



SWAT Team: A Life-Saving Not a Life-Taking Police Operation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine specific aspects of SWAT operations. One objective of this study is to determine the positive aspect of employing SWAT operations within the agency in dealing with suspects. The second objective is to examine the relationship between the SWAT response outcomes, prevalence, and incidence involving suspects and innocent civilians. Specifically, the analyses focus on the number of cases that SWAT teams managed to handle special threat situations with minimal human injuries or loss of life. The analyses are based on a national sample of 341 law enforcement agencies, which employed at least 50 sworn officers. The comparative analyses in this study show that, on average, hostages are 2.3 times more likely to be rescued by a SWAT intervention team than get killed during a hostage situation. Also, this study shows that during a SWAT intervention, the suicidal suspects are on average 10.5 times more likely to be rescued by a SWAT team than commit suicide.

Keyword: SWAT operations, officer-involved shootings, hostages, suspect suicide.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of SWAT, which stands for Special Weapons And Tactics, started in the mid-1960s in Los Angeles, United States (Dempsey & Forst, 2013). It was originally developed to give officers more firepower as well as more efficiency when dealing with criminals (Goranson, 2003; Jones, 1996). SWAT members are highly trained and professional police personnel who dedicate themselves completely to protecting their community from the most dangerous criminal situations. While many attribute the concept of SWAT team to inspector Daryl F. Gates, it was actually officer John Nelson who approached Gates with the idea. Gates decided that the concept was worth pursuing, and he quickly formed a unit of highly trained officers to undergo tactical operations, and to handle unique challenges that policing was facing during the turbulent era of the 1960s (Bennet, 2010). One of the unique challenges was a rash of criminals sniping civilians and uniformed officers around the United States. That first unit was comprised of 15 four officer teams. Each member had served in the military and had undergone additional training to prepare for the tasks at hand.

Since then, SWAT has been a very positive and necessary division pertaining to law enforcement and has saved hundreds of lives over the last fifty years. The SWAT is a team of law enforcement officers who are selected, trained and equipped to work as a synchronized team to resolve critical incidents that are hazardous, complex, and unusual enough to exceed the capabilities of the first responders and investigators to handle such incidents. Today, most countries around the world have some form of police paramilitary units that mirror the SWAT teams in the United States (Grayson, 2013).

Purpose of SWAT Interventions

The primary purpose of a SWAT team is to rescue and protect innocent civilians in situations in which special weapons and tactics are needed. Generally, the SWAT teams are called when there is a need to respond to high-risk operations (Snow, 1999). Some of these high-risk operations may include hostage situations, barricaded suspects, serving search warrants to known dangerous criminals, dealing with armed offenders, civil disturbances, etc. (Klinger & Rojek, 2008; Dempsey & Forst, 2013). The SWAT members are properly trained to deal with such situations. Each member of the SWAT team has to be trained and pass a variety of mental and physical tests in order to be a part of this team and ready to respond to high-risk situations.

Although the most frequent types of situations that SWAT teams deal with are warrant services (Kraska, 1999; Klinger & Rojek, 2008; Lonsdale, 1998), dealing with barricaded suspects who hold hostages remains among the most serious high-risk operations. In those high-risk situations, the suspect(s) have an advantage over the police because of the isolated locations or in many instances, it is impossible for the police to approach the suspect(s) without them being shot at. Hostage situations always bring a call for the SWAT team to respond because of the need for special tactics (Lonsdale, 2005). When dealing with hostage takers, a SWAT team will usually have a lead negotiator who will talk to the criminal(s) holding hostage and try to end the crisis peacefully, without harming the suspects or hostages (Miller, 2005). After all, a successful SWAT intervention is one that ends the situation without fatalities.

Besides dealing with incidents in which the suspect(s) barricade themselves and/or hold hostages, the SWAT teams also serve high-risk warrants. Those types of warrants usually deal with known dangerous armed criminals who are very likely to not surrender peacefully without putting a fight. For other types of police situations, most of the time, the first responders will show up, then depending on the severity of the situation and the type of suspects they deal with, they will call in the SWAT team. Other types of incidents include responding to an active sniper situation, which can put many innocent citizens in danger, or to assist the regular police units when they are taking on a suspect with a lot of firepower or high-powered weapons taking fire upon the officers, etc. (Greene, 1996).

