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SWAT in the Commonwealth: Trends and Issues in Paramilitary Policing

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RESEARCH TOPIC

Movies and television shows depicting a future where law enforcement officers look like military soldiers may not be wholly inaccurate. In the last ten years, SWAT teams, or "police paramilitary units" (PPUs) have become an influential force in contemporary policing.

RESEARCH ISSUES

Academic research and the news media have recently taken note of this development and have highlighted several important trends and issues related to paramilitary policing. These include the rapid growth of PPU's, their movement into mainstream police functions, and the potential negative consequences of such a shift. This study overviews national trends in paramilitary policing using two national surveys. It then examines trends and issues relevant to the state of Kentucky using both mail survey data and in-depth telephone interviews.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings indicate: 1) only minimal growth in SWAT teams in Kentucky, but the potential for an increase in the next few years; 2) a shift in the SWAT function in Kentucky from handling only reactive situations such as the barricaded suspect or hostage situations, to proactive deployments such as conducting a no-knock drug search of a private residence; and, 3) potential growth in smaller Kentucky police departments that raises questions of cost-effectiveness, adequate training, and necessity.

SWAT in the Commonwealth: Trends and Issues in Paramilitary Policing

Peter B. Kraska
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INTRODUCTION: PARAMILITARY POLICING IN A DEMOCRACY

The police institution performs perhaps the most difficult function in our society. The police are both citizen helpers and citizen controllers. As such, they must navigate the tough terrain of maintaining legitimacy among a public that places a high value on democratic freedoms while demanding more aggressive crime control measures. A new path taken by many police departments highlights the struggle in maintaining a balance between democratic norms and tough crime control policies – namely, the growth in size and expanding functions of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, or what is known in the academic literature as "police paramilitary units" (PPUs). Surprisingly, the

Hollywood imagery where squads of militarily-clad police officers carry heavy weaponry, may be a somewhat accurate picture of what has become in the last ten years a common feature of policing in the real world.

Many believe, of course, that "working the streets" is more dangerous today than in the past, and more precautions such as PPU's handling high-risk situations must be taken.¹ However true this perception might or might not be, this image of police as special operations soldiers, as opposed to civilian servants of the public, breaks with a long civilian tradition in American policing and the contemporary trend of community based policing. The news media has begun to pick up on this tension and is asking questions about the new wave of paramilitary policing.

The points of view expressed in this bulletin series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Council on Postsecondary Education, Eastern Kentucky University, or the College of Law Enforcement.

The following are just a few examples of news stories that have appeared in the last two years.

- *Washington Post* — “Exploding Number of SWAT Teams Sets Off Alarms”
- *New York Times* — “Soldiers of the Drug War Remain On Duty”
- *Boston Globe* — “Police Take a Military Turn”
- *National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition* — “Militarizing Police?”
- *Jim Lehrer News Hour* — “SWAT Scrutiny”
- *CBS Evening News* — “Blue Steel, Blue Thunder”
- *Orlando Weekly* — “Commando Cops: The Growing Militarization of Central Florida’s Men in Blue.”²

This media coverage was precipitated by a study conducted at Eastern Kentucky University’s College of Law Enforcement.³ Other factors related to why developments in SWAT teams are receiving so much attention include the sheer size of the phenomenon, numerous high-profile SWAT debacles such as the Waco and Ruby Ridge incidents, and the aforementioned concern about how this trend coincides with our democratic values. -

The purpose of this bulletin is to provide an overview of the issues and trends associated with the SWAT phenomenon as it relates to the state of Kentucky. It will overview the PPU phenomenon at the national level, discuss issues and trends directly relevant to the Commonwealth, and conclude with a look at where this phenomenon might be headed. It is important to point out that wherever possible, the analysis includes the perspective of police practitioners.

POLICE PARAMILITARY UNIT BACKGROUND

Police officials in the 1960s began to call for the establishment of specialized units which could react competently to extremely high-risk events after several highly publicized hostage and sniper situations. Police paramilitary units were modeled after military special operations squads, particularly the Navy Seals, and other police paramilitary teams in foreign countries. By the mid-1970s most larger metropolitan police agencies followed the lead of the Los Angeles Police Department in establishing “SWAT teams.”

