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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Why are tactical officers responding to 'routine' calls? Using police data to examine the presence of risk factors during seemingly low risk incidents

Bryce Jenkins ⬥, Tori Semple ⬥ and Craig Bennell ⬥

Department of Psychology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

**ABSTRACT**

Previous research has suggested that tactical officers across North America commonly respond to calls characterized as 'routine,' which has raised significant concerns. However, most of this research relies on de-contextualized data, such as the broad call category (e.g., domestic), to ascertain the nature of the incidents that receive a response from tactical officers. To provide a more nuanced understanding of these incidents, we were provided access to one year's worth of operational data from the Winnipeg Police Service and conducted a content analysis on incidents that received a response from tactical officers ($n = 1652$). Overall, we found that the primary role of tactical officers was responding to high-risk calls in which violence ($n = 599$) and weapons ($n = 820$) were reported. Furthermore, our findings highlight that the initial call type is not a reliable indicator of the risk posed to public or officer safety.

Officers on tactical teams, commonly referred to as Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), receive specialized training and equipment in order to minimize the risk posed to public and officer safety (Mijares & McCarthy, 2020). The scope of incidents that tactical officers commonly respond to appears to have expanded over time. Specifically, tactical officers are no longer reserved for high severity/low frequency events like hostage takings; they now frequently respond to incidents that some researchers suggest are low risk and fall outside the original purview of tactical officers (e.g., mental health calls, search warrants; Kraska, 2007, 2021; Roziere & Walby, 2020). Notwithstanding these concerns, our understanding of the nature of incidents that tactical officers respond to is limited to broad call classifications (e.g., Domestic Dispute), which have been used by previous researchers to examine these issues (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2018). The current study presents a more nuanced analysis of data related to this topic using call information that better captures relevant contextual details, such as risk factors associated with calls. This may help explain why seemingly 'routine' calls are being responded to by tactical officers.

## Literature review

### Concerns regarding tactical officers

A key concern raised by researchers about the use of tactical officers relates to the concept of police militarization. While there is a lack of consensus regarding how police militarization should be defined (e.g., Rantatalo, 2012a), researchers typically adopt Kraska's (2007) four indicators as

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proxies for police militarization: (1) material (e.g., the use of certain equipment and technology), (2) cultural (e.g., appearance and values), (3) organizational (e.g., units of highly trained officers), and (4) operational (e.g., the adoption of military tactics). Due to similarities between police tactical teams and military special forces, in terms of tactics and equipment used, some consider tactical officers to be the embodiment of militarized policing. Arguments have been made that this distorts an officer's mentality as they start to view members of the public as enemy combatants in a war zone (Kraska, 2007, 2018). This is thought to result in officers becoming hyperaggressive (e.g., more reliant on using force when interacting with members of the public; Kraska, 2018, 2021).

Such concerns are exacerbated (for some) when one considers the expanded scope of tactical officers, in that they now appear to be frequently used during incidents that are perceived to be low risk (Alvaro, 2000). In fact, some researchers suggest that tactical officers are frequently responding to 'routine' incidents such as warrants, domestic disturbances, and mental health crises which, given their supposed hyperaggressive nature, places members of the public at increased risk of harm (Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). Based on these assumptions, some authors have recently suggested that the use of tactical resources for 'routine' incidents 'should be declared failed public policy and scaled back immediately' (Roziere & Walby, 2018, p. 46).

The majority of such research to date has relied on broad call categories (e.g., 'Domestic Dispute') to ascertain the nature of incidents that tactical officers are involved in (Bieler, 2016; Koslicki, 2017; Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). Despite the value of this research in generating an initial understanding of the use of tactical resources, these studies typically provide very limited context about the nature of the situations that tactical officers are responding to. One particular concern is that broad call classifications may mask the presence of risk factors such as information that weapons may be present. The masking of risk factors may facilitate the characterization of common call types as low risk or 'routine,' resulting in erroneous conclusions about the risk posed within the call and the appropriateness of a tactical officer response.

### Capturing the police perspective on the use of tactical officers

Considering the limitations of decontextualized call for service data, two approaches have been taken to develop a better understanding of the incidents that receive a response from tactical officers. The first approach involves interviews with police officers to gain their perspective on the use of tactical officers. Such research has been conducted for years (e.g., Alvaro, 2000; Brimo, 2012, Rantatalo, 2012b; Rojek, 2005), and the interviews generally suggest that the perceived purpose of a tactical response is to reduce the threat to public and officer safety through the use of specialized equipment, experience, training, tactics, team cohesion, and the provision of additional resources.

One recent example of this approach involved interviews with officers from three Canadian police services (Jenkins et al., 2021a). Interviewees in this study indicated that tactical officers primarily respond to calls that are beyond the capabilities of patrol officers. More specifically, participants noted that the primary role of tactical officers was to respond to calls that are high-risk in nature or unfolding in a special environment. Indicators that a call was high-risk included the belief that weapons were present and an individual making threats to their own or others' safety, whereas special environments were most commonly high angle calls where rappelling equipment is required to access an individual (e.g., someone considering self-harm on a bridge). Beyond those two sets of circumstances, participants also highlighted the fact that tactical resources in their services could also be deployed due to organizational policy (where a tactical response is *required* by the organization), such as when officers encounter an armed and barricaded individual, a hostage taking, or need to conduct a search warrant.

These types of interviews have also made clear that how tactical officers are used can vary across agencies. For example, tactical officers can respond as a full team (e.g., during a search warrant) or as pairs of officers depending on the nature of the incident, as well as the availability of tactical personnel (Jenkins et al., 2021a). Within Canada, for instance, agencies that are responsible for large

jurisdictions (e.g., the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) tend to deploy their tactical officers as full teams only. However, when full-team deployments are not required, some municipal police services in Canada have their tactical officers break into pairs to respond to low-risk calls, which eases the strain on patrol and increases the agency's ability to respond to general calls for service more quickly (Alvaro, 2000; Cyr et al., 2020).

