkins et al., 2021b).

It is important to highlight that the coding of variables is based on the information provided by the complainant(s) and the details that were voiced over the radio by officers and telecommunications operators. Given this, the risk factors that were coded were often known prior to any police

response (e.g., during the initial conversation with the call taker) or provided prior to TST arriving on scene (e.g., a General Patrol unit states that the individual has a weapon). Similarly, the DORs often included information regarding the history of the individual prior to TST's involvement in the call (e.g., a search warrant). Therefore, the reporting of risk factors is articulated prior to TST members responding to the incident, as opposed to after the fact to justify the use of tactical resources as has been previously suggested.

This study was approved by Carleton University's Ethics Board (Project # 117265) through a Secondary Use of Data Submission.

Results

The Results section is comprised of three main parts. Given that the role of tactical officers varies from responding as a team to high-risk incidents to assisting patrol in queue management, the first section provides an overview of how many TST units responded to a call and the impact of call type and priority level on the time that TST members spent on scene. Second, descriptive analyses are presented on the presence of risk factors across the various types of specialty units (e.g., K9) before exploratory analyses examines the relationship between specialty units and the incident involving weapons or GBHD. The final section of the Results examines the use of tactics and interventions, including the use of force used by TST members.

In total, the coding manual was applied to approximately half of the occurrences that TST members responded to in 2021 ($n = 1652$ of 3215, 51%). Given the time-intensive nature of manually coding the incidents, this was the most that was feasible during the 5 weeks the first author spent at WPS headquarters. The following section is specific to the files where the coding manual was applied, which means that the aggregate results are an under-reporting of gun calls (i.e., because they were under-sampled).

Time on scene

Overall, the time TST members spent on scene varied considerably across call types. When examining call types where TST members responded at least five times, the average time on scene ranged from 6.88 min ($SD = 8.58$; Hold up alarm) to 129.26 min ($SD = 174.38$; Assist another unit or agency). Occasionally, the time spent on scene also varied across the priority level within a call type. For example, TST members were on scene approximately twice as long during a Priority 1 gun call ($M = 65.76$ min, $SD = 52.81$) as compared to a gun call dispatched as Priority 2 ($M = 36.74$ min, $SD = 32.84$) or Priority 3 ($M = 31.34$ min, $SD = 26.33$). Similarly, TST spent considerably more time on scene during Priority 2 Shots Fired ($M = 32.27$ min, $SD = 38.16$) than Priority 3 ($M = 12.68$ min, $SD = 9.93$). In contrast, the time spent on scene was similar for Priority 2 and 3 Commercial Robberies ($M = 33.44$ min, $SD = 22.69$ and $M = 32.18$ min, $SD = 19.24$, respectively).

Regardless of the call type and priority level, tactical officers spent the longest time on scene during incidents where TST was requested by patrol ($M = 39.11$ min, $SD = 54.14$) as compared to calls where patrol requested any backup ($M = 21.82$ min, $SD = 23.62$), TST responded to lower-risk calls ($M = 23.90$ min, $SD = 53.46$), or there were no available units to be dispatched ($M = 18.75$ min, $SD = 20.16$). During incidents that involved a barricaded individual or possible hostage ($n = 45$), TST members spent on average an hour and a half on scene ($M = 92.20$ min, $SD = 121.59$). However, it is important to note that there is a lot of variability in the time TST spent on scene within these incidents.

Specialty units attending

Within the coded incidents, between one and seven TST units responded. Most often, there was one TST unit responding ($n = 803$, 48.8%), followed by two ($n = 319$, 19.3%) and three units ($n = 305$,

18.5%).³ One TST unit responded most often during incidents where TST was augmenting patrol ($n = 341$ of 488, 69.9%) and when backup was requested ($n = 140$ of 265, 52.8%). However, when TST was requested, TST most often provided a three- or four-unit response ($n = 57$ of 179, 31.8% and $n = 39$, 21.8% respectively).

TST members responded alongside other specialty units in approximately one-third of incidents ($n = 569$, 34.4%). Most commonly this included K9 ($n = 388$, 68.2%), AIR1 ($n = 148$, 24.9%), and Tactical Emergency Medical Services (TEMS; $n = 140$, 24.6%). However, the Armored Rescue Vehicle (ARV; $n = 29$, 5.1%), Incident Commanders (ICs; $n = 4$, 0.7%) and Crisis Negotiators (CNs; $n = 7$, 0.1%) were infrequently used.

