Militarization fails to enhance police safety or reduce crime but may harm police reputation

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The increasingly visible presence of heavily armed police units in American communities has stoked widespread concern over the militarization of local law enforcement. Advocates claim militarized police units enhance officer safety or deter violent crime, while critics allege these tactics are targeted at racial minorities and erode trust in law enforcement. Using a rare geocoded census of SWAT team deployments from Maryland, I show that militarized police units are more often deployed in communities with large shares of African American residents, even after controlling for local crime rates. Further, using nationwide panel data on local police militarization, I demonstrate that militarized policing fails to enhance officer safety or reduce local crime. Finally, using survey experiments—one of which includes a large oversample of African American respondents—I show that seeing militarized police in news reports may diminish police reputation in the mass public. In the case of militarized policing, the results suggest that the often-cited trade-off between public safety and civil liberties is a false choice.

Significance

National debates over heavy-handed police tactics, including so-called “militarized” policing, are often framed as a trade-off between civil liberties and public safety, but the costs and benefits of controversial police practices remain unclear due to data limitations. Using an array of administrative data sources and original experiments I show that militarized “special weapons and tactics” (SWAT) teams are more often deployed in communities of color, and—contrary to claims by police administrators—provide no detectable benefits in terms of officer safety or violent crime reduction, on average. However, survey experiments suggest that seeing militarized police in news reports erodes opinion toward law enforcement. Taken together, these findings suggest that curtailing militarized policing may be in the interest of both police and citizens.

Author contributions: J.M. designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

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funding and presence. This analysis includes a large oversample of African American respondents—an important feature given the high rate at which militarized police units deploy in Black neighborhoods.

On average, militarized police units do not appear to provide the safety benefits that many police administrators claim. And police may suffer reputational damage when they deploy militarized units. These results suggest that the often-cited trade-off between public safety and civil liberties is, in the case of militarized policing, a false choice.

**Defining Police Militarization**

Police militarization is a continuum defined by a combination of equipment, tactics, and culture that centers on violent conflict (7, 15, 16). In recent decades, local police agencies have militarized their departments to varying degrees, adopting weapons, attire, tactics, and organizational structures developed for theaters of war. The proliferation of militarized policing is due in part to an expansion of the war on drugs and federal initiatives that supplied localities with excess military equipment and funds to purchase arms (17, 18). Heterogeneity in agency capacity makes it difficult to precisely code police agencies as “militarized” or not. Recently published data on military gear disbursements have been used in some studies to estimate the effects of militarization on police violence, crime, and officer safety (19–21). But these data convey only the receipt of equipment from one of several programs that help supply agencies with militarized gear (22). The data also appear incomplete (see SI Appendix, section 1A for details).

As an alternative approach, this paper analyzes the effects of a substantively important threshold on the militarization continuum: the use of SWAT teams. Both popular and scholarly debates over police militarization have focused on the activities of SWAT teams, their pronounced role in conducting the drug war (17), and their high-profile crowd-control efforts (23). SWAT teams often receive advanced combat training and exhibit a command structure modeled on military special forces units (15). In general the formation of a SWAT team represents a heightened commitment to the use of militarized equipment and tactics.

While it is plausible that SWAT deployments deter violent crime—and, in turn, improve officer safety—previous research on other heavy-handed tactics, including some that were much more widely applied such as stop and frisk, has found little evidence of resulting crime reductions (24–26). It is therefore crucial to empirically evaluate the assumed benefits of militarized policing.

**Data and Methods**

To characterize where and why SWAT teams deploy, I obtained data on every SWAT deployment in the state of Maryland over a 5-y period via a public records request. These data exist because the rare census of SWAT activity available in Maryland offers a valuable opportunity to study the stated reasons for, and geographic correlates of, militarized policing. Maryland also exhibits large variation in the racial composition of localities [e.g., the percentage of Blacks in zip-code tabulation areas (ZCTAs) ranges from 0% to more than 95%], allowing for an evaluation of the relationship between militarized tactics and neighborhood racial composition with minimal extrapolation.

Before examining that relationship, Table 1, generated using the pooled Maryland SWAT census, first displays the reasons SWAT teams are deployed. Table 1 shows that roughly 90% of SWAT deployments in that state over 5 fiscal years were conducted to serve search warrants. Previous work has shown that the use of SWAT teams to serve warrants, a practice which escalated as a result of the war on drugs (17), is an extremely disruptive event in the lives of citizens and often involves percussive grenades, battering rams, substantial property damage, and in rare cases deadly altercations stemming from citizens’ mistaken belief that they are experiencing a home invasion (28, 29). Table 1 also shows that less than 5% of deployments involved a “barricade” scenario, which typically involves an armed suspect refusing to surrender to police. Violence to people and animals is rare, and gun shots are fired 1.2% of the time—roughly 100 deployments during this period. While the data suggest that indiscriminate violence is less common than some anecdotal reports suggest, they also show that the vast majority of SWAT deployments occur in connection with nonemergency scenarios, predominately to serve search warrants.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason, legal authority</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search warrant</td>
<td>91.06</td>
<td>Property taken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barricade</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>Forcible entry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>Arrest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrest warrant</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>Shot fired</td>
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Table 1. SWAT deployments, Maryland FY2010–2014