It is important to clearly delineate traditional police and policing from police paramilitary units and their activities. PPU are organized and train much like a military special operations team with a strict military command structure and discipline. Units consist of anywhere from 10 to 40 members; the bulk of tactical operations officers function also as patrol officers during their regular duties. The units have at the forefront of their function to threaten or use force collectively, as opposed to the individually-based approach in traditional policing. Operationally, PPU are deployed to deal with those situations that require a team of police officers specifically trained to be use-of-force specialists.

These units have historically operated as *reactive* units, handling only those rare and strictly defined, high-risk situations already in progress such as hostage, barricaded suspect, terrorist, civil disturbance and sniper situations.

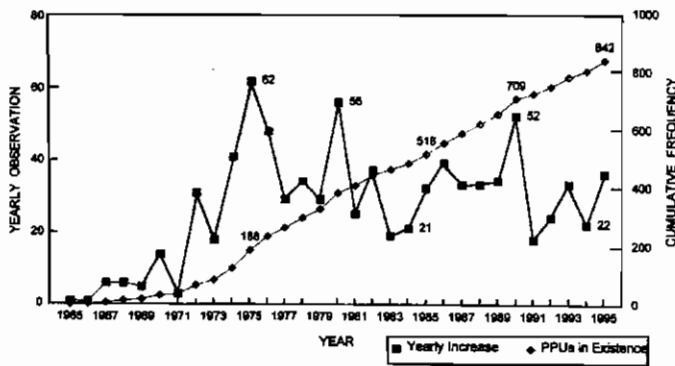
Other distinguishing characteristics of PPU are the nature of the hardware they employ and their garb. They generally outfit themselves with black or urban camouflage battle dress uniforms (BDUs), full-body armor, and Kevlar helmets. PPU weaponry and hardware include submachine guns, tactical shotguns, sniper rifles, percussion grenades, CS and OC gas (tear and pepper gas), surveillance equipment, and an array of less-than-lethal technologies.⁴

SWAT ACROSS THE COUNTRY: NATIONAL TRENDS

PPUs have received little attention in research circles. It is important to demonstrate, therefore, the degree to which they are becoming a common component of contemporary policing. In an attempt to document and understand the current state of paramilitary policing, the author has conducted extensive field research on PPU in several agencies, including agencies in Kentucky, has completed two national surveys, and has conducted over 130 in-depth telephone interviews with members of the PPU community from across the nation.⁵ The first mail survey was sent in the first part of 1996 to all police agencies (excluding federal) serving communities of 50,000 people or more (79% response rate). The second was sent in the latter half of 1996 to all departments serving communities between 25,000 and 50,000 citizens (72% response rate).

The responding departments provided yearly data demonstrating a steep growth in the formation of PPU's and a sharp increase in their use in the last decade. By the end of 1995, about 90 percent of police agencies serving populations of 50,000 people or more had a police paramilitary unit. Although most larger departments formed their units in the 1970s, the numbers of PPU's have grown steadily; in 1982 only about 55 percent had such a unit. In agencies serving 25,000 to 50,000 people, 65 percent had a PPU by the end of 1995. Between 1985-1995 there was a 157 percent increase in paramilitary units in agencies serving small jurisdictions. It is likely that by the turn of the century, three-fourths of these small departments will have PPU's. Figure 1 illustrates the annual growth of PPU's in all size jurisdictions.

Figure 1: The Formation of PPU's
From 1965-1995

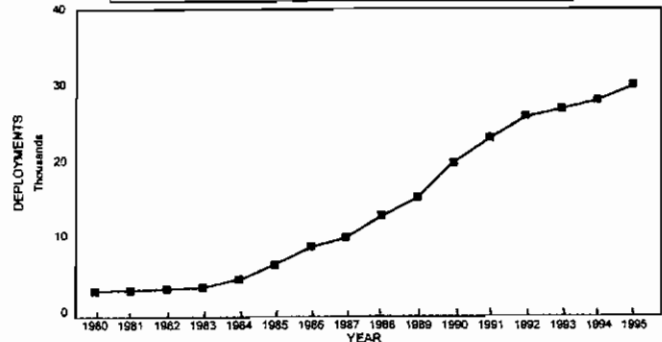


Both of these surveys also collected baseline data on the number of call-outs performed by each department starting in 1980. Yearly data were requested from 1980 to the end of 1995. Call-outs included any activity which required a deployment of the unit, such as barricaded persons, hostage, terrorist, and civil disturbance situations, and the serving of high-risk search and arrest warrants. Measuring call-outs indicates the total amount of SWAT activity.