The impact of incident factors on the use of specialty resources

Overall, specialty units are responding alongside TST to high-risk calls due to the prevalence of risk factors. Perhaps not surprisingly, as compared to when TST was not supported by additional specialty units, incidents where specialty units co-responded with TST had higher rates of violence (33.5% vs. 41.5%) and an indication that weapons were involved (44.9% vs. 59.1%) while the other risk factors were more evenly distributed (see Table 1). Further, the extent to which risk factors are present within calls appears to vary across specialty units. For example, K9 and AIR1 were used during incidents that had the highest rates of violence present within the calls, which may be due to their role in tracking a fleeing suspect. While they were used less frequently, the ARV, CNs and ICs were used most often when weapons were involved, there was a risk of GBHD, and when the individual in question was known to be previously violent.

To examine whether the presence of risk factors was related to the use of specialty resources, we conducted exploratory analyses on the two most prevalence risk factors (i.e., weapons involved and risk of GBHD). An indication that weapons were on scene was significantly associated with the number of TST units that responded to the incident $\chi^2(6) = 188.47$, $p < 0.001$). It was relatively uncommon for a weapon to be reported when there was a single TST unit responding ($n = 266$ of 803, 33.1%). However, this was no longer true when there were two or more TST units attending a call. For example, when two TST units responded, weapons were involved in more than half of calls ($n = 181$ of 319, 57.6%). Similarly, when there were three or more TST units responding, weapons were indicated to be present in more than two-thirds of incidents ($n = 369$ of 525, 70.3%).

Similarly, the call containing a risk of GBHD was associated with the number of TST units that responded $\chi^2(6) = 94.78$, $p < 0.001$. In approximately half of incidents where a single TST unit responded there was a risk of GBHD ($n = 446$ of 803, 55.5%). As the number of TST units responding increased, so did the likelihood of the call presenting a risk of GBHD. Specifically, when two TST units responded a risk of GBHD was present in nearly two-thirds of occurrences ($n = 236$ of 319, 73.9%) and when three or more TST units responded this increased to nearly 80% ($n = 418$ of 525, 79.6%).

Generally, specialty units responding alongside TST were not associated with the belief that weapons were involved in the call. However, this was not the case for the use of K9, which responded to significantly more calls when weapons were involved than not ($n = 243$ vs. $n = 145$; $\chi^2(1) = 33.29$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the ARV was more likely to be used when weapons were believed to be present than not ($n = 27$ vs. $n = 2$; $\chi^2(1) = 22.31$, $p < 0.001$). In all cases but one, the weapon involved was indicated to be a firearm. Not surprisingly, both K9 and the ARV were significantly more likely to respond to incidents where there was an indication that a risk of GBHD was present (K9 $n = 277$ vs. $n = 111$; $\chi^2(1) = 4.52$, $p = 0.033$; ARV $n = 27$ vs. $n = 2$). Additionally, the use of TEMS was associated with the occurrence posing a risk of GBHD ($n = 82$ vs. $n = 58$; $\chi^2(1) = 4.85$, $p = 0.028$).

Search and arrest warrants

Given significant concerns that have been raised regarding the use of tactical resources during search and arrest warrants, we decided to examine the presence of risk factors within these incidents

Table 1. The presence of risk factors within calls where specialized resources responded.