Overall, one can conclude that the SWAT teams are an important part of the strategic policing, in that they deal with the criminal elements that can harm innocent civilians. They are able to respond to situations where the usual means of responding could result in injury or death to those involved or to those nearby. The development of the SWAT teams

has opened up new possibilities in policing and has solved numerous public safety problems. They will continue to be used and to become more capable as time moves on and thanks to the work of all those involved, they will continue to be an effective tool in the continuous fight against crime. One issue that comes up with the contemporary SWAT teams is the fact that serious injuries can and do occur when the SWAT teams encounter hostiles. Though it is a desirable outcome, the idea that when SWAT intervenes, the bad guys are always easily defeated is an underestimated conclusion; thus, injuries are expected and they occur during interventions (Jones, Reese, Kenepp, & Krohmer, 1996). Nonetheless, SWAT teams are indispensable police units and they serve a valuable purpose in policing.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The primary goal of this study is to determine whether or not having a SWAT intervene in certain threat situations saves lives. The first objective in this study is to determine whether or not SWAT officers are more likely to fire on the suspects during a SWAT intervention than the suspects on the SWAT officers. The second objective is to answer the following question: are the SWAT operations effective in saving lives during incidents involving suicidal suspects? The third objective of this study is to attempt to determine the success rate of SWAT interventions during hostage situations. That is, based on thirteen years panel data, I will attempt to answer the following question: are SWAT operations successful in rescuing hostages during their interventions.

METHODOLOGY

The outcome variables, or the dependent variables in this study are the number of lives saved by the SWAT team and the number of lives lost during the SWAT intervention incidents. Methodologically, the analyses are comparative frequency counts. Thus, the main analysis focuses on comparing the number of SWAT officer-involved-shooting incidents for a period of thirteen years (1986-1998), the number of incidents that resulted in suspects committing suicide, and the number of incidents with non-suicide outcomes. Additionally, this comparative analysis focuses on comparing the total number of hostage incidents with the number of incidents where hostages were rescued by the SWAT team, and the number of cases in which the suspects fired at the SWAT team but the SWAT did not fire back. It is noteworthy that the data set I analyzed in this research article has certain limitations for this type of analyses, in that they can only be analyzed using frequency counts at best. Although the analyses in this study are basic and descriptive in nature; nonetheless, they are intended to shed some light on this topic that is understudied.

Data Source

The analyses in this study are based on a national usable sample of 341 law enforcement agencies, which represented about 30% of the original responding agencies (n=1,207) that reported had SWAT teams in their departments. The data were originally collected by the United States Department of Justice and were released to the public domain by the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) in 2007. The sample of 341 agencies includes state law enforcement agencies, country, municipal, and special jurisdiction law enforcement agencies. The data were collected post incidents; meaning the data includes administrative archived Post Critical Incident Reports (PCIR). The sampling units in this study are law enforcement agencies; whereas the units of analysis are the incidents involving SWAT interventions. The types of incidents include barricaded persons (46.9%), narcotics warrants (19.8%), other warrants (9.5%), hostage incidents (18.7%), and all other types of incidents (5.1%).

RESULTS

The first objective in this study was to determine whether or not SWAT officers are more likely to fire on the suspects during a SWAT intervention than the suspects on the SWAT officers. The data in Table 1 show a comparison between the number of incidents in which the suspects have fired first on the SWAT, the total number of officer-involved shooting (OIS) incidents, and the number of cases in which the SWAT officers initiated the shooting sequence first. Overall, the data in Table 1 show that the SWAT officers very rarely opened fire on the suspects before the suspects had initiated such measures. Averaging all incidents from the panel data that includes thirteen years of SWAT involved incidents (totaling 3201 incidents); this study shows that, on average, only 1 in 27 cases the SWAT officers initiated shooting sequence first. This indicates that in most OIS incidents, the firing sequence initiated by the SWAT officers is a countermeasure, in response to the suspects' active threat.