Survey results of the data from larger departments found a fairly constant and minimal number of call-outs for the years 1980-1983 -- an average of about 13 per year. The level of SWAT activity more than doubled by 1986, almost tripled by 1989, and quadrupled by 1995. Similar trends occurred in smaller departments. Between 1980-1984 small jurisdiction PPU's conducted on average about 3.5 call-outs per year. By 1995 this had increased to almost 13. Examining the total number of call-outs from both surveys

may be even more illustrative of PPU's increased activities (see Figure 2). The returned surveys alone documented 29,962 tactical call-outs in 1995; this is a 939 percent increase since 1980 when there were 2,884 call-outs.

Figure 2: The Rise in PPU Call-Outs
From 1980-1995



Probably the most significant finding in this research is that SWAT teams have expanded their functions beyond the rare hostage or barricaded suspect situations into a host of proactive activities normally handled by traditional police personnel and tactics. This includes an enormous increase in the use of PPU's for conducting search and arrest warrants generally associated with drug control efforts, and conducting aggressive patrol work in high-crime areas. Nearly every police official in small and large agencies explained in phone interviews that their PPU's have become involved heavily in "no-knock" search warrants on residences suspected of drug crimes.

A "no-knock" drug raid is a surprise SWAT team search for illegal drugs, guns, and money conducted at a private residence usually during pre-dawn hours. Using specialized battering rams, or "entry explosives," and sometimes flash-band grenades, the team conducts an expeditious room by room search of the entire residence where all occupants are expected to immediately comply with officers' demands to get into the prone position. All are handcuffed and brought to a central location in the dwelling or in the yard. If any person does not comply immediately because they are obstinate or confused, more extreme use of force measures are taken. Finally the police search the entire residence for contraband.

About 80 percent of the call-outs in the last five years seen in Figure 2 were not for traditional SWAT functions but, rather, for "no-knock" drug raids. About 20 percent of departments engaged in 250 or more of these types of deployments per year.

SWAT IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Data for this section of this report examining SWAT in Kentucky were derived from two sources. First, the studies mentioned above include quantitative information relevant to SWAT teams in Kentucky. Second, ten open-ended, anonymous interviews were conducted with police administrators familiar with PPU's and key members of the Kentucky SWAT community. The interviewees were selected based on their level of expertise and knowledge of paramilitary policing and accessibility. Interviews lasted from 20 to 90 minutes.

Growth and Formation of Kentucky PPUs

The national studies cited above uncovered 10 police departments in Kentucky with SWAT teams. This does not mean that only 10 exist - some departments may have not returned a survey, and it is likely that more departments have formed PPUs since the completion of this study. In fact, out of those departments (without a SWAT team) that returned surveys, about 40 percent of them were planning on establishing one "in the next few years." These 10 teams are located in small, medium, and large jurisdictions. All but one team operates as a part-time unit, and the average number of officers in these units is 18. Two of the teams were formed in the 1970s, three in the 1980s, and five in the 1990s.

These quantitative data corroborate information derived from telephone interviews. The overall perception among interviewees was that Kentucky police departments were "behind the power curve" in developing PPUs, but that numerous departments were forming new units. Although demographically Kentucky is a unique state, it is worth noting that surrounding states such as Indiana reported 21 units, Ohio 43, Tennessee 12, Arkansas 7, and North Carolina 22. The most common reasons cited for a lack of PPU formation in Kentucky was a reluctance by police chiefs to support the imagery of SWAT in their communities, and a lack of available monies. All interviewees stressed, however, that Kentucky was on the verge of a significant expan-

sion of PPUs. One interviewee predicted the increase would come in the form of multijurisdictional teams: "very few departments can afford these (PPUs) alone; we will probably do what other states are doing in setting up teams using three of four different agencies." One police administrator who was interviewed predicted that a large growth in paramilitary policing was inevitable.

