

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
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**Assessing the Need for Emergency Response
Teams in Small to Medium Size Police Departments**

**A Police Research Project
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ABSTRACT

Today's law enforcement agencies are under scrutiny from the media, courts and society on the way they manage critical incidents. This is most evident when the use of lethal force is required. The threat of serious injury, death and legal action are concerns administrators must face when officers are involved in narcotic raids, barricaded subjects or hostage incidents. The lack of a trained response team to deal with such emergencies may cause an agency to be marginally prepared, or not prepared at all, in dealing with a crises event.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the need for a response team in medium to small sized police organizations. A review of history and development of response teams, the changing complexity of potential deadly tactical situations, and issues regarding inadequate training to deal with critical incidents are presented.

Many small police departments do not have the resources to develop response teams. As a result, organizing such a unit may not be a priority. This research indicates that deadly force issues should be a priority and these issues increase with the size of the jurisdiction.

The conclusion of this research indicates that administrators of agencies employing 25 or more sworn personnel should be proactive in assessing the need for a response team in their jurisdiction. Because critical threat incidents are rare occurrences, untrained officers who are inexperienced in tactical situations may not be equipped to cause the reasonable, necessary and acceptable results in such life threatening emergencies.

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Introduction

A critical problem that police agencies face is the ability to respond to a major threat with sufficiently trained personnel. Larger departments have the luxury of many officers. As a result, management is able to choose and train a group of these officers to react to barricaded subjects or hostage situations. Small departments usually do not have the finances, time or personnel to adequately train such a group of officers for critical incident responses.

In larger municipalities, with more businesses, industries, people and activity, the likelihood of incidents requiring response or SWAT (Special Weapon and Tactics) teams is much greater. These incidents are not as common of an occurrence in smaller jurisdictions. If an incident does occur, the local law enforcement agency is still responsible for answering the initial call. In many cases these officers have little or no training in the basic response techniques for major "callouts." The potential mortality rate in crises entry is high. It is not something for an untrained group of patrol officers to attempt (Spaulding, 1990, p43).

The purpose of this research is to identify issues regarding the feasibility of small agencies to spend resources to form response teams of officers with specialized training.

The primary intent of the research is to provide administrators of small police agencies with accurate and relevant information related to cost factors, need assessment and liability

issues regarding special response teams.

This research will be conducted for the primary benefit of law enforcement administrators with 25 or more sworn personnel. Every community has the potential for a violent incident. These violent situations open officers to liability based on inappropriate action, due to lack of a response team or improper training. On the other hand, to not act at all or to wait for a response team from another jurisdiction to respond can also be a cause for legal concern. For example, If a gunman barricaded himself, would the initial responders be liable for not setting a proper perimeter to contain the suspect and protect the surrounding public before another SWAT team arrived?

There are several sources of information used in this research paper. They consist of journals, books, government publications and a survey conducted among 32 police agencies.

Historical and Theoretical Context

In the early American West an occasional bad man had to go to jail. If the local sheriff needed extra help in apprehending a desperado, he would deputize a few of the good ole boys. They were not well trained in police tactics and justice was sometimes a little rough (Lesce 84). As we became more civilized we stopped using such primitive methods in apprehending the bad guys. In 1966 we discovered that even our modern day officers were not equipped to handle some incidents of a severe magnitude.

On August 1, 1966, Charles Joseph Whitman, climbed to the top

of The University of Texas Tower. The tower was a major feature of the Austin skyline and overlooked the UT campus. Charles Whitman, armed with several weapons, prepared for a long siege. He began shooting at unsuspecting people from the tower. By the time Whitman was killed by Austin police, over 40 people lay dead or wounded from Whitman's bullets (Roberts 62).

Prior to this incident few, if any, law enforcement agencies staffed specialized teams to deal with armed, barricaded subjects or snipers. Patrol officers generally dealt with these assignments. The Texas Tower incident showed law enforcement agencies that police officers were improperly equipped or trained to successfully deal with situations of this magnitude. Responding officers, equipped only with sidearms, could do little except contain the area and urge bystanders to take cover (Lesce 86). The department was totally unprepared for incidents of this nature.