As an alternative approach, this paper analyzes the effects of additional police deployments on public perceptions of law enforcement. I conducted two survey experiments: one using a convenience sample from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (n = 1,566) and one conducted by Survey Sampling International (SSI) (n = 4,465). (Survey experiments were approved by Stanford University’s Institutional Review Board, protocol no. 32534. All respondents supplied informed consent.) These experiments provided brief news articles accompanied by a randomly assigned image that conveyed different levels of militarization, allowing for an estimate of the causal effect of seeing militarized police on attitudes toward law enforcement relative to seeing more traditionally equipped police forces. Because of the prevalence of SWAT deployments in Black communities, the SSI data include an oversample of roughly 1,850 African Americans to test whether treatment effects varied with respondent race.

**Where and Why SWAT Teams Deploy**

The rare census of SWAT activity available in Maryland offers a valuable opportunity to study the stated reasons for, and geographic correlates of, militarized policing. Maryland also exhibits large variation in the racial composition of localities [e.g., the percentage of Blacks in zip-code tabulation areas (ZCTAs) ranges from 0% to more than 95%], allowing for an evaluation of the relationship between militarized tactics and neighborhood racial composition with minimal extrapolation.

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Critics allege that militarized tactics are more often applied in communities of color, a pattern that would be in line with decades of evidence indicating disparate treatment of racial minorities by police (4, 6, 30). To test this claim, Fig. 1 shows the relationship between the percentage of Black residents in a geographic unit and the volume of SWAT deployments per 100,000 residents in that unit during FY2010–2014, both logged. Fig. 1, Top Left and Top Right is generated using ZCTAs in Maryland and shows a strong positive correlation, even after controlling for local unemployment, education, and household income levels (Fig. 1, Top Right). Fig. 1, Middle Left and Middle Right is generated using data from three large agencies—the Baltimore City Police Department and the Prince George’s County and Montgomery County Police Departments—which publish incident-level crime data that can be mapped to ZCTAs. Even after controlling for the aforementioned social indicators and local crime rates (Fig. 1, Middle Right), the percentage of Blacks still strongly predicts the volume of SWAT activity in a ZCTA. The slope in Fig. 1, Middle Right ($\beta = 1.05, P < 0.001$; SI Appendix, Tables S8 and S9) implies that a 10% increase in the percentage of Blacks in a ZCTA is associated with a 10.53% increase in SWAT deployments per 100,000 residents during this period. Fig. 1, Bottom Left and Bottom Right shows a similar pattern at the county level, although the slope is not statistically significant in the county model with controls. This analysis comes from only one state, so caution is warranted when generalizing beyond Maryland. We also cannot confidently infer a causal relationship from these cross-sectional comparisons. However, these results are consistent with the descriptive claim that Black residents face a pronounced risk of experiencing militarized policing.

**Effects on Crime and Officer Safety**

Proponents claim that militarized tactics deter violent crime and protect police (10). To test these claims, I use a nationwide panel to estimate the effects of acquiring a SWAT team on violent crime and officer fatalities and assaults and an agency-month panel in Maryland to test whether the increased deployment of SWAT teams affects these outcomes. I focus on violent crime because of the asserted link between militarized policing and public safety. To gauge robustness, I estimate two models per outcome: a generalized difference-in-differences (DID) estimator containing agency and time period fixed effects and a second model including fixed effects but also allowing each agency to trend uniquely over time. By comparing agencies to themselves over time, both approaches greatly mitigate concerns over omitted variable bias that plague cross-sectional comparisons (31). All outcomes are logged to reduce the influence of extreme values (see SI Appendix, sections 2–4 for alternative specifications).

Fig. 2 displays estimates of the effect of obtaining a SWAT team on violent crime and officer safety measures. The top coefficient implies a statistically significant 6.5% increase in within-agency violent crimes, on average. This result is consistent with anecdotal evidence of suspects reacting violently to SWAT teams (29) or with militarized policing lowering trust in police, thereby hindering criminal investigations and promoting crime (14). However, once we allow agencies to trend differentially over time, the effect shrinks to a statistically insignificant 4.3%. Estimates for officer deaths, both accidental and felonious, are precise and near zero, partly because they are so rare (i.e., there is little variation in these outcomes to explain). Estimates for assaults are noisier, and one shows a statistically significant 3.2% increase in noninjurious assaults, although this result misses statistical significance in the time trends specification. In sum, estimated effects are generally positive and often indistinguishable from zero, and there is no evidence that acquiring a SWAT team lowers crime or promotes officer safety.
Fig. 3. SWAT team deployments exert no detectable effects on crime or officer safety. Shown are coefficients on log(#SWAT Deployments + 1) from panel regressions using data from Maryland, FY2010–2014. All outcomes are logged. Bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Fig. 3 displays the effects of increased SWAT deployments in Maryland on crime and officer safety. Fig. 3, Left shows results from models using all deployments, summed within agency months and logged, while Fig. 3, Right uses deployments only for barricade situations to test whether using SWAT in emergencies might be especially effective. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.) (Officer fatalities are omitted as an outcome here because they almost never occur in these data; SI Appendix, Table S7.) As Fig. 3 shows, point estimates are negative but near zero, none are statistically significant, and all estimates imply a 10% increase in deployments exerts changes smaller than 1% in all outcomes. Some small declines in officer assaults are detectable if the data are weighted by agency size (SI Appendix, Table S35), suggesting the Maryland results are more sensitive to model specification than the national analysis which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Using the available data, the benefits of increased deployments appear to be either small or nonexistent.

The adoption and deployment of SWAT teams is not randomly assigned, and we should therefore make causal interpretations with some caution (see SI Appendix, section 2B, for placebo tests assessing the risk of endogeneity). The Maryland results may also not generalize to other states. But the lack of any robust association between militarized policing and public and officer safety shown here calls the validity of these claimed benefits into question.

Effects on Police Reputation

I conducted two survey experiments to estimate effects on public perceptions of police, the first one via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) and the second one via SSI. Respondents read a mock news article concerning an unnamed police chief seeking a budget increase. Text remained constant while the accompanying image randomly varied across respondents (Fig. 4). Images were randomly assigned within racial groups of respondents in the second survey (which contained an oversample of African American respondents), with equal probability. The control image (Fig. 4A) featured five male, traditionally uniformed officers (e.g., blue uniforms, brimmed caps, and standard side arms). The “low” militarization conditions (Fig. 4B and Fig. 4C) showed five male officers with “riot gear” and batons or with body armor and assault rifles. The “high” militarization condition (Fig. 4D) added an armored vehicle. (Because it elicited very similar treatment effects to the other low militarization image in Fig. 4C, the Fig. 4B image was dropped from the SSI survey to enhance statistical power.)

In each case, the caption beneath the photo read, “Above: Five city police officers stand guard during a local protest.” All images were tightly cropped to ensure that any differences in responses were due to the appearance of police officers and not the surrounding area in which they were deployed. Following the article, respondents answered questions measuring perceived crime levels, support for police spending, and confidence in police. All images and text were borrowed or adapted from real online news content (32–36).

Experimental Results. Fig. 5 shows average differences in responses between each treatment condition and the control condition in the unweighted samples. All outcomes were rescaled from 0 to 100 so effects can be interpreted as percentage-point increases on each outcome’s respective scale. Militarized images in the M-Turk survey caused clear increases between roughly 8 points and 15 points in perceived levels of crime in the vignette city. The high militarization condition in the SSI survey caused a statistically significant 2.2-point increase in the perceived level of crime in the vignette city and, strikingly, a 3.2-point drop in respondents’ desire for more police patrols in their own neighborhoods. The high militarization treatment also caused support for police funding in the United States to fall by roughly four points in the M-Turk survey and two points in the SSI survey. Support
Survey experimental results: seeing militarized police may tarnish police reputation. Shown are effects of militarized images in M-Turk (blue) and SSI (red) surveys. Bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Fig. 5. Survey experimental results: seeing militarized police may tarnish police reputation. Shown are effects of militarized images in M-Turk (blue) and SSI (red) surveys. Bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Fig. 6. No heterogeneous effects by race of respondent. Bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Aggressive policing strategies have historically been disproportionately applied to citizens of color in ways that serve to preserve race- and class-based social hierarchies (3). The normalization of militarized policing in the United States (15, 16) has raised concerns that a new, heavy-handed policing strategy is being used in similar ways and is eroding public opinion toward law enforcement, but law enforcement administrators defend the tactics claiming they can deter violent crime and protect police. This study marshals an array of data sources and analytical techniques to systematically evaluate these claims.

Consistent with anecdotal evidence (11), militarized police units are more often deployed in areas with high concentrations of African Americans, even after adjusting for local crime rates...
and other community traits. But I find no firm evidence that SWAT teams lower an agency’s violent crime rate or the rates at which officers are killed or assaulted. Using survey experiments, I show that citizens react negatively to the appearance of militarized police units in news reports and become less willing to fund police agencies and less supportive of having police patrols in their own neighborhoods.

Given the concentration of deployments in communities of color, where trust in law enforcement and government at large is already depressed (14, 38), the routine use of militarized police tactics by local agencies threatens to increase the historic tensions between marginalized groups and the state with no detectable public safety benefit. While SWAT teams arguably remain a necessary tool for violent emergency situations, restricting their use to those rare events may improve perceptions of police with little or no safety loss.

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