Table 1. Number of Cases Suspects Fired First vs. Number of Cases SWAT Fired First

| Year | No. of Cases Suspect Fired, but not SWAT | No. of Incidents SWAT Officer-Involved Shootings | SWAT Fired |
|-------------|--|--|------------|
| 1986 | 170 | 178 | 8 |
| 1987 | 178 | 187 | 11 |
| 1988 | 190 | 203 | 13 |
| 1989 | 208 | 220 | 12 |
| 1990 | 220 | 229 | 9 |
| 1991 | 234 | 243 | 11 |
| 1992 | 245 | 256 | 11 |
| 1993 | 254 | 262 | 8 |
| 1994 | 260 | 270 | 10 |
| 1995 | 265 | 277 | 12 |
| 1996 | 286 | 289 | 3 |
| 1997 | 282 | 288 | 6 |
| 1998 | 295 | 299 | 4 |
| SUM | 3087 | 3201 | 118 |
| Mean | 237 | 246 | 9 |

The second objective of this study was to answer the following question: are the SWAT operations effective in saving lives during incidents involving suicidal suspects? The comparative analyses in Table 2 show that, during a SWAT intervention, the suicidal suspects are on average 10.5 times more likely to be rescued by a SWAT team than commit suicide.¹ Of the 3081 incidents involving suicidal suspects in which incidents the SWAT teams intervened, only in 293 of those incidents the suspects ended up taking their own lives. It is obvious here that the SWAT interventions resulted in fewer fatalities and have a preventive effect on suicidal suspects. That is, the intervention of the SWAT team in suspect suicidal cases saved lives.

Secondary in nature but relevant analysis on suspect suicide trends shown on Figure 1, there is an increase in the number of cases involving suicidal suspects in the thirteen years panel data analyzed in this study. However, the ratio between the total number of cases with suicidal suspects and the actual suicides during SWAT interventions has significantly decreased. This shows an increase in the SWAT effectiveness in handling such cases.

Table 2. Comparing the Number of Indicants with Suicidal Suspects and the Number of Reported Suicides during SWAT Interventions

| Year | No. of Incidents SWAT Officer-Involved Shootings | No. of Incidents with Suicidal Suspects | No. of Reported Suicides | Ratio Suicidal vs. Suicides |
|-------------|--|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1986 | 178 | 168 | 7 | 24 |
| 1987 | 187 | 174 | 7 | 25 |
| 1988 | 203 | 189 | 12 | 16 |
| 1989 | 220 | 206 | 14 | 15 |
| 1990 | 229 | 218 | 14 | 15 |
| 1991 | 243 | 233 | 17 | 14 |
| 1992 | 256 | 245 | 19 | 13 |
| 1993 | 262 | 254 | 24 | 11 |
| 1994 | 270 | 261 | 29 | 9 |
| 1995 | 277 | 268 | 36 | 7 |
| 1996 | 289 | 286 | 39 | 7 |
| 1997 | 288 | 283 | 35 | 8 |
| 1998 | 299 | 296 | 40 | 7 |
| SUM | 3201 | 3081 | 293 | --- |
| Mean | 246 | 237 | 22.5 | 10.5 |

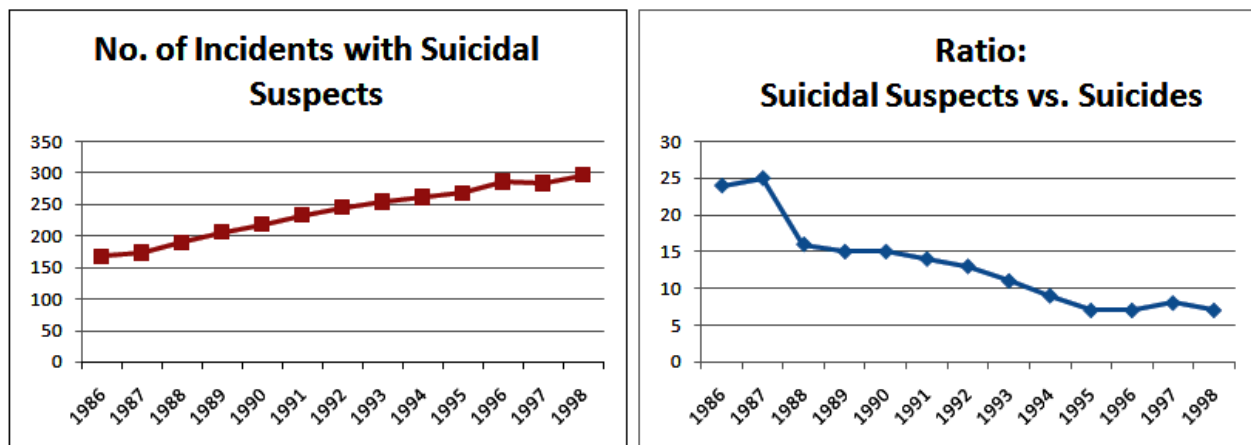


Figure 1. Trend Comparison of the Relationship between the Number of Incidents with Suicidal Suspects and Actual Suicides