This event illustrated how the complexion of many types of crimes were changing. It caused law enforcement agencies across the nation to assess their own capabilities in dealing with a similar event. Many law enforcement agencies which possessed sufficient resources began to establish and train specialized tactical teams for use during hostage/barricade and other types of high risk incidents (Mijares 10).

Today almost every large city has a response or react team of some kind to handle a complex tactical response. Many of the medium to small agencies are marginally prepared or not prepared at all for a critical incident (Olin 2).

For the purpose of this research paper a response team is defined as an organized group of officers specially trained to respond to a serious threat. This response team may not have all of the capabilities of a SWAT team. It is a team which is disciplined and equipped to contain a situation so that innocent civilians are not needlessly jeopardized.

Most small agencies do not have the necessary resources of manpower and equipment as the larger agencies. They also may not have the same need for responding to a number of serious situations. Even though the likelihood of a major incident is less likely in small towns, it does not mean that it will not happen. Ninety-one percent of all police agencies maintain fewer than 50 officers and 90 percent of all departments serve a population of less than 25,000 (Gordon 45). If small jurisdictions are unable to see a need for response teams then the majority of law enforcement agencies in our country would be without react capabilities.

Smaller agencies are beginning to see that they are not immune to the problems associated with big cities. Problems with drug trafficking and gangs were once isolated to metropolitan areas. Response teams were seen as something unnecessary because the big problems did not happen there (Pilant 73).

The City of Lufkin, Texas, population 30,000 lived in the same quiet bliss as did many other small departments in East Texas. The homicide rate averaged about one murder a year. In 1989 Lufkin suddenly changed. In the first six months of 1989 Lufkin saw ten drug related murders including a hostage situation where one person

was killed and two others were wounded. "It was a rude awakening for the city" said Sergeant David Walker. "The citizens started looking to the city council for help," (Pilant 74). Lufkin soon formed a Special Entry and Response Team.

Religious groups stockpiling weapons, militia groups advocating government overthrow and isolated extremist groups are taking root across the country (Gilmartin 5). Though they may not all be a threat to society, some do pose a significant risk. Many of these groups live or conduct business away from urban areas to avoid interference from government agencies. Law enforcement from rural areas who may be called on to deal with extremist groups may be totally unprepared. Between 1994 and 1996 there were at least 441 militia units across the country (Abshire 42).

Review of Practice and Literature

Many police departments consider the formation of a SWAT team only after experiencing a barricaded suspect incident which results in an officer being injured or killed, or the incident otherwise mishandled (Boyd 23).

Hostage situations, barricaded subjects and raid operations are not just a big city problem. They happen wherever there are people who break the law and there are police officers to intercede. The formation of tactical teams is becoming common place in American law enforcement. What was once thought of as a big city concept is spreading across the country to police agencies which may have fewer than 20 officers (Spaulding 79).

While larger agencies are better equipped to finance SWAT teams, smaller agencies face problems with limited manpower and budgets in organizing a SWAT team. Smaller agencies have recruiting problems and are often stepping stones to larger agencies (Lesce 31). The tax base is usually limited and police salaries are lower than the larger departments (Schmitt 35). Many small police agencies must prioritize financial needs to make ends meet. Purchasing equipment, radios, squad cars, and paying salaries are basic needs. There may be merit in the need for a SWAT team but the basic needs of an agency come first. Departments with less than 25 officers would also have a difficult time in organizing and training a team considering the strain to the agencies manpower. Fairburn states, " A minimum police population of 40 is required for a limited team and a police population of 100 or more would be required for a full-fledged SWAT unit" (43).

A department with 25 or more officers is generally going to serve a population of 10,000 or more. Even though a full fledged SWAT team might not be cost effective, a response team to respond to an initial serious threat should be considered. The team may not have enough expertise to handle a hostage rescue but it could probably contain the situation until a neighboring SWAT team responded.