Unit Type	Risk Factors									
	Violence	Weapons involved	Threats	Grievous Bodily Harm/Death	Previous Violence	Previous Weapons	Gang member	Previous shooting	Previous homicide	Any risk factor
TST Only (n = 1083)	363 (33.5%)	487 (44.9%)	142 (13.1%)	716 (66.1%)	130 (12.0%)	93 (8.6%)	26 (2.4%)	9 (0.8%)	23 (2.1%)	820 (75.7%)
K9 (n = 388)	190 (48.9%)	243 (62.6%)	37 (9.5%)	277 (71.4%)	51 (13.1%)	35 (9.0%)	8 (2.1%)	5 (1.3%)	5 (1.3%)	307 (79.1%)
AIR1 (n = 148)	68 (45.9%)	84 (56.8%)	14 (9.5%)	104 (70.3%)	23 (15.5%)	14 (9.5%)	4 (2.7%)	2 (1.4%)	2 (1.4%)	118 (79.7%)
TEMS (n = 140)	28 (20.0%)	72 (51.4%)	17 (12.1%)	82 (58.6%)	25 (17.9%)	26 (18.6%)	5 (3.6%)	2 (1.4%)	6 (4.2%)	87 (62.1%)
ARV (n = 29)	6 (25.0%)	27 (91.7%)	0 (0%)	27 (91.7%)	5 (20.8%)	9 (37.5%)	1 (4.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.2%)	27 (93.1%)
CN (n = 7)	2 (28.6%)	6 (85.7%)	4 (57.1%)	7 (100%)	3 (42.9%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (100%)
IC (n = 4)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
Average for these calls (n = 569)	236 (41.5%)	336 (59.1%)	59 (10.4%)	390 (68.5%)	78 (13.7%)	58 (10.2%)	11 (1.9%)	6 (1.1%)	11 (1.9%)	432 (75.9%)

The incidents that TST responded to alone are not included in the average. Due to the fact that multiple specialty units responded alongside TST to calls, the values in the table do not sum to the average values as the average values reflect the unique number of calls with respect to that risk factor.

specifically. Additional contextual information was available for approximately half ($n = 96$ of 171, 56.1%) of search and/or arrest warrants. Most warrants were high risk as nearly two-thirds of incidents posed a risk of GBHD ($n = 57$, 59.4%). Weapons were commonly reported to be present ($n = 41$, 42.7%) during warrants, most of which were firearms ($n = 37$, 38.5%). Additional risk factors included previous violence ($n = 24$, 25.0%), homicide charges ($n = 22$, 22.9%), possession of weapons ($n = 14$, 14.6%), previous shootings ($n = 5$, 5.2%), an officer safety caution ($n = 1$, 1.0%) and previous involvement with TST ($n = 1$, 1.0%).

Tactics and interventions used by TST

In light of the concerns raised about police tactics, we examined search and arrest warrants in which the tactic adopted by TST was specified ($n = 88$). Overall, it was found that the use of tactics was associated with the belief that weapons were present (Fisher's Exact $p < 0.001$). Specifically, *knock and announce* ($n = 6$, 6.8%) and *knock and talk* ($n = 1$, 1.1%) were only used in situations where a weapon was *not* believed to be involved. *Surround and call outs* were the most frequently used tactic and was used significantly more often when there was an indication weapons were involved ($n = 45$, 51.1% vs. $n = 2$, 2.2%). In contrast, *no knock entries with a dynamic clear* were used five times (5.7%), all of which were in situations where weapons were *not* believed to be involved. Finally, there was no significant association between the presence of weapons and *high-risk vehicle takedowns* ($n = 7$, 8.0% vs. $n = 9$, 10.2%). Similar results were found when considering whether the incident posed a risk of GBHD (Fisher's Exact $p < 0.001$). *Surround and call outs* and *high-risk vehicle takedowns* were adopted most often when a risk of GBHD was posed compared to when it was not ($n = 46$ vs. $n = 1$ and $n = 12$ vs. $n = 4$, respectively). In contrast, *no knock entries with a dynamic clear* were never used when there was a risk of GBHD present.

TST members used force against an individual during a total of nine incidents (0.5% of all coded files). The most common intervention options used by TST were the Conducted Electrical Weapon (CEW, $n = 4$, 44.4%) and less-lethal bean bag rounds ($n = 3$, 33.3%). Among these incidents, six individuals had weapons, three of which were firearms, including one incident in which a firearm was pointed at TST members. During the other two cases, a member of the public was actively being assaulted, one with an impact weapon. These results indicate that TST officers rarely used force and when force was used, it was frequently less-lethal options against an individual armed with a weapon. While uncommon, TST members also used specialized equipment during warrants or barricaded events such as distraction devices⁴ (DDs, $n = 17$, 70.8%), chemical munitions ($n = 5$, 20.8%), PepperBall® ($n = 1$, 4.2%), and glass break rounds ($n = 1$, 4.2%). When considering the context of these incidents, DDs were frequently deployed during incidents in which a weapon was indicated to be involved ($n = 15$, 88.2%), most often a firearm ($n = 12$, 70.6%). Similarly, chemical munitions were exclusively used during incidents that an individual was barricaded with a firearm ($n = 4$, 80%) or an edged weapon ($n = 1$, 20%).