While the number of tactical officers responding to a call can vary as a function of the nature of the call, so too does the equipment worn by tactical personnel. In Canada, officer attire can range from grey patrol uniforms to full tactical gear (e.g., helmet, hard body armour, carbine; Blaskovits et al., 2022; Jenkins et al., 2021a). One would likely see officers in the grey patrol uniform in cases where they are assisting with low-risk calls for service when patrol officers are not available or when additional units are required. In contrast, when responding to calls that are high-risk due to the presence of various risk factors (e.g., a belief that firearms are involved), tactical officers may wear full tactical gear.

### Considering the context of calls that receive a tactical officer response

The second approach used by some researchers to overcome the limitations of relying solely on decontextualized call types to determine what sorts of calls tactical officers respond to involves detailed examinations of contextual call information. A re-analysis of the Winnipeg Police Service (WPS) data used by Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) to argue that tactical officers are responding to 'routine' calls highlights the value of this approach (Jenkins et al., 2021b).

When Jenkins et al. (2021b) re-examined WPS files that included additional context beyond the call type ($N = 1019$), they found that at least one weapon was believed to be involved (before the response was initiated) during approximately 60% ($n = 610$) of incidents that received a response from tactical officers. Firearms were the most reported weapon ($n = 460$) comprising approximately 45% of all incidents. Importantly, only 41% ($n = 190$) of these incidents were originally classified as firearms-related calls (e.g., Gun, Shots Fired), indicating that the majority of calls in which firearms were believed to be present were not classified as firearm-related. Furthermore, firearms were believed to be involved in 45% to 50% of calls dispatched as Suicide Threats, Wellbeing Checks, Domestic Disputes, and Warrants, all of which are seemingly 'routine' calls. Given these findings, the initial call type appears to be a poor measure of risk posed to public and officer safety.

Unfortunately, the attempt by Jenkins et al. (2021b) to provide a more nuanced perspective on calls that tactical officers respond to was restricted to a small dataset that relied on an informal mechanism to track the use of tactical officers (Daily Occurrence Reports [DORs]; Jenkins et al., 2021b). Given this, it is likely that important contextual information (e.g., the presence of risk factors) was not included in the DORs. The current study incorporates higher-quality Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) data to address these limitations. Using this dataset, the current study aims to address the following research questions: (1) In what proportion of incidents are tactical members augmenting patrol?; (2) To what extent are various environmental considerations (e.g., barricaded individual) and risk factors (e.g., presence of weapons) prevalent in the calls that receive a tactical officer response?; and (3) To what extent does the call type (e.g., 'Domestic Disturbance') mask the presence of risk factors within an incident?

## Methods

### The Winnipeg police service

For context, the WPS has approximately 1,350 officers and the population of Winnipeg is around 767,000. While the number of officers per 100,000 residents has decreased considerably over the past five years from 196.7 to 176.7, there has simultaneously been a gradual increase in the overall number of dispatched calls for service from 205,641 to 234,058 (Winnipeg Police

Service, 2022a). The exception to this is the decrease in dispatched events between the years 2020 and 2021, which notably occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the decrease in dispatched events between 2020 and 2021, the rate of violent crime increased by 5% (Winnipeg Police Service, 2022a). Specifically, in 2021 the Crime Severity Index (CSI) for violent crime in Winnipeg was nearly double the Canadian average (173.3 and 92.5, respectively; Government of Canada, 2022; Winnipeg Police Service, 2022a). Despite the increased rate of violent crime, the WPS use of force rate for 2021 was slightly below the five-year average (0.30% and 0.36%, respectively). Additionally, there were no officer-involved shootings in 2021 (Winnipeg Police Service, 2022b).

Winnipeg's Tactical Support Team (TST) is a full-time team with approximately 37 officers whose primary purpose is to provide frontline support to other members of the WPS (Griffiths & Pollard, 2013). Consistent with other Canadian tactical teams, TST officers receive significantly more training than patrol officers with approximately 25% of shift time dedicated to training (Alvaro, 2000; Cyr et al., 2020). When not deployed as a full team (e.g., Search Warrant) or involved in training, members of the TST serve a patrol-like function and respond to high-risk calls such as when weapons are believed to be present. Tactical officers can also augment patrol resources and assist with queue management by responding to low-risk calls (e.g., Distress Alarm).

## Data sources

The WPS provided us with access to their operational data for the year 2021. Two data sources were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the incidents that WPS tactical officers are involved in. Each of these will be briefly explained below.

### Computer aided dispatch

A list of all occurrence numbers for incidents that TST members responded to in 2021 was pulled from the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. This data was extracted as an Excel file that included the occurrence number as well as an overview of the incident, such as the initial and final call type and priority level. The occurrence number was then searched in the CAD Viewer, which provides a record of the incident from when the call taker or officer starts the file to when the file is resolved and cleared by the responding officer(s). Given the sensitive nature of accessing the CAD data, all data was accessed on the secure server within WPS headquarters.

To gain an understanding of the call-taking and dispatching process, the first author had the opportunity to observe call takers and dispatchers during their shift. This provided an initial understanding of how calls were received from the public, entered into the CAD system, and dispatched to officers. Later, when provided access to the list of call types, it became clear that there are classification rules for call takers and dispatchers. For example, if the complainant mentions to the call taker that a firearm is believed to be present during the initial conversation, the incident is likely to be classified as a Gun call. However, there are some exceptions to this as certain call classifications take precedence when there is an indication a firearm is present. These calls include Domestic Disputes, Robberies, and Shots fired. In the case of Domestic Disputes, the relationship between the involved parties supersedes other relevant call factors. For example, if there is a Domestic Dispute involving a firearm, the call is classified as a high priority Domestic Dispute as opposed to a Gun call, even though if the exact same situation occurred between individuals who are not partners or ex-partners the call would be classified as a Gun call.

### Daily occurrence reports

Daily Occurrence Reports (DORs) are reports created as part of an informal tracking system that records the incidents that tactical officers are involved in. Given that the purpose of the DORs is to provide TST supervisors with brief synopses of incidents that the TST has been involved in, they are often lacking contextual information as the supervisor can input the occurrence number into CAD

and view the full narrative. In the current study, the DORs were used to supplement the CAD data, particularly for warrants, which included little information given that they are not in-progress calls.

