

An exploration of the use of tactical officers in three Canadian police services

The Police Journal:
Theory, Practice and Principles
2021, Vol. 94(4) 515–538
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DOI: 10.1177/0032258X20962833
journals.sagepub.com/home/pjx



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Abstract

In order to better understand the use of tactical police resources in Canada we interviewed patrol and tactical officers ($N = 28$) from three Canadian police services. A thematic analysis indicated that tactical officers are primarily responding to calls *beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* which included *high-risk calls* as denoted by the presence of risk-factors and calls unfolding in *special environments*. Further, tactical officer response is thought to result in a *reduced threat to officer and public safety*. Our findings suggest that in contrast to previous claims, tactical officers are often responding to calls where significant risk is present.

Keywords

Police, police militarization, police tactical units, Canada

Police tactical units (e.g., Special Weapons and Tactics [SWAT] teams) were originally developed in response to high-profile situations resulting in the death of civilians (Brooks, 2010). Previously, the police were ill-equipped to deal with such high-risk incidents and the development of these teams of officers with specialized training and equipment were a way for the police to minimize the likelihood of harm to both the public and officers (Klinger and Rojek, 2008). However, over time, the use of such teams

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has become increasingly controversial, as scholars have argued that they are the catalyst of a concerning trend of police militarization, which may expose the public to more aggressive policing, including the use of lethal force (Delehanty et al., 2017). Further, despite their intended use for rare, high-risk events, more recent research across North America has seen the increased use of tactical teams for what some are considering more 'routine' calls (e.g., traffic stops, mental health calls, warrant executions; Kraska, 2001; Roziere and Walby, 2018).

Given the potential consequences of the increased use of tactical teams, it appears more important than ever to gain an understanding of the circumstances under which these teams are being used in order to facilitate evidence-based decision making around the use of tactical resources in contemporary society. Previous research on the topic in Canada is limited to the use of call for service data that relies solely on call type (e.g., domestic disturbance; Roziere and Walby, 2018, 2020) and contains substantial amounts of missing information (e.g., related to risk factors associated with the calls; Jenkins *et al.*, 2020), both of which may result in erroneous conclusions. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to provide more context to the circumstances under which tactical police resources are used in Canada by interviewing officers from three police services. In order to set the context for the current study, we will review the literature pertaining to the use of tactical teams and perceptions regarding their use.

Literature review

The use of police tactical units

In both the United States (US) and Canada, the use of tactical units has rapidly expanded in the past few decades (e.g., Alvaro, 2000; Kraska, 2001; Kraska and Kappeler, 1997). Coinciding with this increase in the use of tactical units is the apparent expansion of their mandate such that tactical units are no longer reserved for infrequent high-risk calls such as hostage takings, but are instead incorporated into mainstream policing as they frequently conduct warrant executions and proactive patrol (e.g., Alvaro, 2000; Kraska and Kappeler, 1997). Recently, when reviewing Canadian police services' operational files relating to the use of tactical resources, Roziere and Walby (2018, 2020) similarly concluded that tactical officers in Canada are frequently responding to 'routine' calls such as mental health calls, domestics, and noise complaints. Considering the assertion made by some that tactical teams are the embodiment of police militarization, due to their use of specialized equipment, military tactics, and aggressive appearance (Hill and Beger, 2009; Scobell and Hammitt, 1998), all of which are in line with Kraska's (2007) indicators of police militarization, their use during such calls is suggested to not only traumatize the public but also aggravate the situation, potentially resulting in the use of force (Roziere and Walby, 2018). Roziere and Walby (2018) condemn the use of tactical resources in this fashion and suggest this practice should be 'scaled back immediately' (p. 46).

While the approaches to research described above provide an initial understanding regarding the use of tactical resources, there are some notable limitations associated with this research that may potentially result in erroneous conclusions. Most problematic perhaps is using the original call type (e.g., robbery) to determine how tactical teams

are being used. For example, using this approach, Roziere and Walby (2017) argue that tactical units are being used for ‘routine’ calls, which they consider to be any call outside of the original intention of tactical teams (e.g., hostage taking, terrorist event). However, some of the calls that they describe as ‘routine’, such as domestic disputes, mental health calls, and warrant executions can pose serious risk to officers and are often the calls where officers are assaulted or killed (e.g., Statistics Canada, 2009; Tiesman et al., 2010). Considering only the original call type does not provide any insight into *why* tactical resources are being used and can lead researchers to assume that the decision was made inappropriately. However, call types that appear benign on the surface (e.g., a domestic disturbance) may include numerous factors that increase the level of risk to both the officers and the public and therefore warrant the response of officers with better training and equipment.¹ Potential risk factors include the history of the subject (e.g., known to be violent and resist arrest; Johnson, 2001), situational factors (e.g., intoxication; Covington et al., 2014; McLaughlin, 1992), and the presence of weapons (Bierie, 2017; Bierie et al., 2016).

We acknowledge that adopting a more nuanced approach to analyzing call for service data can be challenging due to the often limited data released by police services. However, adopting such an approach can provide greater insight as to the risk factors present in calls that tactical officers respond to. For example, when re-analyzing the data released to Roziere and Walby (2018) by Winnipeg Police Service ($n = 1019$), a weapon was believed to be present in 60% of calls ($n = 610$), the majority of which were firearms ($n = 460$, 45%; see Jenkins et al., 2020). Further, due to a non-significant statistical relationship being found between various types of ‘routine’ calls and the presence of weapons, call type was not a reliable indicator of risk, as weapons were just as likely to be found during mental health calls, traffic stops, domestics, and warrant executions (Jenkins et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest to us that previous conclusions that tactical officers in Canada are responding to ‘routine’ calls are potentially unfounded.

Perspectives on the use of tactical units

Despite the claims made in previous research that tactical teams are frequently responding to ‘routine’ calls, little research has examined public perceptions on the issue. A representative sample of the 2010 US Census ($n = 702$) was used to examine the extent to which members of the public support the use of tactical teams in various circumstances (e.g., hostage situations, serving drug warrants; Moule et al., 2018). Overall, participants endorsed tactical team deployments during events that have historically been in their mandate, such as hostage (95.3%) and terrorist events (94.4%), more often than during less traditional roles. For example, only two-thirds of participants supported the use of tactical teams during the arrest of armed and dangerous offenders (67.3%) or during civil unrest (64.3%). In contrast to the prevalence at which tactical units conduct search warrants (e.g., Roziere and Walby, 2018), only about 40% of the sample examined by Moule and his colleagues approved of tactical teams being used for this purpose. Interestingly, despite this general lack of support for the use of tactical teams for warrant executions, in the year following the riots in Ferguson, Missouri only 20% of the 324

police agencies examined by Phillips (2018) reported a reduction in the use of their tactical team for this purpose.