Discussion

Researchers have often failed to consider important contextual information when examining the use of tactical resources (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020), which has stunted our understanding of the nature of incidents that tactical officers respond to, the use of specialty resources more generally, as well as the use of police tactics. Given this, the current study used operational police data from the WPS to expand our understanding of these issues.

Regarding the use of specialty resources, we found that in approximately half of incidents TST members provided a single unit response ($n = 803$ of 1652, 48.6%). Given this, it is problematic to conflate the number of incidents that tactical *officers* were dispatched to with

the number of tactical *team* deployments as has been done previously (Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). Further, we found that the number of responding TST units increased when risk increased; specifically, weapons were indicated to be involved, the call posed a risk of GBHD, and when patrol requested TST attendance (e.g., during an armed and barricaded event). Similarly, we found that the time TST spent on scene was nearly twice as long when TST was requested as compared to when patrol requested any backup, TST responded to low-risk calls, or when no other units were available. These results suggest that tactical officers are sometimes assisting with call queue management during low-risk incidents in order to provide a faster response time to the public (Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2021a). However, it is important to highlight that when tactical officers are being used in this capacity, they are responding in SUVs with similar equipment to patrol officers. When considering specialty resources that responded alongside TST, we found that K9 and the ARV were used more often when weapons and a risk of GBHD were present. Similarly, the presence of TEMS was highest when there was a risk of GBHD within the incident. Taken together, the results suggest that the use of police resources is commensurate to the level of risk posed within the incident (Research Question 1).

Researchers have criticized the practice of using tactical teams to conduct warrants (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2020), and public support for the use of tactical teams during warrants is generally limited (Moule et al., 2019); however, our results indicate that many of these incidents pose significant risk to public and officer safety. For example, over half of all search and arrest warrants posed a risk of GBHD ($n = 57$, 59.4%) and firearms were often indicated to be present ($n = 41$, 42.7%). Our analysis of the tactics adopted by TST indicates that the level of risk posed appears to influence the strategies used (Research Question 2). For example, *knock and announce* and *knock and talk* were only used in situations where weapons were not present. However, *surround and call outs* were most often used when weapons were indicated to be involved. Within the WPS, the rate of dynamic entries for warrant executions appears to have reduced over time. For example, no-knock entries comprised approximately one-third of warrant executions ($n = 73$) conducted in 2013 and 2016 (Jenkins et al., 2021b). However, no knock entries were used only five times in our coded files for 2021 and none of these included events where weapons were involved. This suggests a notable shift in the tactics used by TST. Furthermore, while the use of the ARV is controversial (Townes et al., 2023), our analysis suggests that the ARV is used infrequently and in situations that pose significant risk to public and officer safety.

One major concern about the use of tactical officers, particularly during 'routine' calls, is the assertion that they are more likely to use force when interacting with the public (Kraska, 2021). Based on the data provided, these concerns do not appear warranted, at least in the context of Winnipeg, as TST members rarely used force when responding to incidents ($n = 9$, 0.5% of incidents). Furthermore, when TST did apply force, this involved the use of less-lethal options when responding to individuals armed with weapons, including firearms, which are situations where officers could reasonably use lethal force. In line with previous research, these findings suggest that tactical officers reduce the risk to officer and public safety due to their additional training, experience, and equipment (e.g., Brimo, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2021a; Klinger & Rojek, 2008; Rojek, 2005).

Implications

The findings from the current study have implications for research on the use of tactical resources. In particular, our results highlight the value of collaborating with a police agency as opposed to relying on Freedom of Information legislation as has been done previously (Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). Engaging with police services facilitates a more informed understanding of the data that is being examined (Jenkins et al., 2023; Mitchell

et al., 2022; Simpson et al., 2021). Additionally, collaboration allows for higher-quality data that provides greater insight into the research topic. For example, being provided access to CAD data allowed us to record the number of TST units that were dispatched to an incident, allowing us to distinguish between full-team deployments and incidents where a single TST unit responded to augment patrol resources. Leveraging CAD data also enabled us to record the amount of time that TST units spent on scene.