## Coding manual

A coding manual was created to capture the presence of risk factors that increase the threat to public and officer safety (see Appendix A). In line with our previous research, these risk factors related to the presence of weapons, situational factors (e.g., intoxication), and relevant history of the individuals involved in the incident (e.g., known to be violent; Jenkins et al., 2021b). Throughout the coding process we also added variables to capture relevant contextual information (e.g., high angle call, injuries sustained by members of the public), and the level of violence present within an incident (e.g., property was damaged, assault occurred). While this is not something that is explicitly captured in the CAD system, we also coded whether the call had the potential to cause grievous bodily harm or death (GBHD) to a member of the public or a police officer. This was determined based on our understanding of an officer's risk assessment process. Incidents were said to pose a risk of GBHD if any one of the following characteristics were met: an indication that weapons were involved,[1] instances where the complainant(s) called for police and then the line went dead, complainant(s) calling as people were trying to kick down the door of their residence, some cases of assault (e.g., person kicking someone in the head repeatedly, people trying to push an individual off a bridge), and instances where the environment posed life-threatening risk of harm to the individual (e.g., person walking into traffic, person standing on the ledge of a building).

## Analytical strategy

Given that the CAD data is stored on a secure server at WPS, the first author spent five weeks in the Organizational Development and Support Division to conduct a content analysis of the calls that TST members were involved in. We used a modified stratified sampling approach in which at least one-third of incidents from each call type were randomly selected and coded to provide a representative portrayal of incidents that received a response from tactical officers. However, due to concerns that tactical officers respond to seemingly low-risk calls, we oversampled call-types that previous research has suggested are 'routine' incidents (i.e., Domestic Disputes, Family Trouble, Suicide Threat, Mental Health Act, Wellbeing Check, Medic). Being that the focus of the coding was on these seemingly benign calls, we under-sampled incidents related to Gun calls ($n$ = 90 of 561, 16%). Finally, additional calls for all call types in which there was a DOR that corresponded to the CAD file were also coded. This was done because it allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the incident.

Using the information captured in the CAD history and DORs, we conducted a content analysis of risk factors and relevant contextual information. Specifically, the first author reviewed the available narrative and coded the presence of any risk factors or relevant context using dichotomous variables (i.e., present vs. absent). Because the first author conducted the content analysis alone, we are unable to calculate inter-rater reliability, which is a potential limitation. However, these concerns are alleviated by the fact that a content analysis using a very similar coding manual produced high levels of agreement between two coders in the study reported on by Jenkins et al. (2021b).

The coding of variables was based on the information that the complainant(s) provided to the call taker and information that was voiced over the radio by officers and telecommunications operators. Therefore, the risk factors that were coded were typically known prior to any police response (e.g., during the initial conversation with the call taker) or provided prior to TST arrival (e.g., if a General Patrol unit arrives and states the individual has a weapon and went into a residence). In the case of warrants, the DORs often included information regarding the history of the individual prior to TST conducting the warrant.

Taken together, the risk factors included in both the CAD files and the DORs were articulated prior to TST involvement instead of after the fact to justify the use of tactical resources, as has been previously suggested (Walby, 2022). In fact, the only information that was captured after TST were on scene related to injuries sustained to the public prior to TST arrival (e.g., stabbings).[2]

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 to high-risk incidents to assisting patrol in call queue management, the first section relies on CAD data to examine the role that TST members are fulfilling when responding to incidents. Second, descriptive analyses are presented pertaining to the relevant environmental factors (e.g., barricaded individual) associated with calls, and a breakdown is provided of the risk factors associated with incidents that received a response from TST members. The final section of the results explores the prevalence of risk factors within incidents that have previously been characterized as low-risk or 'routine' by previous researchers, such as Mental Health Calls and Domestic Disputes.

The coding manual was applied to approximately half of the 3215 occurrences TST members responded to in 2021 ($n = 1652$; 51%). Unfortunately, due to the time intensive nature of manually coding the incidents, this was as much as was feasible during the five weeks the first author spent at WPS headquarters. The results reported below focus on the files where the coding manual was applied. Given that we under-sampled Gun calls in favour of other calls, the aggregate results represent an under-reporting of the prevalence of risk factors because the calls for service that were coded are not representative in terms of call type of all occurrences.

### How TST members support patrol or other units

Previous research has indicated that tactical officers augment patrol by assisting with low-risk calls as a means to help with call queue management (Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2021b). Given this, we recorded the capacity in which TST members were assisting patrol or other units. Primarily, TST members were responding to high-risk calls in which they either self-assigned ($n = 460$, 27.8%) or patrol officers requested TST to attend the call ($n = 179$, 10.8%). Similarly, TST members frequently responded to calls following patrol officers requesting backup ($n = 265$, 16.0%).

During approximately one-third of coded incidents ($n = 488$, 29.5%), tactical officers were responding to low-risk calls to relieve the workload on patrol officers and provide a quicker police response time. Although relatively uncommon, tactical officers also self-assigned to calls when there was a lack of available patrol units to be dispatched ($n = 110$, 6.7%). However, it is important to note when responding to low-risk calls, TST members were wearing grey patrol uniforms and not their full tactical gear (e.g., helmet, carbine; Jenkins et al., 2022). The remainder of occurrences that tactical officers were involved in were either warrants or assisting other units (e.g., Guns and Gangs, Homicide; $n = 150$, 9.1%)

### The prevalence of environmental considerations and risk factors

#### Environmental considerations
While the presence of risk factors is the primary reason for the response from tactical officers, there are also a number of environmental considerations that trigger the use of tactical resources (Jenkins et al., 2021a). Environmental factors were mentioned in a limited number of occurrences ($n = 63$, 3.8%). Primarily, these environmental factors included a barricaded individual ($n = 39$, 2.3%),

a hostage situation ($n = 10$, 0.6%), bomb events ($n = 7$, 0.4%), high angle calls ($n = 4$, 0.2%), and overwatch for large public gatherings ($n = 3$, 0.1%).