The third objective of this study was to determine the success rate of SWAT interventions during hostage situations. To address this objective, I compared the total number of hostage incidents and the number of incidents in which hostages were successfully rescued by the SWAT teams. The data presented in Table 3 show that, of the 2073 total hostage incidents, in 1453 of those incidents the hostages were successfully rescued by the SWAT operations. The data show that on average, hostages are 2.3 times more likely to be successfully rescued by the SWAT team than killed during a hostage crisis incident.

¹ It is noteworthy to mention here that data in Tables 1, 2, and 3 do not include cases that are successfully resolved without fatalities or officer-involved shootings. Research shows that most cases in which the police negotiators communicate with the barricaded suspects are solved without fatalities (Miller, 2005). The numbers of incidents that are compared in this study includes only those in which SWAT officers have been involved in an active shooting with suspects.

Table 3. Comparing the Total Number of Hostage Incidents and Incidents with Rescued Hostages

| Year | No. of Hostage Incidents | No. of Incidents with Hostage Rescued | Other Outcome |
|-------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1986 | 79 | 75 | 4 |
| 1987 | 88 | 79 | 11 |
| 1988 | 99 | 88 | 11 |
| 1989 | 126 | 100 | 26 |
| 1990 | 134 | 104 | 20 |
| 1991 | 157 | 111 | 46 |
| 1992 | 173 | 117 | 56 |
| 1993 | 191 | 120 | 71 |
| 1994 | 202 | 122 | 80 |
| 1995 | 214 | 125 | 111 |
| 1996 | 135 | 133 | 2 |
| 1997 | 232 | 138 | 94 |
| 1998 | 243 | 141 | 102 |
| SUM | 2073 | 1453 | 634 |
| Mean | 159 | 111 | 48 |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Since the late 1960s, which marks the beginning of SWAT formation, SWAT has gradually gained both good reputation and disrepute throughout the United States. Since then, there have been numerous movies, cartoons, video games, television series produced and even action figures depicting SWAT operations as life-saving, but also as door-braking paramilitary formation that typically reminds civilians of the government power and authority. SWAT has become a conventional entity, and media has contributed to this image by making it look thrilling. However, the media does not always show the risks, commitment, and time that these officers put in to keep the community safe, most of the time being on volunteer status.

In terms of research interests, surprisingly enough, there is little to no research on SWAT operations. Perhaps this the most understudies top in policing, which warrants the need for research in this area. The present study is intended to add to this limited literature on SWAT operations. Although this study has many limitations, it offers three important piece of information to the criminal justice readers. First, this study shows that hostages are 2.3 times more likely to be rescued by SWAT than get killed during a hostage situation. Second, during a SWAT intervention, the suicidal suspects are on average 10.5 times more likely to be rescued by a SWAT team than commit suicide. Third, this study shows that the SWAT officers very rarely initiate the shooting sequence first and respond with firepower only in cases when they are met with such threats. In the numerical value, this means, an average only 1 in 27 officer-involved shooting incidents, the SWAT fired at the suspect before the suspect initiated such threat sequences. This is the evidence needed to conclude that the SWAT operations meet the criteria of life-saving and not life-taking police operations.

This research does not answer many important questions about the SWAT effectiveness. This is a limited suggestion but future research can focus on two new dimensions of this topic. First, there is a need to know what type of police training has a significant effect on improving SWAT interventions in terms of successfully saving hostages during interventions involving barricaded suspect. Second, future research can also measure the effect of differential training on successful interventions involving suicidal suspects. This may help policy makers to make informed decisions on what type of training is more relevant and more important in improve the quality and effectiveness of SWAT operations.

Finally, the title of this research article was not pre-planned. It was derived from the findings of this article. Thus, the SWAT operations are not meant to deprive people of life; rather these operations have shown overtime that they are necessary and much needed law enforcement tools that help save the lives of innocent people who are unfortunate enough to find themselves among suicidal suspects.

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