A group of officers trained to respond could contain a situation and prevent the escape of a suspect. It should prevent the situation from becoming a moving problem where the suspect would be more difficult to contain or endanger other individuals.

The team could be trained to assess the suspects options and limit his actions. A response team could train to negotiate, avoid getting too close to a suspect, train to use less lethal weapons in lieu of deadly force and safely perform evacuations.

Without a trained response team these options would be limited or unavailable. Whenever a gunman is barricaded law enforcement is at a disadvantage. Officers can close that advantage if they are properly trained. Too many times untrained officers may feel that they were successful in taking a barricaded subject into custody because nobody was hurt. That does not mean that the operation was handled correctly. It often means that the officers were " lucky". Luck will eventually run out if the proper tactics are not used.

To research how small to medium departments felt about the need for a response team a survey was sent to 32 departments. (See Attachment A). The populations of the respective cities ran from 2,100 to 77,000 with the average being 30,818. The department size ran from 8 minimum officers to 143 with the average being 53 sworn personnel.

The following information was obtained in this survey:

1. 100% of the departments surveyed stated that there was a sufficient need for a response team in their agency.
2. 90.6% had a response team.
3. 79.4% of the departments with response teams stated that their response team was a SWAT team

Providing a response team strained the resources of almost all of the departments but they felt it was necessary. Factors which made it difficult to maintain their response team:

1. budget - 44.8%
2. manpower - 37.9%
3. low need for response team - 13.7%
4. limited training - 31%

(Several of the departments listed more than one factor)

The number of times the team is called out in a year was 0 to 100 times with the average being 10.8. (For many of these teams hazardous narcotic warrants made up most of their calls). Three (9.4%) of the departments stated that they had no response team. The primary reasons were low need, budget considerations and an inter local agreement with a neighboring agency.

The survey indicates that most administrators felt that the need for a response team is important despite the strain on budget, manpower and training considerations.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

It is well established from research that a response team is desirable for any agency with a potential to deal with violent incidents (Attachment A). Administrators must weigh the threat assessment to their communities (need for a response team) to the cost of providing a team.

The size of the jurisdiction and the number of institutions such as schools, banks, businesses, post offices should be relevant in assessing the need for some sort of response team. The frequency of acts of violence and amount of narcotic use and trafficking are also important in identifying tactical resources to deal with potential problems. The availability of mutual aid with

a larger department and the distance and response time of the assisting agency should be considered. If a city does not have major business, heavy narcotic or gang problems, and has an agreement with a neighboring jurisdiction to respond to critical incidents, the need for a response team may not as critical as other departmental issues.

The low need for a response team versus the limited resources to support it may be a legitimate reason to not incorporate a team. One factor which is not a legitimate reason is the old school mentality of some administrators toward any type of a response team. Some misconceptions, proliferating images of the tactical response unit as a "hit team" have hindered both the formation and evolution of special teams. Some chiefs and sheriffs have entirely foregone the creation of a special team for fear of adverse public and political reactions (Taylor 27). Some still believe that it is a waste of resources to supply a team of officers who they perceive are there to walk through walls and 'kick butt'. These individuals have yet to realize that a properly trained team is more likely to end a situation peacefully than an untrained team.

Everyone expects their local police to do a competent and thorough job. The public is much more aware of their individual feeling of safety and security than they are of published crime rates, number of arrests, or whether crime rates went up or down (Ahrens 6). It would seem that special operations officers are valuable assets in safely resolving potentially violent situations. At least this is a commonly held view - that such teams are

important to the safety of the community, other law enforcement personnel, and criminal suspects (Stevens 116).