### The presence of risk factors
Overall, the majority of coded occurrences had at least one risk factor present in the call ($n = 1252$, 75.8%). Similarly, most incidents contained a risk of GBHD as defined above ($n = 1106$, 66.9%), while another 92 incidents included an element of violence that did not meet the threshold of causing GBHD. The following section presents a breakdown of the various risk factors within the calls.

*Violence expressed.* During approximately one-third of calls, the complainant indicated that there was an element of violence ($n = 599$, 36.3%). These included assaults ($n = 189$, 11.4%), threats or assaults with weapons ($n = 119$, 7.2%), damage to property ($n = 100$, 6.1%), shots fired ($n = 90$, 5.4%), stabbings ($n = 62$, 3.8%), shootings[3] ($n = 41$, 2.5%), and the use of incapacitant spray ($n = 25$, 1.5%).

The level of violence exhibited during the incident was often masked by the initial call type, however, the extent to which this occurred depended on the type of violence. For example, less than one-fifth of assaults occurred during calls that were initially classified as Assaults or Fights ($n = 33$ of 183, 18.0%). Similarly, the minority of incidents that involved threats or assaults with weapons were classified as weapons-related (e.g., Assault with weapon, Weapon call; $n = 47$ of 119, 39.5%). Further, only about half of the incidents in which a complainant reported a stabbing had occurred was originally classified as a Stabbing ($n = 33$ of 62, 53.2%). Firearms-related violence was masked to a lesser extent as the majority of shootings and shots fired were originally classified as a Gun call or Shots fired ($n = 27$ of 41, 65.9% and $n = 79$ of 90, 87.8%, respectively).

*Weapons believed to be involved.* In nearly half ($n = 823$, 49.8%) of incidents where TST members responded there was at least one weapon believed to be involved. Most commonly this included firearms ($n = 455$, 27.5%), edged weapons ($n = 319$, 19.3%), impact weapons ($n = 65$, 3.9%), and other weapons (e.g., incapacitant spray, explosives; $n = 63$, 3.8%). The majority of calls in which a firearm was believed to be involved were not classified as a firearms-related call ($n = 287$ of 455, 63.1%). Similarly, most calls where a weapon was indicated to be present were not classified as weapons-related ($n = 504$ of 823, 61.2%). These results suggest that the initial call type is not necessarily indicative of whether weapons are involved in the incident.

*Threats made.* There was a total of 201 incidents (12.2%) where threats were made. Most commonly these were threats by the individual to cause GBHD to other people ($n = 119$, 7.2%), to themselves ($n = 57$, 3.5%), or to police ($n = 13$, 0.8%). There were an additional 29 threats to assault other people ($n = 25$, 1.5%) or police ($n = 4$, 0.2%). Not included in this count are another 10 incidents that mentioned police-assisted suicide, which can be considered a veiled threat to pose risk of GBHD to officers in an attempt to force police to shoot the individual.

*Historical information.* Nearly one-third ($n = 465$, 28.1%) of calls included relevant historical information about the subject of the complaint. Most commonly these were in-progress calls ($n = 417$) as opposed to pre-planned events such as warrants ($n = 48$). The most common historical information related to the subject of the complaint included previous violence ($n = 208$, 12.6%) and being known to carry weapons ($n = 151$, 9.1%). Additionally, some individuals were indicated to have gang affiliations ($n = 37$, 2.2%). Finally, some individuals had a No-Contact Order in place[4] (NCO; $n = 34$, 2.1%), previous homicide charges ($n = 34$, 2.1%), shootings ($n = 15$, 0.9%), and prior TST involvement ($n = 3$, 0.2%). Given concerns about TST involvement with individuals with a mental illness, we coded the presence of a mental illness ($n = 42$, 2.5%) and previous suicide attempts ($n = 48$, 2.9%), both of which were infrequent.

*Injuries to the public.*  The following section provides an overview of the injuries that were caused by the subject(s) of the complaint and occurred or prior to TST arrival on scene. Most injuries sustained by the public were due to lacerations stab wounds ($n = 83$, 5.0%), gunshot wounds ($n = 32$, 1.9%), as well as blunt force trauma ($n = 24$, 1.5%). A smaller number of injuries occurred during vehicle collisions ($n = 5$, 0.3%) or from incapacitant spray ($n = 4$, 0.2%). Across all injuries, individuals were transported to hospital in stable ($n = 15$, 0.9%), unstable ($n = 38$, 2.3%), or critical ($n = 14$, 0.8%) condition. Additionally, TST members responded to at least 13 homicides, which is approximately 25% of the homicides in Winnipeg in 2021. This finding suggests that while TST members make up a small percentage of the Service, they are responding to a high number of Winnipeg's violent crimes.

Being that the majority of weapons were noted to be present during calls that were not classified as weapons-related, we examined whether the initial call type was indicative of the mechanism of injuries and the severity of injuries sustained by the public. Approximately half of injuries caused by edged weapons were coded as a weapons-related call ($n = 41$ of 83, 49.4%), while three-quarters of shootings were originally classified as weapons-related ($n = 24$ of 32, 75%). A very small percent of injuries caused by impact weapons ($n = 2$ of 24, 8.3%) were initially coded as a weapons-related call. A similar trend occurs when considering the degree of injury sustained by members of the public. Specifically, for injuries classified as unstable, critical, or fatal, only half originated as a weapons-related call ($n = 32$ of 63, 50.7%).[5]

## The masking of risk factors by call type

### Initial and final call types

Tactical officers were involved in incidents that fell under 73 initial call types (see Table 1 for the most common call types within the files coded). In approximately one-third (29.6%; $n = 489$ of 1652) of the incidents that were coded, there was an indication that there was a risk of GBHD based on initial call type classification (e.g., Gun, Stabbing, Shots). However, as can be seen in Table 1, there is considerable deviation between the initial and final call type. For example, the number of Gun calls increased by nearly 50% from the initial to final call type. This finding provides evidence that the initial call classification is not necessarily indicative of the level of risk posed within the incident.

### Presence of risk factors within call types that have been characterized as 'routine'

Certain call types have been previously considered 'routine' because they are *perceived* to pose low risk to public and officer safety (Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). As highlighted in Figure 1, there is often considerable variation in the call type and priority level as the call is entered into the CAD system compared to the final call type after more information comes to light, such as when

**Table 1.** The most common call types that were coded.

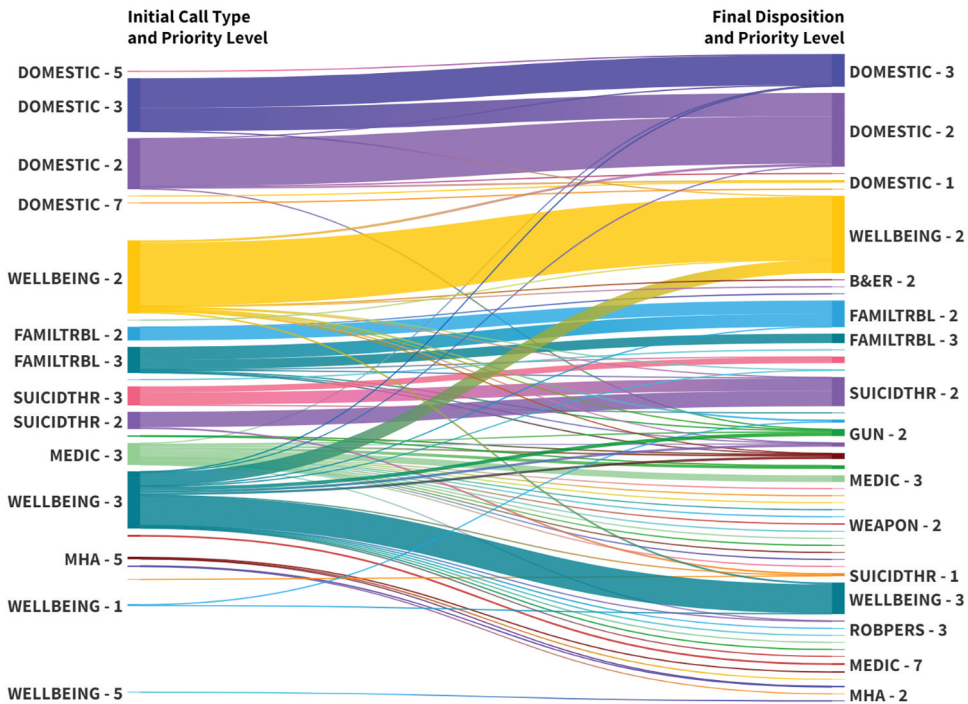| Call Type | Initial n (%) | Final n (%) | Change n (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Wellbeing Check | 224 (13.6%) | 195 (11.8%) | −29 (−12.9%) |
| Domestic Dispute | 180 (10.9%) | 196 (11.9%) | 16 (8.9%) |
| Warrant | 115 (6.9%) | 117 (7.0%) | 2 (1.7%) |
| Gun | 90 (5.4%) | 133 (8.1%) | 43 (47.8%) |
| Weapons | 83 (5.0) | 91 (5.5%) | 7 (8.4%) |
| Shots | 73 (4.8%) | 76 (4.6%) | 3 (4.1%) |
| Family Trouble | 68 (4.1%) | 62 (3.8%) | −6 (−8.8%) |
| Suicide Threat | 62 (3.8%) | 67 (4.1%) | 5 (8.1%) |
| Assist | 53 (3.2%) | 51 (3.1%) | −2 (−3.8%) |
| Disturbance | 45 (2.7%) | 29 (1.8%) | −16 (−35.6%) |
| Stabbing | 42 (2.5%) | 54 (3.3%) | 12 (28.6%) |

**Figure 1.** A comparison of the initial and final call type and priority level. Note. Priority 1: danger to life or GBHD is present. Priority 2: impending danger to life or GBHD. Priority 3: urgent person incident where there is serious risk to an individual. Priority 5: non-urgent person incident where there is no serious risk to any individual. Priority 7: calls where delayed response will not affect the safety and wellbeing of any individual.

officers have responded. For example, there are a number of Domestic disturbances that originated as priority 3 calls that were later increased to priority 2.

Given the concerns raised by Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) about tactical officers responding to 'routine' calls based on call type classifications, the following section examines the presence of risk factors within call types that have been classified as low-risk to demonstrate that call type is not indicative of risk. Although there is variation across call types, the presence of risk factors is not uncommon during 'routine' calls when using the initial call type to classify the call, however, a similar pattern emerges when using the final call type (see Table 2). When taking the average across the six call types highlighted in this table, many of the risk factors are more prevalent in calls characterized as 'routine' than the average for all incidents that were coded. Specifically, while the rate of violence (38.3% vs. 36.3%) and the belief that weapons were involved (46.7% vs. 49.6%) was similar, 'routine' calls had higher rates of any risk factor present (88.5% vs. 68.9%), threats made (21.0% vs. 12.0%), historical violence (21.8% vs. 10.8%), the individual being known to carry weapons (13.7% vs. 9.1%), gang affiliations (3.1% vs. 2.2%), and NCOs (5.3% vs. 2.1%).

Not only are there considerable risk factors within 'routine' call types, the findings related to public injuries are also noteworthy. For example, approximately one-third of injuries sustained from weapons occurred during these calls. Across these call types, there were 31 stabbings (37.3% of total edged weapon injuries), 7 shootings (21.9% of gunshot wounds), and 11 impact injuries (45.8% of blunt force injuries). Overall, these findings indicate that call types, which have been classified by some researchers as 'routine', often contain considerable risk to public and officer safety.

