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THERE'S NO ~~EASY~~ SOLUTION

The domestic arms race has made police work exceedingly risky

> "The actions of those officers were appropriate, and they're not to be criticized in any way."

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. That's how LAPD Chief Bill Bratton laid down the law to the Los Angeles Times when a reporter asked whether the shooting death of a SWAT officer and the grievous wounding of another might have been averted had the team not acted so hastily.

While the question may have come too soon, it's one eminently worth asking. Only moments before SWAT arrived patrol officers were already set to barge into the home of a resident who called 911 and told dispatchers that he had shot and killed his family.

Why did SWAT rush in? After the 1999 Columbine massacre departments around the country supplanted conventional "surround and call-out" doctrines with "active shooter" strategies that endorsed making a quick entry, by patrol officers if necessary, when doing so might save lives. Without doubt, the new approach has worked. Prompt response by Kansas City patrol officers is credited for minimizing the toll of an April 2007 shopping center shooting spree that left one officer wounded and two citizens dead. More recently, officers burst into a packed Missouri city council meeting and shot dead a crazed gunman who had killed two cops and three city officials, probably saving several others from the same fate.

Swift action can work miracles. But all bets are off if the element of surprise is missing and the perpetrator has had time to prepare; for example, as in Los Angeles, where the shooter positioned himself behind stacked mattresses and waited for officers to burst in. Active shooter strategies were not intended for barricaded suspects, and there is no doubt that despite Chief Bratton's testy response LAPD will be carefully reviewing its policies to help prevent a repeat tragedy.

Information is naturally the key. But how can officers know whether someone really *is* lying in wait? How much time must lapse before it's considered too dangerous to rush in? Newfangled technology is hardly the answer. Dropping in microphones, sending in a robot -- all these are uncertain tools that take a lot of time, time that those already threatened or bleeding to death don't have.

There is another, equally serious issue -- gun lethality. According to Federal gun manufacturing records, less than twenty percent of handguns made in 1973 were high-caliber, meaning .357 and above for revolvers and 9 mm. and above for pistols (not including .38 revolvers and .380 pistols, which are considered medium caliber.) On that year only *one-third* of newly-manufactured handguns were pistols, a significant point since these can potentially hold more rounds than revolvers and are much quicker to reload. Over the next quarter-century things dramatically changed. By 1998 fifty-eight percent of handguns produced were high-caliber, and by 2006 the figure was a stunning *sixty-five* percent. On that year *three-fourths* of handgun production was reserved for pistols.

Wound severity is a function of ballistics (see, for example, De Maio's Gunshot Wounds," 2d. Ed., p.59). As caliber and velocity increase, the energy that a bullet can transfer to tissue soars:

Ballistics of commonplace pistol ammunition

Caliber	Muzzle velocity (ft.-sec.)	Muzzle energy (ft.-lbs.)
(Low) .25	760	64
(Mid) .38	975	264
(Hi) 9mm	1220	334
(Hi) .40	1135	403

Critics claim that firearms manufacturers purposely racked up their products' lethality as a marketing ploy, much as auto manufacturers increased sales by building ever-larger SUV's. Racing to keep from being outgunned, officers now routinely carry high-capacity .40 and .45 caliber pistols. (A .40 caliber pistol was one of the two handguns that the Missouri killer used when he burst in to the city council meeting. He stole it from the body of a police sergeant he had already murdered.)

What does this mean to the cop on the street? Even when medical care is promptly available, as during the incidents in Los Angeles and Missouri, the arms race has made gunshot wounds far less survivable. Of the 26 officers shot and killed in 2006

while wearing body armor, nineteen were wounded in the head and neck, critical areas where differences in the lethality of a projectile can determine whether a victim lives or dies. Increases in lethality can help explain why, while the national murder rate has steadily dropped since the early 1990's -- sixteen percent between 1997 and 2006 -- the number of officers feloniously killed by firearms has fluctuated. According to the FBI, 68 were killed in 1997, falling to 41 only two years later, then rising to 61 in 2001. Substantially fewer officers -- 46 -- were shot and killed in 2006. But in 2007 the count went way up again, with an estimated 69 officers killed by gunfire.

There's no snappy ending here. Considering the lethality and ubiquity of firearms, it's a wonder that officers keep stepping up to the plate. And considering our bizarre love affair with guns, the future promises only more dead cops.