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SWAT teams' standards, use, proliferation questioned

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In a way, Texas contributed a lot to the nation's interest in SWAT teams.

The year was 1966. Charles Whitman, armed with a high-powered rifle and almost inaccessible atop the tower at the [University of Texas at Austin](#), was gunning down victims with impunity. Regular police officers, outgunned, were hard-pressed to stop him.

Police tactical teams were first formed in Los Angeles the very same year, and the idea began to catch on.

Throughout the turbulent 1960s, and to the present, a long list of tragic and violent incidents further provided impetus for police departments to form specialized, highly trained and heavily armed police units.

Shooting rampages at schools. Botched robberies that segued into hostage standoffs. Deranged gunmen who stormed restaurants or offices and killed indiscriminately. Terrorist attacks.

But what exactly is a SWAT team? How much training is required? What's the screening process for candidates, and what is expected physically and mentally?

The answers are imprecise. National and state organizations representing tactical officers have established guidelines for staffing, selection and oversight, but typically there are no mandatory requirements beyond what individual agencies establish for themselves. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education has a recommended curriculum for basic SWAT training, but the training is voluntary.

Police tactical units go by many names: SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics), SRT (special response team), SOT (special operations team). The concept is basically the same: ideally, a group of carefully screened law enforcement officers who are trained and equipped to take on high-risk operations that are above and beyond the duties of regular officers.

But the reality is that not all tactical squads are created equal.

"To throw SWAT uniforms and tactical vests and ballistic helmets on police officers ... and a semiautomatic machine gun in their hands ... and offer them very little training – that does not give you

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FILE 1966/ The Associated Press
As sniper [Charles Whitman](#) killed from the [University of Texas](#) tower, there was little that outgunned police could do. As a result, interest in tactical teams grew.

a SWAT team," said Paul Hershey, president of the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association. "Just because it looks like one doesn't mean that it is one."

About a year ago, the National Tactical Officers Association, a nonprofit group that represents tactical officers, produced written SWAT standards for law enforcement agencies.

"If you make the decision that you're going to form a team like this, and you're going to call it SWAT, then you have a risk-management issue and you have a responsibility to equip them and train them and get them to the numbers where they can do the job as safely as they can," said John Gnagey, NTOA executive director.

Without proper training, "my personal opinion is that some of these so-called SWAT teams put the public at greater risk by going out there and trying to handle something they shouldn't be handling," said Lt. D.L. Hodge, who oversees the Dallas Sheriff's Department tactical team.

NTOA's minimum guidelines for a SWAT team call for 17 members. None of the teams formed by Dallas County constables appear to have that many.

Some critics worry that tactical teams are being used for police functions that could be handled with less force.

"Over the last 25 years, America has seen a disturbing militarization of its civilian law enforcement, along with a dramatic and unsettling rise in the use of paramilitary police units for routine police work," Radley Balko wrote in a 2006 [Cato Institute](#) study of police tactical operations. "The most common use of SWAT teams today is to serve narcotics warrants, usually with forced, unannounced entry into the home."

That increase, Balko wrote for the Libertarian think tank, has brought about "unnecessary violence and provocation" to nonviolent drug offenders – and to innocent civilians when police target the wrong residence – and "dozens of needless deaths and injuries."