Our findings also have implications for policy. Some researchers have advocated for the implementation of policies that would ban tactical officers from responding to incidents that are characterized as ‘routine’ based on the call type alone. We feel that these arguments are misguided as they lack an appreciation for the risk that is often present in ‘routine’ calls and represent public policy recommendations based on insufficient evidence. For example, while the use of tactical officers to conduct search and arrest warrants has received considerable criticism our results suggest that most of these incidents are high risk and often involve weapons. Furthermore, in contrast to claims that tactical officers are primed to use force, we found that force was used in less than 1% of incidents and often involved the use of less-lethal options when lethal force would likely have been justified given the level of threat posed. Due in part to the higher prevalence of high-risk incidents that tactical officers respond to, there is growing evidence that tactical officers develop enhanced decision-making, with some studies suggesting that tactical officers are less likely to shoot an unarmed person in a rapid shoot/no shoot scenario (Suss & Ward, 2012; Vickers & Lewinski, 2012; Ward et al., 2011). Based on these findings, barring tactical officers from calls would likely have the unintended effect of increasing the rate at which force is used by police.

Limitations and future directions

While this study provides more insight into the use of specialized resources by the police, there are some notable limitations to this research. Primarily, these limitations center around the lack of contextual information that is included in CAD for pre-planned events such as warrants or when TST was assisting other units (e.g., Homicide). We used DORs to supplement the CAD data whenever possible, but given that the DORs are an informal tracking mechanism, there is likely missing information regarding important contextual factors. For example, TEMS was often used on standby during warrants ($n = 78$) of which the majority were not associated with additional contextual information; therefore, the risk factors are under-reported in these incidents. Similarly, when TST was Assisting Other Units, little contextual information was provided. Ultimately, the results are an under-reporting of risk factors not only within call types (e.g., Search Warrant) but also regarding the use of specialty resources (e.g., there are three occurrences where the ARV was used but no narrative was provided).

Despite the value of the current study, our findings may not generalize to police agencies across Canada. In order to develop a robust understanding of the use of tactical resources in Canada, researchers should develop high-quality datasets that allow for the examination of similar issues with other agencies. The development of high-quality police datasets will help facilitate cross-jurisdictional comparisons, which are not currently possible due to the variability in data collection practices (Lair et al., 2024).

Conclusion

De-contextualized police data has been used to raise significant concerns about the use of tactical officers in Canada. However, in addition to the issue of conflating full-team deployments with any incident where at least one tactical officer responds (Lair et al., 2024), relying on de-contextualized data provides limited insight into the nature of

incidents that police respond to as well as the use of police resources during these calls. Our study found that the presence of weapons was related to the number of TST units responding, the use of some specialty units (e.g., ARV) and the use of tactics during search and arrest warrants. Taken together, these results suggest that the use of police resources is a measured response to the level of risk posed within an incident. Future research should engage with other Canadian police agencies to provide in-depth examinations of the use of police resources, particularly those as contentious as tactical officers and their equipment.

Notes

1. The inner perimeter is established in order to contain an incident and is located as close to the event as possible without compromising the safety of the individual or police (Ontario Provincial Police, 2006).
2. However, we excluded 32 incidents where a weapon was involved but the call narrative did not suggest that the call presented a risk of GBHD (e.g., an individual was bear sprayed and robbed but the suspect has fled).
3. A similar pattern was found when examining all incidents that TST responded to with one unit responding most often ($n = 1531$, 47.7%), followed by two ($n = 668$, 20.8%) and three units ($n = 643$, 20.0%).
4. Distraction devices are used to temporarily disorient an individual by producing rapid sound and air waves (Mijares & McCarthy, 2020). Chemical munitions and PepperBall® are similarly used to incapacitate an individual by causing irritation to the eyes, skin, and respiratory tract (Semple et al., 2021).

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Appendix A

Risk Factor		Present	Absent
Violence Expressed	Assault		
	Stabbing		
	Shots fired		
	Shooting		
	Threatened/assaulted with a weapon		
	Maced/bear sprayed		
Weapons Involved	To property		
	Firearm		
	Edged (e.g., knife)		
	Impact (e.g., baseball bat)		
	Other (e.g., explosive)		
GBHD Expressed			
Threats Made	To police		
	To others		
	To self		
	Victim precipitated		
Historical Information	Officer safety caution		
	Suicide attempts		
	Mental health		
	Weapons		
	Violence		
	Gang member		
	Shooting		
	Homicide		
	No contact order		
	Prior TST involvement		