Considering the apparent discrepancies in police and public perspectives regarding the use of tactical teams for various functions, examining this issue from a variety of perspectives is likely beneficial. However, research on officer perceptions of police militarization and the use of tactical teams has been largely neglected. During observations of a tactical unit during training and operations, as well as interviews with members of the tactical team, Rojek (2005) found that tactical officers primarily respond to high-risk calls where there is an elevated risk of violence to both the officers and the public. Typically, these high-risk calls included information that the subject(s) was armed or would display violence (e.g., had used violence previously or had made threats). Tactical officers often considered these high-risk calls to be beyond the capabilities of patrol officers to safely resolve and, in contrast to claims that tactical teams are inherently aggressive, interviews with tactical officers have highlighted that the primary concern during a tactical unit response was the safety of all parties involved (Brimo, 2012; Rojek, 2005).

Tactical team members have described that the additional training, experience, and equipment they have (compared to patrol officers) facilitates safer outcomes when responding to high-risk calls (Brimo, 2012; Rojek, 2005). This perspective appears to have some merit considering that there is evidence that the additional training that tactical officers undergo increases their critical decision-making ability during rapid shoot/no shoot scenarios in which tactical officers are better able to discriminate between lethal (i.e., firearm) and benign (i.e., cellphone) objects (Vickers and Lewinski, 2012; Ward et al., 2011). Further, despite claims that tactical officers are hyper aggressive, when reviewing the operational records of 341 tactical units across the US, Klinger and Rojek (2008) came to the conclusion that tactical units successfully resolve high-risk incidents while using minimal force. Specifically, their data suggest that tactical officers used lethal force in less than 0.03% of calls, and there were over 450 incidents where the subject fired at police but the officers did not return fire.

The current study

There is no disputing that tactical units are frequently used in North America, however, there is little research that examines *when* and *why* they are being used. Previous research has relied on reports that are void of context and that rely on coarse metrics (i.e., call type) to determine when tactical resources are being used. Further, when these call types may be considered 'routine', researchers have inferred that this use is inappropriate as it is beyond the original scope of tactical teams (e.g., Kraska, 2001; Roziere and Walby, 2018). In order to gain an understanding of when and why tactical resources are used, it is essential that more substantive data are relied on. One useful source of data are interviews with officers, which may provide a better understanding of this issue than is provided by the very limited data used in previous research (e.g., Roziere and Walby, 2018, 2020). Indeed, this more in-depth approach appears essential given the discrepant conclusions between previous research that only considers the call type that tactical

officers respond to and approaches that have sought to capture the presence of risk factors within these calls (Jenkins *et al.*, 2020).

To provide a more informed understanding of the types of calls that tactical officers respond to, as well as the factors that are considered when deciding whether tactical resources should be dedicated to a given call, we sought the perspectives of police officers from three Canadian police services that were included in Roziere and Walby's original study (2018). The current study examines the following four research questions: (1) What types of incidents do tactical officers respond to?; (2) What, if any, factors are evaluated when considering whether tactical resources should be deployed?; (3) Why are tactical officers deployed to these calls?; and (4) Do participant responses to these questions vary depending upon the position they hold within their police service (i.e., patrol officer vs. patrol supervisor vs. tactical team member vs. tactical team supervisor)?

Method

Social constructivist paradigm

Considering our appreciation for the multiple realities that are shaped by sociocultural factors, and our understanding that any given officer's experience with tactical teams will be framed within this context, the current study adopts a social constructivist paradigm (Schwandt, 1994). Given our view that reality is socially constructed, the interview itself is fundamental to the understanding of participants' lived experiences with policing in general and the use of tactical teams more specifically (Ponterotto, 2005). Further, we take the perspective that our own subjectivities influence the research process. As such, we make these subjectivities explicit and used them as a reference point throughout the analytic process (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). Consistent with our philosophical underpinnings, the quality of our research should be assessed using Lincoln and Guba's (2000) 'parallel criteria' for social constructivists as well as Morrow's (2005) pan-paradigm criteria.

Briefly, Lincoln and Guba's (2000) criteria for evaluating qualitative research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility involves demonstrating that the research process was rigorous, which can be achieved by extensively engaging with participants, conducting a negative case analysis, engaging in reflexivity, and conducting member checks (i.e., making sure the researchers' interpretation is consistent with participant beliefs). Transferability involves providing enough information so that others can determine the extent to which the findings are applicable to their contexts. This can be achieved by providing information regarding the researchers themselves (i.e., a researcher-as-instrument statement), the context of the research, and the participants. Dependability involves demonstrating that the research process was completed systematically, which can be accomplished by keeping a detailed audit trail of the research process including data collection and analysis. Finally, confirmability involves ensuring that the findings represent the data rather than the assumptions or beliefs of the researchers (as much as possible). This is achieved by keeping an audit trail, being aware of one's subjectivity and influences, and engaging in member checks.

Morrow's (2005) pan-paradigm criteria involves social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation. Social validity means that the research conducted has value to society. Subjectivity and reflexivity involves being clear with one's self and others about the biases and assumptions the researchers hold and engaging in self-reflexive journaling throughout the research process. Adequacy of data means that the data is sufficient for providing insight to the research topic. Instead of relying on a specific number of participants, this is achieved by sampling participants who have the experience required to speak to the research topic and that enough participants are sampled so that no new information is provided (e.g., redundancy or saturation). Finally, adequacy of interpretation involves ensuring that the interpretation is grounded in the data and consequently there is a good balance of researcher interpretation and supporting quotations from participants.