Table 2. The presence of risk factors within call types that have been classified as 'routine'.

| Call Type | Violence | Risk Factors | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Weapons involved | Threats | Grievous bodily harm/ death | Intoxicated | Previous violence | Previous weapons | Gang member | NCO in place | Any risk factor |
| Domestic Dispute (n = 180) | 89 (49.4%) | 104 (57.7%) | 52 (28.9%) | 134 (74.4%) | 27 (15%) | 96 (53.3%) | 41 (22.7%) | 10 (5.6%) | 27 (15.0%) | 165 (91.7%) |
| Family Trouble (n = 68) | 42 (61.8%) | 44 (64.7%) | 24 (35.3%) | 53 (77.9%) | 21 (30.9%) | 12 (17.6%) | 12 (17.6%) | 2 (8.3%) | 0 (0.0%) | 66 (97.1%) |
| Suicide Threat (n = 62) | 10 (16.1%) | 38 (61.3%) | 31 (50%) | 62 (100%) | 3 (9.7%) | 5 (8.1%) | 12 (38.7%) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 62 (100%) |
| Medic (n = 42) | 13 (30.9%) | 16 (38.1%) | 0 (0.0%) | 27 (64.3%) | 2 (4.8%) | 1 (2.4%) | 1 (2.4%) | 1 (2.4%) | 0 (0.0%) | 30 (71.4%) |
| Mental Health Act (n = 6) | 0 (0.0%) | 4 (66.7%) | 2 (33.3%) | 4 (66.7%) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 2 (33.3%) | 0 (0.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 5 (83.3%) |
| Wellbeing Check (n = 224) | 69 (30.8%) | 66 (29.5%) | 16 (7.1%) | 170 (75.9%) | 8 (3.6%) | 13 (5.8%) | 12 (5.4%) | 5 (2.2%) | 4 (1.8%) | 187 (83.5%) |
| Average for these calls (n = 582) | 223 (38.3%) | 272 (46.7%) | 125 (21.5%) | 450 (77.3%) | 61 (10.4%) | 127 (21.8%) | 80 (13.7%) | 18 (3.1%) | 31 (5.3%) | 515 (88.5%) |

## Discussion

Some researchers have asserted that the use of tactical officers during 'routine' calls, such as warrants, domestic disturbances, and mental health crises should be scaled back immediately (Roziere & Walby, 2018). However, the results of the current study indicate that there are numerous reasons why tactical officers are responding to calls that have been characterized as 'routine'. Specifically, we found that during about one-third of coded occurrences, tactical officers were responding to low-risk calls to assist patrol officers and provide a quicker response time for the public (n = 488, 29.5%; Research Question 1). Occasionally, tactical officers self-assigned to low-risk calls because there were no patrol units available to be dispatched to the call. This finding indicates that due to the increased workload on patrol officers within the Winnipeg Police Service, tactical officers are sometimes assisting with call queue management (Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2021a). However, it is important to note that given the under sampling of Gun calls in the current study, the actual proportion of low-risk calls that tactical officers respond to is lower than reported here.

While tactical officers sometimes assist patrol officers during low-risk calls in which there is no indication of violence (e.g., Animal call, Business Alarm), the primary role of tactical officers in the WPS was responding to high-risk calls. Within the coded files there was limited environmental information available to help explain the reliance on tactical officers, but the most common reason was a barricaded individual or possible hostage incident (n = 49). However, information related to the prevalence of risk factors was much more common in the available data. For example, approximately one-third of coded incidents involved indications of violence (n = 599, 36.3%). Relatedly, weapons were reported to be present during half the incidents (n = 823, 49.8%), of which firearms were the most reported weapon (n = 455, 27.5%; Research Question 2).

Overall, it appears that the call type often masks the risk posed within an incident (Research Question 3). For example, based on the initial call type alone, one-third (n = 489, 29.6%) of the incidents that were coded indicated that the call posed a risk of GBHD (e.g., Gun call, Shots fired). However, when the presence of various risk factors was considered, the number of incidents that

posed a risk of GBHD doubled ($n = 1106$, 66.9%). Consistent with Jenkins et al. (2021b), nearly two-thirds of incidents in which a firearm was believed to be involved were not initially classified as a firearms-related call. Additionally, the fact that risk factors were commonly reported alongside high rates of injuries during 'routine' calls suggest that these incidents actually pose considerable risk to public and officer safety.

Taken together, our findings highlight that the initial call type is not a reliable indicator of risk posed to public or officer safety. Given this, the conclusions reached in previous research (e.g., Roziere & Walby, 2020), which has relied exclusively on de-contextualized data (i.e., initial call type), appear to be flawed; 'routine' calls do often pose a significant risk to public and officer safety. Given that tactical officers are deployed based on the presence of risk factors within a call (rather than any given call type) it is not surprising that tactical officers are frequently involved in these types of incidents.

### *Implications*

Our findings have important implications for research on the use of tactical officers. For example, given that most incidents that tactical officers respond to are high-risk, as indicated by relatively high rates of violence and beliefs that weapons are involved, our findings call into question the assertion that tactical officers within the WPS are frequently responding to 'routine' calls that are void of risk to public and officer safety. The foundation for these claims has been the analysis of police records (e.g., Daily Occurrence Reports produced by the WPS) that were released to Roziere and Walby (2018, 2019, 2020) via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. Despite the value in using FOI legislation to gain access to government records, the data that are released often provide little insight into the nature of the incidents in question. Indeed, even Roziere and Walby (2018) state that the information released to them often 'fail(s) to capture data that accurately reflects the activities of the [tactical team]' (p. 40). In light of these limitations, we believe our findings speak to the value of engaging with practitioners (e.g., call takers and dispatchers, data analysts, police officers) who are familiar with such data. Doing so will allow for a more informed understanding of the data, such as the coding rules used for classifying calls for service (e.g., Domestic Dispute; Mitchell et al., 2022; Simpson et al., 2021), which is simply not possible when relying solely on FOI released data.

Engaging with practitioners will also hopefully allow other errors to be avoided, such as conflating full-TST deployments with situations where a pair of tactical officers without additional equipment (e.g., carbines) respond to calls (as was done by Roziere & Walby, 2018). In fact, in the current study, the CAD data indicated that approximately half of the coded incidents received a two-officer response, not a full-team deployment. We believe this speaks to broader misconceptions regarding the use of tactical officers when fulfilling patrol functions. When responding to high-risk incidents, tactical officers may respond en masse with access to the full range of tactical resources (e.g., body armour, carbines, armoured vehicles, etc.; Towns et al., 2023), but when tactical officers are used in more 'routine' capacities, they typically respond in pairs, in SUVs, with similar equipment to that of patrol officers.

The results of the current study also highlight other points that researchers should consider when conducting studies that leverage CAD data. For example, research has demonstrated that there is considerable variation within specific occurrence types (e.g., a mental health call), which underscores the need to capture contextual information (e.g., Haberman et al., 2021; Simpson et al., 2021). For example, the severity of mental health calls can range from relatively low (e.g., a concerned individual has not heard from someone for a while) to very high (e.g., an individual is known to have access to firearms and has made comments about suicide by cop). Additionally, consistent with other research, the current findings highlight issues with using call for service data to estimate variables of interest. As an example, it has been shown that relying on the call type or

a mental health flag to estimate the prevalence of mental health or crisis-related calls leads to underestimates (e.g., Henning et al., 2019; Koziarski et al., 2022; Langton et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2022; Pearce & Simpson, 2022). Our findings demonstrate that this is not unique to the examination of mental health calls the results indicate that using call codes (e.g., Domestic Dispute) can lead to substantial underestimates of the prevalence of risk factors such as violence, weapons, and the risk of GBHD. Given these results, there is a need to have broader discussions about identifying risk with CAD data (e.g., this will have implications for assigning alternative responses to calls for service, such as non-police responses to mental health calls).

Our research also has implications for policy. As argued above, some researchers have used their analysis of de-contextualized call types to recommend that restrictions be implemented to reduce the scope of incidents that tactical officers can be involved in (e.g., preventing them from responding to 'routine' calls; Roziere & Walby, 2020). However, as we have shown, many of the incidents that receive a tactical officer response, which have been characterized as 'routine' by other researchers, actually pose significant risk. Policies that would restrict tactical officers from responding to certain call types lack an appreciation of the risk that is often associated with these incidents. Furthermore, advocating for the removal of tactical officers from certain calls demonstrates a misunderstanding of the purpose of call types. More specifically, call types are not used by the police to determine risk posed within an incident; instead, call priority is a better reflection of risk to public and officer safety.[6]

A good example of this is domestic disputes. While it is relatively uncommon that tactical officers in the WPS respond to Domestic Disputes, the incidents they do respond to pose a significant risk to public and officer safety. For example, in 2021, WPS members responded to more than 17,000 Domestic Disputes, of which approximately 2,000 involved violence (Winnipeg Police Service, 2022a). Tactical officers responded to 180 of these calls and our data suggests that a tactical response was likely warranted. For example, at least one-third of Domestic Disputes in our study contained risk factors that are known to increase the odds that a domestic assault will result in a fatality (e.g., threats, a history of violence, the presence of a weapon; Matias et al., 2020; Overstreet et al., 2021). Furthermore, firearms were believed to be involved in approximately one-third of Domestic Disputes and comprised nearly 60% of the weapons involved in these incidents ($n = 61$). Relatedly, there was a risk of GBHD in nearly three-quarters of Domestic Disputes that received a response from tactical officers ($n = 134$, 74.4%). Similar results were found when examining mental health and crisis-related calls. Given the severity of these incidents, it is not surprising that Compton et al. (2009) found no reduction in the number of tactical team callouts for mental-health related calls despite an increase in the number of specially trained Crisis Intervention Team officers.

One of the major criticisms about the increased use of tactical officers is the suggestion that these officers are predisposed to use force, including lethal force, when interacting with the public. The assertion that tactical officers are primed to use force, in combination with their increased use in 'routine' calls, is suggested to have severe consequences for the public (e.g., increased killings by police; Kraska, 2018, 2021; Roziere & Walby, 2020). However, there is growing evidence that due to their additional training, equipment, and experience, tactical officers actually reduce the likelihood and severity of force (Brimo, 2012; Frongillo, 2023; Jenkins et al., 2021a; Klinger & Rojek, 2008; Rojek, 2005). As previously mentioned, tactical officers receive significantly more training than patrol officers (Alvaro, 2000; Cyr et al., 2020), which increases their ability to perform in high-risk situations (Baldwin et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2022). Given their mandate of responding to calls beyond the scope of patrol officers, tactical officers respond to high-risk calls and are thus exposed to violence with greater frequency than patrol officers (Landman et al., 2016). Given this, it is likely that the increased rates of force that are sometimes observed when tactical officers respond to a call are likely a product of the high-risk nature of the incidents that these officers respond to (Gaub et al., 2020; Landman et al., 2016; Williams & Westall, 2003), as evidenced in the current study.

Due to the additional training and experience tactical officers have responding to high-risk calls, these officers are likely to develop expertise in managing such calls and other potential use of force

incidents (Boulton & Cole, 2016; Rantatalo, 2012b; Suss & Boulton, 2019; Suss & Ward, 2010). Such expertise will likely allow for enhanced decision-making when facing complex situations with high consequences. In fact, a recent systematic review comparing patrol and tactical officers found that tactical officers possess enhanced decision-making abilities and are less likely to shoot unarmed individuals when making rapid shoot/no shoot decisions (Jenkins et al., (n.d.)). In addition to enhanced decision-making under stress, tactical officers also have greater access to equipment that facilitates the safe resolution of an incident including less-lethal options that are frequently used in place of lethal force (Ho et al., 2007; Sousa et al., 2010; Sytsma et al., 2022). Taken together, the skills and abilities of tactical officers closely aligns with the risk factors that are often present within the incidents they respond to, which is likely to optimize officer and public safety.

This sentiment is consistent with other work, such as Iacobucci's (2014) independent investigation of the Toronto Police Service following the killing of Sammy Yatim[7] by one of their officers. He came to the conclusion that Toronto's tactical team could be looked to for guidance in cases like Yatim's given their ability to successfully de-escalate people in crisis. The fact that initial call types mask the presence of risk factors, such as an indication that weapons are present, in combination with emerging evidence that tactical officers often reduce the need and severity of force, suggests that tactical officers responding to 'routine' calls is generally an effective use of specialized resources (Cyr et al., 2020; den Heyer, 2014). We believe that this practice should continue.

Importantly, the use of tactical officers may increase public safety not only by means of improved decision-making and access to less lethal intervention options, but also through the provision of medical care on scene. Due to the high-risk incidents that tactical officers respond to, they often receive additional medical equipment and training, particularly as it relates to penetrating trauma such as gunshot wounds (e.g., tourniquets, chest seal; Mijares & McCarthy, 2020; Tsikouras et al., 2022). Tactical officers can provide medical care to stabilize individuals prior to paramedic arrival, which can be delayed as paramedics often require the scene to be determined safe by police before they provide care (Tsikouras et al., 2022). Given this, tactical officers responding to high-risk incidents where serious injuries have occurred (e.g., a shooting) may reduce civilian fatalities.

## Limitations and Future Directions

The current research provides a better understanding of the nature of incidents that receive a response from WPS tactical officers, however, there are some limitations that are worth noting. For example, the use of the CAD system provides access to higher-quality data than has been previously used to examine the use of tactical resources (e.g., Jenkins et al., 2021b; Roziere & Walby, 2018, 2019, 2020). However, the CAD data used in this study provided contextual information for unfolding incidents only, not for pre-planned events, such as warrants, or when tactical officers were assisting other units (e.g., Guns and Gangs, Homicide). To account for this, DORs were used to supplement the CAD data. While this did provide us with a better understanding of these incidents, the prevalence of risk factors is still likely to be underreported for pre-planned events (e.g., search and arrest warrants). This limitation relates to more general concerns that have been voiced by others surrounding the use of police data for research given that such data is typically not captured for this purpose (e.g., it can be incomplete, biased, and not as accurate as desired; Güss et al., 2020; Schade & Thielgen, 2022).

Additionally, our findings may not generalize to other Canadian police services. Future research should adopt a similar approach with other agencies, especially those that use different deployment models (e.g., where tactical officers do not augment patrol resources and primarily respond to callouts, such as in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police). It is likely that different deployment models will impact the frequency with which tactical officers are used and the risks associated with the calls they are responding to. Exploring geographic variations in the use of tactical officers will also be of value. For example, Jenkins et al. (2021a) note that high angle calls were a common reason for the use of

tactical officers in their study, however, these incidents were exceedingly rare in the files coded for this study ($n = 4$). These sorts of incidents may be more common in some jurisdictions (e.g., Vancouver) where high-rise buildings and bridges are more prevalent. Applying a similar content analysis approach to the one we applied will help develop a more nuanced understanding of the incidents occurring across North America that receive a response from tactical officers.

Finally, the data we collected does not allow us to speak to a wide range of issues that are clearly important to address. One key issue that should be explored relates to the implications of our research for public perceptions of tactical officers, especially when they respond to calls that the public may perceive as low risk. While tactical officers do not tend to wear full tactical gear (e.g., helmets, carbine) when responding to low-risk calls, they will likely be wearing uniforms that the public may be unaccustomed to (e.g., grey tactical uniforms; Towns et al., 2023). Small changes to the police uniform can significantly impact perceptions of officers (e.g., Blaskovits et al., 2021; Jenkins et al., 2021; Simpson, 2018) and police services will want to know how their tactical officers are being perceived while responding to the various types of calls they attend.

## Conclusion

Significant concerns have been raised regarding the use of tactical officers despite those concerns being based on an analysis of de-contextualized data. Our study, which attempted to better understand the context of calls where tactical officers were involved, found that many calls characterized as 'routine' actually pose significant risk to public and officer safety. These findings, in combination with the growing evidence that tactical officers might actually reduce the need and severity of force, suggests that the use of tactical officers may not need to be 'rolled back' to the degree that some have suggested (Roziere & Walby, 2020). To further address this issue, future research should continue to conduct high-quality examinations of the environmental considerations and risk factors that characterize the sorts of calls that tactical officers are involved in. This will facilitate more informed discussions regarding the use of tactical officers.

## Notes

1. This excludes 32 incidents where a weapon was involved but the narrative did not indicate that the call presented a risk of GBHD (e.g., an individual was bear sprayed and robbed but the suspect has fled).
2. Although this information may have been recorded after TST officers arrived on scene, this variable was included as a proxy for actual risk posed within the incident as it demonstrates that many of these calls not only involve the potential for harm, but serious injuries sustained by the public.
3. Shootings were coded when there was an indication that an individual was shot, whereas Shots fired were coded when there was no indication that an individual was struck during an attempted shooting.
4. NCOs are typically court orders that prevent an individual from contacting a victim and are often implemented when the individual has been charged with an offence involving violence or threats towards the victim (Government of Canada, 2021).
5. This count excludes one injury that was classified as unstable due to a vehicle collision.
6. Saying this, we believe that when examining in-progress calls, some call types are regularly associated with higher levels of risk. For example, call types that reflect violence (e.g., stabbing, gun call) are likely to be of higher call priority in general than call classifications that do not reflect violence (e.g., animal, noise complaint).
7. Sammy Yatim was fatally shot by police after refusing to drop a knife that he used to chase people from a crowded streetcar. The responding officers found Yatim on the empty streetcar and one officer shot him multiple times when he took a step towards the officers. The officer was charged and ultimately convicted of attempted murder (R. v Forcillo, 2018).

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## Disclosure statement

## Funding

## Notes on contributors

*Bryce Jenkins* is a PhD student in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University. His primary research focuses on understanding and improving officer decision-making during potential use of force incidents. Relatedly, his research aims to understand the use of tactical officers and the implications of their use.

*Tori Semple* is a PhD student in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University. Her research primarily examines de-escalation and use of force, with a particular focus on police interactions with persons with a mental illness and how specialized training or models of response can improve these interactions.

*Craig Bennell* is a Professor of Psychology at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, where he is also the Director of the Police Research Lab. His research is typically conducted in partnership with Canadian police services and focuses on various aspects of evidence-based policing. He has a particular interest in de-escalation and use-of-force in the policing context, where his research focuses on factors that influence police decision-making and strategies for improving training in these areas.

## ORCID

Bryce Jenkins 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4738-828X
Tori Semple 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3286-7966
Craig Bennell 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7676-5232

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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 | | |
| To property | | |
| Weapons Involved | | |
| 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 | | |