Citizens expect proper handling of emergencies. The law enforcement profession should not be perceived as disorganized. The resulting impact of an improperly handled tactical situation can be so overwhelming that the after incident publicity may be more devastating than the actual tactical deployment. An ill-conceived tactical plan that fails may result in lawsuits or the unnecessary loss of life to those involved in the situations (Olin 5). Critical examples of action that may require immediate intervention include execution of hostages, gunshots directed at police officers or bystanders, and attempts to escape from the area of containment (Ross 26).

Major incidents have circumstances present which are difficult for patrol officers to handle. Without a trained and properly equipped response team, police may have insufficient weaponry, ineffective communications, tactics and command of the special threat situation. In *Canton v. Harris*, Supreme Court Justice White states " While it may seem contrary to common sense to have a policy of not taking reasonable steps to train, etc., if the need for more or different approaches and training is so obvious and the inadequacy is so likely to result in the violation of constitutional rights, the policy makers of the city might reasonably be accused of being deliberately indifferent to these needs" (Ross 26).

A trained team reacting to a major threat will better know

what to do and how to take charge of the threat. Training for the incident can reduce the uncertainty of what to do and better prepare officers to assess options and in many cases resolve the problem. A response team may not have all of the appropriate tools and training to resolve all special threats. If the response team does not have complete SWAT capabilities and equipment it can at least increase the safety factor to citizens and officers until a SWAT team arrives. Many agencies which are too small to form their own response team may consider a multi-agency team concept where small agencies support each other in crises events. To increase safety and reduce liability in special threat situations, smaller agencies may adapt guidelines and policies specifying how and what the multi-agency team responds to.

Another under-utilized concept in law enforcement is regionalization of services. This can involve a single agency or combined agencies providing SWAT services in a given geographical area that may encompass several law enforcement jurisdictions (Carmona 36).

Conclusion/Recommendations

Small to medium size police agencies should make a careful evaluation of their need for a response team if one is not in place. A classroom of students being held hostage in Rockwall, Texas is just as critical as it is in Dallas. An untrained agency responding to such an incident without the benefit of proper planning, negotiating, and deployment tactics has a potential for

catastrophe. Hostage and barricade incidents are rare occurrences and as a result police do not gain the experience necessary in responding to these incidents which would lead to a smooth and practiced action (Wargo 44).

A response team does not have to be a SWAT team but it must train. Practice in solving unexpected situations is critical for any tactical team (Miller 17). A team should not be overextended- the commander should be able to recognize when a mission is too big (Kolman 153). It can be the front line in preventing escalation of a problem until a larger SWAT team arrives.

Even though a response team may be seldom or never used, their existence exhibits preparation for potentially deadly crisis events and stimulates confidence within the department and public. A response team also lessens the likelihood of injury to officers, the public, and violators (Swanson 79).

Barricaded subjects present increased liability and actual physical danger to both the citizenry and the officers who must face such individuals. The formation of response teams is the most effective and acceptable alternative in forcing conventional law enforcement personnel to cope with subjects who operate outside the scope of normal law enforcement policy and operations (Taylor 27).

In conclusion, police administrators of small and medium size agencies should invest considerable effort in assessing the need for developing a response team or considering a multi-agency agreement. A more realistic needs assessment for response teams or mutual aid agreements may not be for a chief to ask how prepared they are if an incident happens, but how prepared they are when it happens.

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Attachment A

1. What is your city/county population? _____
2. What is the actual number of sworn personnel in your department? _____
3. In regards to budget, manpower and training considerations, is there a sufficient need to have a trained response team in your department? _____
4. Do you have a response team? Yes-go to #5
No-go to #9
5. How many officers make up the response team? _____
6. Is your response team trained as a SWAT team? _____
7. What factors, if any, make it difficult to maintain your response team? Circle all that apply.
Budget
Manpower
Low need
Limited training
Other
8. What is the average number of times your response team is called out in a year? _____
9. (No response team). What specific factors prevent the development of a response team? Circle all that apply.
1.Budget
2.Manpower
3.Low need
4.Limited training time
5.Limited training resources
6. Interlocal tactical response agreement
10. Comments:

