SWAT Pranks and SWAT Mistakes

By Lauren Kirchner
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Last week, a popular video-game livestream was interrupted when a player's door was busted in by a team of highly weaponized and adrenaline-pumped cops. Twenty-three-year-old Jordan Mathewson's webcam and microphone captured the whole tense and terrifying episode as they cursed at him, pointed AR-15s and shotguns at him, and cuffed him on the floor.

This was just the most recent and highest-profile instance of a prank now being pulled by video-game players against their rivals, and by hacker kids against celebrities. To "swat" someone is to impersonate them on an untraceable phone call to the police, confess to fake murders, threaten more violence, and do everything possible to cause a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to come rushing to wherever they are. If there's a livestream on at the time, that's all the better for watching the prank's effects.

In the video of the prank, which Mathewson later posted to YouTube, it's clear that he knew what was happening when he first heard the cops coming down the hall: "I think I'm being swatted," he told his viewers. Good thing, too; his calm affect when the cops reached his door might have saved his life.

"I receive at least two phone calls per week from journalists, lawyers, or police departments reporting a new botched raid, generally where a citizen has been killed under highly questionable circumstances."

"This is not a game," Chief Doug Stephens of the Littleton Police Department told a local ABC news reporter. "We have real guns with real bullets, and there's some potential there for real tragedy."

No kidding. Adrenaline, tension, trigger-fingers, and bad information make a terrible combination. SWAT raids, which by one oft-cited count have increased 1,400 percent in America since the 1980s, can lead to tragic mistakes on all sides. In 2006, Atlanta police killed a 92-year-old woman when "they got the wrong house" while executing a drug

raid. Not knowing it was the cops busting her door down, Kathryn Johnston pulled out a revolver to defend herself, and was shot by the police.

In 2011, Detroit police shot and killed a seven-year-old girl named Aiyana Stanley-Jones during a dramatic "flash-bang" raid that was being filmed for a reality TV show for A&E. Officials later said it was "a total, unfortunate fuck-up." This year, a 61-year-old man in Lebanon, Tennessee, was killed after he pulled a gun during what he thought was a home invasion; the cops who shot John Adams later admitted that they had "intended to raid the home next door."

And, according to a news story that not surprisingly got even more national airtime than those above, cops killed two beloved family dogs in a raid-gone-wrong of the house of a "recreational marijuana smoker" in St. Paul, Minnesota. Police reportedly confiscated one glass bong during the raid.

These are just a few stories out of many. Radley Balko of the Cato Institute created a map of dozens of botched police raids across the country in conjunction with his 2006 paper, "Overkill: The Rise of Paramilitary Police Raids in America." SWAT raids are most often used today to serve drug warrants, "usually with forced, unannounced entry into the home," Balko wrote:

These increasingly frequent raids, 40,000 per year by one estimate, are needlessly subjecting nonviolent drug offenders, bystanders, and wrongly targeted civilians to the terror of having their homes invaded while they're sleeping, usually by teams of heavily armed paramilitary units dressed not as police officers but as soldiers.... And they have resulted in dozens of needless deaths and injuries, not only of drug offenders, but also of police officers, children, bystanders, and innocent suspects.

Balko's analysis aligned this rise in paramilitary drug raids with the overall pattern of increased militarization of police over the decades. He cited research by criminologist Peter Kraska, who has traced the rise in police militarization back to the 1970s.

In the fallout of the shooting of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, media commentary has often described the militarization of local police forces as a post-9/11 phenomenon. It's true that grant money and equipment transfers from the Department of Homeland Security has made it even easier for local police departments to obtain more expensive and heavier-duty military equipment. And the terror attacks of 2001 increased the scope and the scale of the funding involved. But the current iteration of the federal government's "1033 program," which allows for excess military equipment to be transferred to local police departments, launched in 1997. And the seeds of today's militarized police forces were sown much earlier than that.

Kraska's 1997 paper, written with Victor Kappeler for the journal *Social Problems*, described how the "metaphor of war (e.g. the War on Poverty, the war on drugs)" has fueled and glorified the use of military tools to solve local, domestic problems. The lines between police and military began to blur in America especially after the Cold War. "With the threat of communism no longer a national preoccupation, crime has become a

more inviting target for state activity," the authors wrote. Paramilitary units and SWAT teams have been an important aspect of that trend.

Of the larger law enforcement departments Kraska and Kappeler's research focused on, "most departments formed their units in the 1970s," and grew them steadily throughout the following decades. The drug war, especially, encouraged this growth. Not only did the number of these units grow, but the frequency with which they were actually deployed exploded in the late 1980s and early '90s. First they looked at the number of deployments in the years 1980 to 1983. Then they saw that "the level of police paramilitary unit activity more than doubled by 1986, almost tripled by 1989, and quadrupled by 1995." The vast majority of these calls were for "high-risk warrant work" for drug raids.

Ten years later, having established himself as an expert in this area, Kraska wrote, "I receive at least two phone calls per week from journalists, lawyers, or police departments reporting a new botched raid, generally where a citizen has been killed under highly questionable circumstances." He wrote that he had personally recorded more than 275 of these cases.

Finally, in an article for *Policing and Society* last year, Kraska and Kappeler also made the important point that "both the felonious killings of police officers and violent crime rates in the USA declined dramatically during the very period that police agencies were creating the vast majority of these [paramilitary] units."

Crime is going down nationwide, and yet the frequency of SWAT raids is still rising. Even with the best police training, more raids inevitably introduce more opportunities for error. And the consequences of those errors are usually much more devastating than a viral video of a video-gamer getting punked.