I think situations exist in our neighborhoods today that dictate that police departments in Kentucky become more tactical, across the entire agency.... Some cities in this country have fully equipped units on the street, SWAT type units that go in and deal with neighborhoods that are out of control with full ballistic gear, MP5's, concussion grenades, that they are not afraid to use. It is going to come to a point that the only people that are going to be able to deal with these problems are highly trained tactical teams with the proper equipment and training to go into a neighborhood and clear a neighborhood and hold for community policing efforts.

These quotes and the mail-out survey shed some light on the perception of some Kentucky police as to why PPUs should be formed. Overall, their perceptions coincided with the results from the national surveys; PPUs are needed to combat the drug problem. Both Kentucky police and police nationally cited, as a secondary reason, an effective response to "barricaded suspects." All interviewees in Kentucky claimed that barricaded suspect situations are more common today than in the past.

Options varied on conducting "no-knock" drug raids. One SWAT commander mimicked several interviewees in questioning whether the risks incurred conducting these types of raids were worth a low-level drug arrest. Others argued that the drug war "has to be brought indoors" - meaning proactive raids on private residences were essential in fighting the drug problem. There is a growing awareness nationally, even within the SWAT community, of the dangers of proactive drug raids (see newspaper articles cited above); some of the interviewees were obviously sensitive to these concerns.

PPU Activity in Kentucky

Kentucky PPU's carried out a yearly average of 36 call-outs in 1995. This represents a significant increase from 1985 when the average number of deployments was only 15. Almost all call-outs in the early 1980s were for barricaded suspect situations. By the end of 1995 only one-quarter of these call-outs were for barricaded suspect situations and almost three-fourths were for serving warrants. All of these figures are consistent with the national trend of PPU's shifting from being a reactive tool handling the rare barricaded or hostage situation, to a proactive force used for no-knock drug raids on private residences.

One important difference between Kentucky PPU's and the rest of the nation is in the area of patrol work. Twenty percent of PPU's nationwide, in both small and large jurisdictions, are used for aggressive, proactive patrol work. None of the police agencies in Kentucky had expanded their PPU's functions to include patrol work. However, one-half of the Kentucky respondents agreed with the statement that "PPU's should be deployed into high-crime areas for proactive patrol work." One interviewee stated that he would not allow his PPU to engage in this activity because; "it just doesn't give the right image to our department; my officers in battle-dress-uniforms patrolling the streets would be offensive." A SWAT commander disagreed: "saturating a crime-ridden neighborhood with fully equipped officers would give the community some breathing room and welcome relief."

No national standards exist for the formation and training of PPU's. Therefore, police agencies are on their own in determining the type and extent of training needed. This lack of regulation and uniformity is reflected in the disparate number of training hours PPU members receive in Kentucky. Nationally, the average number of training hours for the typical part-time SWAT team is about 225 hours per year, per officer. In Kentucky three departments provide fewer than 100 hours, two departments provide about 120 hours, four departments provide slightly more than 200 hours, and one full-time unit trains 800 hours per officer, per year. Most experts agree that team members who are routinely deployed on call-outs need at least 250 hours of training per year, and at least 300 hours if they are only rarely deployed.

All SWAT teams in Kentucky appear to be well-funded in that they are well-equipped with the latest gear and weaponry. All teams are equipped with military-style battle-dress-uniforms, protective vests and shields, Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine guns, and dynamic entry devices. In addition, 80 percent of the teams have surveillance technologies such as hypersensitive listening devices and night-vision aids.

CONCLUSION: ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS

All empirical indicators point to an increase in activity and in the number of police paramilitary units in Kentucky – although this growth is lagging behind the rest of the country.⁶ Given the highly decentralized nature of policing in Kentucky, and the rapidly increasing popularity of these units in police subculture, SWAT teams will likely show up in some unlikely locations. One Kentucky department in a small town of only 9,000 people with no real crime problem has established a well-funded 15 officer PPU. The unit got its start from a large drug seizure case and has had strong administrative support ever since, even though the team is rarely used.

Differing interpretations of these types of formations in small departments are possible. A common argument heard from the SWAT community is that a police agency never knows when a high-risk situation might present itself. We have just been provided evidence of this in the Littleton, Colorado incident. The reasoning is that it is better to be prepared, no matter what the odds of a disaster are, than to risk a disaster at the hands of ill-trained road patrol officers.

The counter argument focuses on the potential negative consequences of having PPU's in smaller departments. This position would not view small-town SWAT teams as cost-effective (start-up costs can run as high as \$150,000 - \$200,000), and would argue that a SWAT team can create more problems in a small department than it solves, especially in extremely difficult-to-handle situations such as the Littleton, Colorado incident.⁷ For example, some inactive SWAT teams pressure their administrations into allowing SWAT's involvement in functions better left to traditional policing - such as drug raids and patrol work. In addition, a 15 officer SWAT team in a department of only 30-50 officers can have a profound and potentially negative impact on

the organizational culture, one that emphasizes militaristic as opposed to democratic values. This is especially relevant today since the police institution has been attempting to adopt a more democratic community response model of service (community policing), as opposed to the traditional crime-fighting, paramilitary-professional model.

The cultural shift toward a military model is one worth watching closely. In studying the formation of these units in numerous jurisdictions, it seems that a large part of what drives their popularity beyond their actual utility is the seductive power of paramilitary subculture as promoted by the media, SWAT equipment suppliers, and professional SWAT associations. The techno-warrior outfits, heavy weaponry, sophisticated technology, hypermasculine themes, and the perception that SWAT officers are the "elite" cop's cops are nothing less than intoxicating for many SWAT team participants and those who aspire to work in such units. One might characterize some of this phenomenon as a runaway cultural process where certain officers desire these types of units, and some administrators feel they are being left behind if they do not have one.

This brings us back to the point made earlier about the police performing an extremely difficult function in our society and the importance of balancing democratic values with tough crime control policies. Police paramilitary units certainly represent a significant shift in the American police institution both in form and substance. There is no doubt that highly trained teams of high-risk specialists should play a role in contemporary police efforts. The question remains, however, as to the extent to which this trend should be limited and regulated in order to minimize the potential negative consequences associated with paramilitarizing our police.

NOTES

1. In actuality the felonious killing of police officers has not risen but has dropped significantly in the last 20 years. See P.B. Kraska, "Questioning the Militarization of U.S. Police: Critical Versus Advocacy Scholarship." *Policing and Society: An International Journal of Research and Policy*, Vol. 6, 1999, pp. 1-22.
2. *Washington Post*, 17 June 1997, p.A1. *Boston Globe*, 22 June 1997, p. A10. *National Public Radio's Weekend Edition*, 3 August 1997. *Jim Lehrer News Hour*, 23 September 1997. *The*

3. P.B. Kraska and L.J. Cubellis. "Militarizing Mayberry and Beyond: Making Sense of American Paramilitary Policing." *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 14, 1997, pp.607-629. P.B. Kraska and V.E. Kappeler "Militarizing American Police: The Rise and Normalization of Paramilitary Units." *Social Problems*, Vol. 44, 1997, pp. 1-18. P.B. Kraska and D.J. Paulsen, "Grounded Research Into U.S. Paramilitary Policing: Forging the Iron Fist Inside the Velvet Glove." *Policing and Society*, Vol. 7, 1997, pp. 253-270.
4. "Less-than-lethal" technologies are use of force technologies designed to disable, incapacitate, or disorient someone without killing them. Probably the most popular item used by SWAT teams is a lead-shot filled nylon bag, known as a "bean-bag," which is discharged out of a 12-gauge shotgun.
5. P.B. Kraska, "Enjoying Militarism: Political/ Personal Dilemmas in Studying U.S. Police Paramilitary Units". *Justice Quarterly*, Vol. 13, 1996, pp. 405-429. Kraska and Cubellis, "Militarizing Mayberry and Beyond." Kraska and Kappeler, "Militarizing American Police." Kraska and Paulsen, "Grounded Research Into U.S. Paramilitary Policing."
6. Although the findings in this study rely on interview data, they should be fairly representative of what is happening in Kentucky. The interviewees were all people who are aware of trends and issues associated with SWAT in Kentucky. In addition, there is no reason to believe that the quantitative data cited are not representative of all SWAT units in Kentucky.
7. For a more complete discussion of small-town issues and trends see Kraska and Cubellis, "Militarizing Mayberry and Beyond".

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Notes

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