Researcher-as-instrument statement

To allow readers to evaluate the extent to which the researchers' positions influences the research process, researchers adopting the social constructivist paradigm highlight their perspectives and positions relative to the research topic (Morrow, 2005). For the past 3 years, the two authors responsible for conducting and/or coding the interviews have worked with numerous Canadian police services engaging in various aspects of evidence-based policing research. Predominantly our work has focused on examining police use of force and de-escalation training, and determining the extent to which it adheres to the principles of adult learning. Throughout this process we have completed ride-alongs and observed police training from numerous police services. The current project was the first author's master's thesis, which was supervised by the third author. This was our first experience with the topic of police militarization and the use of tactical units.

The first and second author engaged in self-reflexive journaling for the purpose of understanding our biases, preconceptions, and expected outcomes as we undertook the task of conducting and coding the interviews. We then 'bracketed' our predispositions, not to eliminate them (which we ultimately do not believe is possible), but instead to understand how these biases may have influenced our research process (Morrow, 2005). Self-reflexive journals were incorporated into the analytic process and were used as a reference point to compare findings that we created (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005).

Participants

The Vancouver Police Department (VPD), Winnipeg Police Service (WPS), and Ottawa Police Service (OPS) permitted the first author to interview some of their officers for the purpose of completing this project. In total, the sample included 7 officers from OPS, 12 officers from WPS, and 9 officers from VPD (see Table 1). Considering the current study's focus on police officer perspectives regarding the use of tactical units, the current study had the exclusion criteria that interested participants must be active police officers within one of these police services. The officers were not compensated for participating in the study.

Table 1. Overview of participants position held and police service.

Service	Position held			
	Patrol officer	Patrol supervisor	Tactical officer	Tactical supervisor
OPS	2	1	2	2
WPS	5	1	3	3
VPD	3	3	1	2
Total	10	5	6	7

Table 2. Measures of central tendency for participant demographics.

Variable	Most common response
Age (years)	$M = 42$ ($SD = 6.65$)
Gender	Male ($n = 25$)
Ethnicity	Caucasian ($n = 27$)
Years service	$M = 16$ ($SD = 6.52$)
Rank	Constable ($n = 15$)
Military experience	No ($n = 25$)
Carbine trained	Yes ($n = 24$)
Tactical experience	Yes ($n = 16$)
Years on tactical unit	$M = 8$ ($SD = 4.87$)
Current position	Patrol officer ($n = 10$)

Across the three services, a total of 28 participants were interviewed. The interview length ranged from 15.25 minutes to 79 minutes, with an average of 44.50 minutes ($SD = 17.25$). The participants' age ranged from 27 to 54, with an average age of 42 years ($SD = 6.65$; see Table 2). More than half the sample were officers with tactical team experience (57%; $n = 16$), of which 13 were currently on a tactical team. All but four participants consented to being quoted. Participants who agreed to be quoted were asked to provide a pseudonym, which is used in place of their name.

Procedure

Convenience sampling was utilized as the officers in charge of the respective patrol and tactical shifts sent out emails advising their members of the study. This email included the purpose of the study, the steps to ensure participant anonymity, as well as our contact information. In two of the services, officers who were potentially interested in participating were asked to forward their contact information to their supervisor, which was then sent to the research team, while officers from the third service contacted the research team directly. Officers who were interested in participating were sent an informed consent form that further explained the purpose and requirements of the study. If officers were still interested in participating after reviewing the informed consent form, they were instructed to contact the researcher to schedule an interview. Snowball

sampling was also used in that participants were asked to forward contact information for the researchers to anyone who may be interested in participating. Approximately 12 officers were recruited through this method.

Analytical approach

Interviews were all conducted by the first author. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interviews were then thematically analyzed by the first and second author. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative research, which can provide a rich account of participant perspectives by highlighting the similarities and differences across and within participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step approach to thematic analysis.² First, we familiarized ourselves with the data through reviewing the transcripts numerous times and jotting down initial ideas (phase 1). Next, we systematically completed line-by-line coding to generate initial codes (phase 2). Independently from each other, the researchers developed *in vivo* codes (i.e., the codes used the language of the participants') to reduce the likelihood that we imposed our biases on the data (Seale, 1999). We then started to group our initial codes into potential themes and subthemes that facilitated our conceptualization of the relationships among the codes. At this point we came together to discuss our respective potential themes and subthemes that had developed and integrated our ideas to develop a more comprehensive working list of potential themes and subthemes (phase 3). We then determined the extent to which the coded extracts were reflective of their respective themes, as well as developed a 'thematic map' (a representation of the themes and how they relate to each other; see Figure 1). Next we sought to determine if our themes adequately reflected the broader dataset (phase 4). At this point, any missing coded extracts were added. Once we had agreed on the conceptualization of the thematic map and that it adequately reflected our data, together we began defining and naming the themes. This was done by examining the essence of each theme as indicated by their coded extracts (phase 5). At this point we conducted a negative case analysis in which we sought out cases where an officer's response was inconsistent with other participants' experiences. This was done to ensure that we were not simply applying our expectations to the data, as we actively sought out cases that contradicted the themes we had developed. The final stage includes the writing of the final report (phase 6).

The software program NVivo (QSR International, 2019) was used to facilitate the third through fifth stages of the analytic process, which was recursive in that the stages were not completed in a linear fashion (e.g., Braun and Clarke, 2006; Ely et al., 1997). For example, the process of refining and organizing themes occurred until the themes and subthemes were clearly articulated and summarized by a sentence or two (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

In an analytical journal we documented our decision-making process regarding methodological decisions as well as kept analytical memos regarding the themes as they were identified and refined. To ensure that the themes we developed were consistent with the participants' experiences, we conducted member checks. Specifically, one-third of the participants were emailed an overview of the themes and subthemes, and a brief

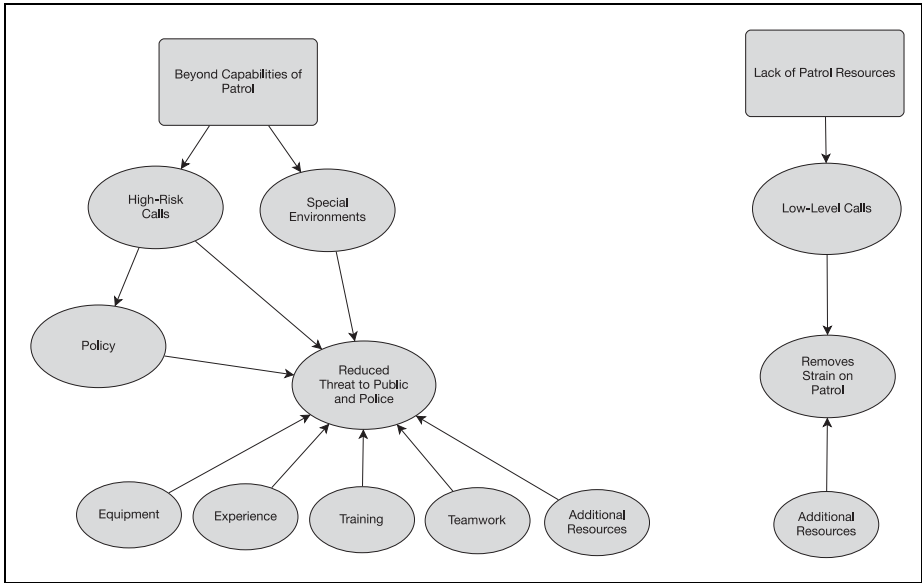


Figure 1. A thematic map describing the types of situations tactical team members respond to.

description of the relationship between the main themes, at which point they were asked to provide any feedback that they would like. Feedback was provided by seven participants, which was subsequently incorporated into the analysis.

Results

First, an overview of the research sites will be provided to give context to the experience of the officers. Then, we will provide an overview of the thematic analysis.

Unfortunately, the interviews of WPS and VPD members were unable to be conducted in person, so the officers’ description of the city in these sites were relied on. However, the interviews with OPS members provided similar portrayals of the issues facing police officers and the society they serve. The officers in all sites generally described the lack of resources within policing and the prevalence of substance use and mental health issues within the populations they serve, with particular mention being made of the rise of methamphetamine as a source of crime in society. The descriptions provided by the interviewees were very consistent with the media’s portrayal of the issues officers face in their respective cities (e.g., Crawford, 2018; MacLean, 2019; Tumilty, 2019). Considering that officers are often guarded and wary of outsiders, throughout the interview process the interviewer was surprised by the extent to which they were open regarding their perceptions of the issues facing police officers generally and tactical units specifically.

Saturation was achieved after approximately 10 interviews. With respect to the use of tactical officers in the three services, there were two overarching themes identified in the interview responses. Each theme describes the types of calls that tactical team members

respond to. The first theme includes *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally*, which is comprised of *high-risk calls* and *special environments* (see Figure 1). For some *high-risk calls*, *policy* mandated a tactical team response. However, regardless of the type of incident, the purpose of the tactical team member response was a *reduced threat to officer and public safety*. This reduction in threat was facilitated through various means (i.e., additional *resources, equipment, training, experience, and teamwork*).

The second circumstance that leads to tactical team members responding to calls in the three services is when there is a *lack of patrol resources*. During such calls, tactical team members *assist patrol with low-level calls*, with the purpose of *removing the strain on patrol*. Overall, this process is completed by the increase in *additional resources* that the tactical team members provide. Each of these overarching themes and their sub-themes will be discussed in more detail below.

Prior to elaborating on the situations that tactical team members respond to, it is important to distinguish between tactical team deployments and calls in which a handful of tactical team members respond to supplement patrol. Josh, a patrol supervisor with previous tactical experience, highlighted this nicely in stating:

Just because [tactical members] shows up at certain calls to assist, to me, it doesn't mean it's a [tactical team] deployment. To me, a [tactical team] deployment is either when, you know? You've got that big call and they are coming in and they are going, yes, you know what? We've got it. Okay. You guys got it. They are taking over the call. They've got the inner perimeter. My job as an NCO now is to control the outer perimeter. To me, that's a [tactical] call. Just because two or four [tactical members] show up at certain calls doesn't mean it's a [tactical] deployment. They're just assisting. It's when it's the big, protracted incidents that occur. The suicidal ones, where they are gearing up and they are swinging off a balcony. Or they're swinging off, tied onto a vehicle. And they are grabbing a guy off the railing. Yes, those are [tactical team] calls.

Relatedly, numerous tactical officers emphasized that their uniform and equipment vary as a function of their duties. Therefore, the appearance of tactical officers during a warrant execution is different than when they are responding to other calls for service. Specifically, one tactical member stated 'When we engage in patrol like activities, we're not wearing the gear that you see tactical teams wearing on TV. So, we're basically dressed the same as patrol, except we're in a different colour' (Vincent).

Calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally

Approximately half ($n = 15$) of participants explicitly mentioned that tactical team members attend *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally*. This sentiment was shared by patrol and tactical officers. For example, Brock, a tactical officer stated, 'Our mandate is to attend critical incidents, which can be defined as any call that is of such a nature that it would be beyond the perceived capability of the patrol units to resolve safely'. Relatedly, one patrol officer explained, 'Typically, that's basically that you're doing one thing at a call, and then something changes. And now it's getting out of

patrol's wheelhouse of doing stuff. This is getting above our skillset, and maybe we need something else' (Clarky). Calls described to be outside the abilities for patrol to safely resolve fall into either *high-risk calls* or incidents unfolding in a *special environment*.

High-risk calls. Nearly all officers ($n = 25$) explicitly mentioned that tactical team members respond to *high-risk calls*. Patrol and tactical officers described these types of calls in a similar manner. A patrol officer described the nature of these high-risk calls when he says,

But my experience of it, they're most likely or most often they're high-risk situations where there's potential of an armed suspect or there's a weapon involved that could pose either grievous bodily harm to any member of the public or to a police officer or someone else. So they usually respond to, it could be high-risk scenarios where there's a barricaded suspect, there could be active shooter situations. Anything that involves an elevated level of I guess you could say tactical response by police (J.J. Andersen).

Similarly, Rover, a tactical officer, described the increased level of risk and specifically highlights the presence of weapons:

Anything with a greater risk to the public or the members, uh we'll attend to. So anything with a higher level of, higher priority call so largely things involving, mostly we'll go to any sort of firearms calls but anything that involves weapons and stuff is something that [we] can respond to.

As indicated in the quotes above, there are numerous factors that indicate the call is *high-risk*. During the coding process, the two authors that coded the interviews came to realize that their experience with police use of force and de-escalation training sensitized us to the manner in which participants described the risk-assessment process that officers complete during a call. Therefore, our analytic process did not focus on the call type (e.g., domestic, mental health call) but instead the factors within the call that may necessitate assistance from tactical team members. Each of the risk factors will be described briefly below.

Weapons known or believed to be present. The belief that weapons are present was the most commonly discussed indication the call was high-risk ($n = 27$), and therefore a response from tactical officers was beneficial. When describing the types of calls tactical members respond to, a patrol officer, Jamie, explained 'Um, generally, calls with weapons whether it be edged weapons such as knives or machetes or stuff like that to firearms'. A patrol supervisor reiterated this point when stating, 'if there's any mention of a weapon, like especially a firearm, not necessarily, let's say, a knife or anything like that, but specifically a firearm or explosive, that's an automatic' (Sgt. Rally).

Violent individuals. Another potential risk factor discussed ($n = 17$) was violent individuals. This may include individuals who historically or are currently exhibiting violence. Jamie summarized this nicely:

If there are weapons involved or a historical, if the subject has a history of using weapons. If that information is available to us, whether it be firearms or edged weapons. If there, even say any known subjects. We'll just say if their large in size maybe, maybe their 6 foot-five and 280 pound male that has been known to fight with police in the past, like those are something that we may ask for tac[tical]. It really depends on the information, the call history.

Threats to others. Information that the subject had made threats to the safety of others was also discussed by participants regardless of their role ($n = 19$). Sgt. Rally, a patrol supervisor, discussed how he would rely on the tactical unit in situations where an individual's safety was compromised:

So, for me, again, if there's something involving a weapon that we know about, if there's something involving a person, and their safety is at risk, in terms of someone holding them or someone hurting them, and they're in an unknown situation, so they're in a house, they're in somewhere that involves having our guys and girls physically enter a dwelling, house or a location to secure them, so that would be automatically [the tactical team] for me.

Threats to self. The final element that indicated a call was high-risk was a subject's threats to their own safety. Generally, all officers ($n = 19$) described these events in the same manner. However, members on a tactical team also described potential suicide by cop situations. When discussing *threats to self*, one tactical supervisor noted:

We've actually even started being dispatched to suicide calls, like threats of suicide, someone is armed with a gun. We'll go to that. So, those are typically some of the mental health calls that we'll be attending, usually if they're armed and if they've locked themselves in a room or locked themselves. We'll go to either assist or just take over a call and start dealing with it in the appropriate fashion (RT).

Robert Lowe, another tactical supervisor, succinctly highlighted the presence of a suicidal individual, as well as potential suicide by cop situations:

So, again, there are hundreds of [Mental Health Apprehensions], so a simple [Apprehension] does not involve tactical. There's no red flag, there's no, oh, we better give tactical a heads up. So, it's only in those cases where there's been a history of violence or if there's been news that the person's acquired a weapon to hurt themselves. Or, perhaps, they've confided to somebody that they're going to try to be shot by police officers or go out in a blaze of glory or whatever, then that sort of thing, they [referring to patrol] would come to tactical and say, this is our situation.

Policy. A handful of officers ($n = 9$) mentioned that their organizational *policy* necessitates a tactical team response, the majority of which ($n = 6$) were tactical officers. Participants described three situations where *policy* indicated that when feasible, the tactical team was necessary in responding to the incident. These included *barricaded*

individuals, hostage takings, and warrant executions. For example, Peyton, who served as an Incident Commander, explained the following:

So [the tactical team] obviously, in the City of [Location], the policy is that they attend any high-risk warrant. So this is any type of warrant that will involve potential loss of evidence, a dangerous circumstance, weapons present, high-risk persons for example.

Similarly, a tactical officer explained the policy for his police service:

So there's a policy that says that unless it's exigent, any door that needs to be breached, any forced entry they call it that needs to be happening throughout [Location], the tactical team will do it, unless it's exigent or unless it's deemed so safe that we're not really required. So, any warrants for drugs, disposable evidence, stuff that we may lose or dangerous people, we'll do it (Harry).

Barricaded individuals. Most commonly ($n = 24$) participants explained that tactical teams are required when individuals barricade themselves. Peyton summarized this nicely when she stated:

So generally, our policy does state that if you have a barricaded person with a firearm it actually says, but for us we generally . . . Any time if I get a call and it's a situation of a barricaded person with any type of weapon at all, I am going to engage the tactical team and the negotiator.

Hostage takings. Due to their similarity, *hostage takings* and *barricaded individuals* both require a tactical team response. Doug, a patrol officer with previous tactical team experience noted the primary functions of tactical teams when he said, 'definitely the meat and potatoes of it is the hostage rescue and barricades, the active deadly threats and stuff'.

Warrant executions. The final situation where policy mandated a tactical team response were *warrant executions* ($n = 27$). When referring to the tactical team, one patrol officer explained that, 'They're utilised a lot by special teams for warrant entries and CDSA [Controlled Drugs and Substances Act] search warrants and things like that. I know they're used very frequently like that' (Chris). Gus, another patrol officer, also described the use of tactical teams during *warrant executions* as well as the presence of risk factors during these calls:

But I know the tactical team is used for search warrants that other units have written. And a lot of times with search warrants, and especially with the meth trade now, a lot of these guys are armed with zip guns and homemade guns and stolen guns. So, a lot of the time, the tactical teams will be used for those types of situations but it's not as per se, me calling them out. It's a pre-set event that okay, today we're doing the search warrant, the tactical team will assist with this.

While all participants described warrants in a similar manner, members who had tactical team experience often provided more detailed information regarding when they would conduct warrants and the factors that made the *warrant execution* a *high-risk* situation.

Special environments. The second component of *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* included those unfolding in *special environments*. This terminology was exclusively used by tactical team members ($n = 3$), however numerous officers described various calls that fall under this category. One tactical team member described these *special environments* as:

Well, it runs the gamut from if it's one of those special environment calls, if it's a jumper on a building or a bridge, we have the training, the equipment to be able to operate in those special environments—again, be they high angle, marine, SCBA . . . self-contained breathing apparatus, would be required, like a drug lab or a meth lab, something like that . . . Those are capabilities that patrol is not trained in and does not have the capabilities to safely respond to (SB).

Bomb calls. One of the *special environments* discussed were *bomb calls*. Most of the seven officers who mentioned this had tactical experience or knew members of the team. SB, a tactical officer, highlighted why tactical team members are used during *bomb calls*:

We have breachers, explosive breachers, and explosive disposal unit members attached to our team as well, so any kind of bomb call or bomb threat, suspicious package, that kind of thing, as well as any kind of call that is deemed to be outside of the . . . Deemed to be outside the capabilities of being handled by just your general patrol members.

Overwatch. Of the six officers who mentioned the use of tactical teams for the *overwatch* of large public events, the majority had tactical team experience. One supervisor of a tactical team described *overwatch* as the following:

. . . but we do the overwatch too. We have crowd operations, they're snipers, but mostly what they're doing is they're just . . . They can safely go up on top of the buildings and have the optics, binoculars, and spotting scopes, to see what's going on in the crowd . . . they identify suspicious activity, anything that may turn an otherwise peaceful demonstration or gathering violent or dangerous and provide that information to officers on the ground (Robert Lowe).

VIP and witness protection. The use of tactical officers for *VIP and witness protection* was only mentioned by officers with tactical team experience ($n = 4$). While this is not a common use of the tactical team, it does appear to be an increasing demand on tactical units. Harry, a tactical team member, gave an example of when witness protection is used:

We've had in the last few years high profile trials where threats were made, or gang related and guns and this and that. We were asked to do security on the trials because they were worried about escape, they were worried about a shootout at the courthouse. So, sometimes we will be assigned to a trial for three to four months at a time, so we can do witness protection. So in the last I'd say four to five years it's been really demanding.

High angle calls. The final, and most commonly mentioned ($n = 14$), element of *special environments* that members of tactical teams respond to are *high angle calls*. While *high angle calls* include individuals barricaded on a balcony, these calls were most often discussed in conjunction with individuals who were threatening to jump from elevated locations such as bridges or parkades. Interestingly, it was predominantly tactical team members and patrol supervisors who mentioned *high angle calls*. When discussing an individual who is considering jumping from a bridge, one patrol supervisor remarked:

And [the tactical team] is there because they've got the ability to tie off and if they have to go grab this guy, they can tie into their trucks and rope off and they've got it all trained in practice that, if required, the truck rolls up and they go and run and grab the guy, and if they end up going over with the person, there's someone controlling the ropes to make sure they don't go all the way down, right? (Kev).

Reduced threat to officer and public safety. Regardless of the reason for the response from tactical team members (e.g., due to *policy*), nearly all ($n = 27$) officers explained that the purpose of their involvement resulted in *reduced threat to officer and public safety*. When discussing this relationship, Rex, a tactical team member, explained that:

Our primary objective is just resolving the situation in a safe manner that nobody gets hurt, the subjects, or us. That's the primary objective. And we're not driven by the queue [of calls for service]. There's no pressure on us to resolve this fast so you can get to the next call. That's one of the benefits of us attending those calls.

The reduction in threat to both officers and the public was described to be facilitated through various avenues, which will be discussed below.

Additional resources. Most participants ($n = 19$) explained that the response from tactical team members provided *additional resources* to the call. Primarily, these resources were an increase in the number of officers on scene. For example, a patrol officer noted that during a *high-risk call*, 'Whenever you have more numbers, the safer someone feels. So having their presence there, yes, it does help. But doesn't matter if their tactical, as a police officer, you've got to be thinking safety at all times'.

These thoughts were mirrored by patrol supervisors when describing their appraisal of a call. For example, Josh noted:

Because a lot of these things can happen at bad times. It's like great, now I have got two, four, six extra bodies that are coming here. You know? Thank god. Because now, I am not worrying about resources, because I know now that they're coming, we're probably going to end up having a tactical negotiator as well.

Teamwork. The benefit of *teamwork* between tactical unit members was also described to be a factor that *reduced the threat to officer and public safety*. The majority of the 10 officers who mentioned *teamwork* were tactical team members. Often these officers provided more in-depth answers as to how the relationship between officers resulted in safer outcomes. Vincent, for example, explained how prior to making an entry into a residence, members of the team were assigned their respective role to optimize safety for all parties involved:

It's the fact that we operate as a team, the fact that we have access to a lot more equipment, and the fact that we're better trained. So, a good example of that is if a guy is barricaded in a house with a knife, we go in there. Prior to going in, I'll designate a less-lethal guy. We can have an ARWEN, which shoots the big rubber bullets, a Taser guy, so a guy with a CEW who can taze. We can have a shield, so that if we get close enough we can use it to pin a person. We'll have obviously our lethal cover, but we'll go in as a team.

Equipment. All officers ($n = 28$) suggested that the additional *equipment* provided to tactical team members assisted in the reduced threats on scene. The additional *equipment* that was described to be responsible for the increased safety included higher level of protection (e.g., shields, armored vehicles), less-lethal options (e.g., ARWEN), and tools allowing for access to high angle locations (e.g., rappel gear). One tactical supervisor summarized the sentiments of the participants' in the following quote:

Again, like I said before, we have better and more less-lethal options to deal with persons, rather than just defaulting to, you either have a Taser or a firearm type of thing, or a fist fight. And along with that, we have extra tools. We have cameras, shields. A lot of stuff that we can use to mitigate risk for not only officers involved, but also subjects as well. So, I think that in general it's a benefit (Randy).

Experience. Most officers ($n = 17$) provided explanations that tactical officers may increase the safety for the officers and the public due to their elevated levels of *experience*. One patrol officer spoke to the increased experience of tactical team members over patrol when she stated, 'Um, again [the call is] safer because they have the skills and qualifications to handle things that us frontline people might not know how to handle' (Skylar). Supporting this, one tactical supervisor officer explained:

We are sadly fairly busy in [Location] typically, so we have a lot of practical and lived experience to draw on. Where over the hundreds and hundreds of general patrol officers, they might only experience that once or twice, and they won't necessarily come in as a cohesive group (Randy).

Training. Nearly all ($n = 27$) participants described how the additional *training* provided to tactical team members increased the safety at the scene. Generally, all officers described this in a similar manner, however members with tactical experience specifically mentioned some additional factors such as specialty tactics, negotiator training, and

being provided more opportunities to train than patrol officers. In the view of one officer, the specialized *training* provided tactical officers with additional ways to problem solve. She stated, 'In patrol, we might be just trying to get it resolved as quick as we can, whereas [the tactical team], because of their additional training, they'll maybe have some other ideas for how to make it work' (Alfie).

When describing an incident where officers were shot when conducting a search warrant, another officer on a tactical team noted that the lack of specialized *training* likely contributed to the injuries sustained by the officers:

Well, there's a, I mean when I told you about [the incident]. I mean that's a prime example of what happens when you don't have a trained tactical team responding to those warrant services. I'd say if you didn't have a tac[tical] team, there would be . . . well there'd be a lot more hurt cops out there in our city for sure (Xavier).

Calls lacking patrol resources

While not the primary duties of tactical team members, most officers ($n = 19$) described tactical members assisting on calls that lacked patrol resources. Gus, a patrol officer, described one situation in which members of a tactical team would assist him:

And it all depends too, if we get a call of violence like a domestic, and there's one GP unit going, which is a general patrol unit, and they're looking for back up, and a tactical unit is on the road and they're patrolling as a general patrol officer. They would attend to the call with us. They just give us some back up. But they're not in what you would call Level III body armour, like hard plates and helmets and that. It's just they're wearing their patrol vests and not strapped with carbines or anything. They're like patrol officers in a grey uniform.

A patrol officer with previous tactical experience suggested that members of the tactical team responding to *calls lacking patrol resources* may not only benefit the officers, but also the public as well:

They [referring to patrol] get tied down, they get bogged down with calls. Johnny, regular taxpayer, he's just been broken into. Shouldn't have to wait for a couple of days for someone to come and take his break and enter in his house. So, if you can have members of the [tactical] team that are just out there just helping, just general patrol calls. They still have to be available for that big priority call that comes in. But there's a lot of stuff out there that they can help with, to essentially just help cut down the workload and just have that faster turnover of members being available to go and deal with calls. If they can run around and put out small fires, it leaves patrol more available to come and take your call (Doug).

Participants often suggested the purpose of tactical team members responding to these calls for service was to help *remove the strain on patrol* by providing *additional resources*. These themes will be described below.

Removes strain on general patrol. A handful of officers ($n = 7$) explicitly stated that the purpose of tactical officers responding to *calls lacking patrol resources* was to *remove*

strain on general patrol. Interestingly, this theme was only present in officers who had tactical experience. For example, Josh, who was previously on the tactical team, highlighted his experience with tactical members as a patrol supervisor:

But it is nice to have the extra help. Because quite often, recently, we've had upwards of 80 to 120 calls, holding in our district for service, and no one to go to these calls. Now, a lot of them are report-type calls. But when the in-progress stuff starts coming in, we just get bogged down. So, it is nice when you hear them come on the air, saying, hey, you know what? We're here. We're assisting. Or saying, we got this call. It's nice to hear.

Additional resources. The purpose of tactical team members responding to *calls lacking patrol resources* was often ($n = 16$) described as providing *additional resources*. The majority of officers who mentioned this had tactical experience. Keith, a patrol officer, succinctly described the consequence of these *additional resources*: 'No it's just the benefits obviously, there's less calls waiting and we can help more people'. The use of tactical officers to help provide *additional resources* to patrol is well captured in the following statement by a tactical supervisor:

However, in our current environment, and this is across Canada, staffing levels are low enough and demand for a regular patrol response is high enough that we're always looking for ways to support our frontline. And that means that when canine officers are out, they're handling thousands of calls a year that have nothing to do with, general-purpose dogs, or drug dogs, or tracking dogs, they're just supporting patrol because they're short, and they have too much work to do. And that's the same with tactical (Robert Lowe).

Discussion

Despite the growing academic attention focused on the use of tactical units, the perspective of police officers has largely been neglected (Brimo, 2012; Phillips, 2018). Following the call to provide qualitative data in order to better interpret quantitative findings (Bieler, 2016; den Heyer, 2014), the current study sought to provide context to the claims made by Roziere and Walby (2018) by gaining an understanding of officer perspectives from three Canadian police services about the types of incidents tactical officers respond to, the factors considered in determining whether a tactical officer response is necessary, and the reason for the response from tactical team members.

We found that tactical team members respond to two overarching types of incidents, including *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally*, as well as *calls lacking patrol resources* (Research Question 1). Within calls that are perceived to be *beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* there are numerous factors that potentially necessitate a response from tactical officers (Research Question 2). For example, the call may be unfolding in a *special environment* such as high angle calls. Additionally, members of tactical teams were described as responding to *high-risk calls*, often mandated by *policy* (e.g., regarding warrant executions). *High-risk calls* are defined as any situation where there is a greater than normal risk to the public, the subject, or the officers, and are indicated by various risk factors including the presence

of weapons, an indication of violent individuals, and threats. When officers discussed tactical team members assisting in *calls lacking patrol resources*, this was often for the purpose of *removing strain on patrol* such that there would be a delay in police response if the tactical officers did not assist.

The reason for the response from tactical team members varies by the type of call (Research Question 3). Specifically, during *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* officers noted the tactical members were required for a *reduced threat to officer and public safety*, which was facilitated primarily through the additional training, equipment, and experience the tactical officers have over patrol officers. Consistent with our sample, previous interviews with tactical officers revealed that this increased safety is provided by the additional training, equipment, experience, and teamwork that tactical team members have over patrol officers (Brimo, 2012; Rojek, 2005).

Regarding tactical team member responses to *calls lacking patrol resources*, this assistance was thought to *remove strain on general patrol* by providing *additional resources* when they were scarce. Most commonly this was when patrol officers were requiring backup during a call or when patrol officers were currently unable to respond. Due to the high volume of calls for service, the response times during in-progress calls are often considerable (e.g., Carruthers, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2018; St-Onge, 2018). In Winnipeg for example, more than an hour typically passes before patrol officers are able to respond to calls deemed 'urgent', including domestics (Griffiths and Pollard, 2013). Therefore, despite contentious debates surrounding tactical team members responding to domestics (e.g., Roziere and Walby, 2018), the potential for a quicker police response to such calls is a clear example of when additional police resources, in the form of tactical officers, may be beneficial to not only the police service, but also the public. Furthermore, it is important not to conflate these instances with tactical unit deployments where officers are wearing the necessary equipment for responding to certain high-risk calls (e.g., helmets, carbines, extra body armor, etc.), but instead a handful of police officers in a different colored uniform. This distinction was highlighted by numerous officers in our sample.

Considering the limited variation in participant responses, it appears that the position held by the participant minimally influences the lens through which officers view tactical teams (Research Question 4). In fact, despite searching for officers with beliefs contrary to those presented, we were unable to find any in regard to the research questions being examined. It is possible that, due to the training received by police officers, all members of a police service are generally aware of the circumstances that tactical team members respond to and the factors considered when deciding if officers should request members of specialized teams.

While participants spoke about the various issues in a similar manner, officers with tactical experience often provided more depth to their answers (e.g., the factors that make a warrant execution *high-risk*) and mentioned situations that tactical team members respond to that patrol officers did not speak to (e.g., *VIP and witness protection*). This trend is not surprising considering that officers with tactical experience obviously have a more nuanced understanding of the types of calls they respond to and various factors that result in the call being *beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally*. Interestingly, patrol supervisors who are often responsible for requesting the assistance

of tactical officers during *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* appear to have the next best understanding of situations where tactical officers are valuable resources. For example, patrol supervisors discussed how tactical team members would be used during *high angle calls* at a greater frequency than patrol officers.

Limitations

While this study provides an initial understanding of officer perspectives regarding the use of tactical team members, the study is not without limitations. Given the nature of the population being examined, the use of gatekeepers was required to gain access to the sample of officers. Therefore, this somewhat limited our ability to use diverse recruitment methods which potentially limits the sample of officers. Considering this, it is possible that the officers interviewed may be more supportive of tactical units than the typical officer; however, considering that many of the officers acknowledged challenges associated with the use of tactical resources that are beyond the scope of the current paper (e.g., the relationship between patrol and tactical officers), the concern that these participants were providing a one-sided account is somewhat mitigated. Regardless, future research should examine the perceptions of tactical teams from officers with additional diverse experiences (e.g., investigators, members of crisis teams, negotiators, etc.), as well as officers who work in more rural areas where tactical units are less accessible.

Additionally, other stakeholders impacted by tactical units in Canada (e.g., citizens that come into contact with tactical team members, government officials who fund policing, etc.) are likely to have different views than the sampled officers. For example, Turner and Fox (2017) found that members of Congress were significantly less supportive of the use of military equipment and tactical units than officers and police executives. Therefore, although police officers represent one critical voice in the dialogue concerning the use of tactical teams in Canadian society, there are many other voices that should be considered in future research. Relatedly, research should also explore the reasons why government officials and the public seem to support the use of tactical teams to a lesser extent than police officers.

Implications

Considering the limited attempts that have been made to gain an understanding of police officer perspectives regarding the use of tactical units (e.g., Phillips, 2018; Rojek, 2005), particularly within the Canadian context, this project has both practical and theoretical implications. For example, from a practical perspective, our findings contradict the assertion that the use of tactical officers in 'routine' calls for service and warrant executions are evidence of 'failed public policy' (Roziere and Walby, 2018: 46), but appear instead to be an attempt to optimize limited policing resources in order to meet the increasing demand of calls for service (e.g., Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014). In fact, the use of tactical officers may not only increase the safety for all parties involved, but also bolster limited policing resources during times of scarcity. Taken together, the use of tactical team members during both *calls beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* and *calls lacking patrol resources* appears to be a prudent utilization of these

specialized officers (e.g., Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014). That being said, despite the value of tactical officers augmenting limited patrol resources, their primary mandate is still responding to critical incidents. Therefore, these officers ‘cannot be tied [up] on lengthy, complex investigations or incidents requiring long police reports because they need to remain available to provide tactical support to patrol units’ (Demers et al., 2007: 1030). Future research should conduct a cost/benefit analysis of tactical officers responding to calls outside of critical incidents as it relates to the effective and efficient use of police resources. It would also be useful to examine how this use of police tactical units is perceived by the public.

Theoretically, our findings contribute to the body of existing research examining the use of tactical resources, and the notion that they are inherently aggressive. Interestingly, there was a convergence between the risk factors identified in the relevant literature (e.g., Bierie et al., 2016), the operational data analyzed in Jenkins et al., (2020), and those discussed during the interviews reported on here. Operational data in Jenkins et al., (2020) was coded for the presence of weapons, threats made to one’s self or others, and a history of violence. During the interviews in the current study we came to realize that indications a call was potentially *beyond the capabilities of patrol to resolve optimally* included *weapons known or believed to be on scene, threats to self, threats to others, and violent individuals*. Considering the same factors were highlighted across numerous data sources (e.g., police data, interviews, literature review), and were consistent with our own knowledge of the risk-assessment process, we can be reasonably confident these factors are critical in determining whether a response from tactical team members may be beneficial. Future research should therefore continue to examine the presence of these risk factors in order to provide context surrounding the use of tactical resources. Additionally, research should continue to consider diverse perspectives and use rich data sources in order to allow for a better understanding of the use of tactical teams and to determine whether the theoretical assertions regarding the threat posed by tactical teams and police militarization more generally are warranted.

Conclusion

Despite very limited empirical data, there have been serious concerns raised regarding the use of police tactical teams in Canada (e.g., Roziere and Walby, 2018). The current study sought to contribute to the dialogue surrounding the use of tactical resources by Canadian police services by providing the perspective of police officers. The experiences of the officers interviewed, in combination with the available empirical research, not only calls into question the validity of concerns that tactical teams are responding to ‘routine’ calls, but also the belief that their use increases the level of risk to the public. Future research should continue to conduct higher quality examinations on this controversial use of police resources in order to facilitate more informed discussions and the development of evidence-based public policy.

Acknowledgement

We are indebted to the officers who volunteered their time to share their experiences with us. Without their contribution, this paper would not have been possible.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. In addition to the equipment that patrol officers have access to (i.e., carbine, pistol, oleoresin capsicum spray, conducted energy weapon, baton), tactical officers also generally have access to various less-lethal tools (e.g., ARWEN launcher, distractionary devices), protective equipment (e.g., hard body armor, armored vehicles), and equipment that allows them to access environments which would otherwise be restricted (e.g., breaching tools, repelling gear).
2. A thematic analysis was originally conducted by the first author on 23 of the interviews for his Master's thesis. However, after taking a course in qualitative research methods the decision was made to re-analyze the data given our better understanding of qualitative methods and our philosophy of science. An additional five officers were interviewed, and the thematic analysis presented in the current study was conducted on all 28 interviews.

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