



Drones as a De-Escalation Tool for Law Enforcement

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Over the last several years, there has been intense public attention focused on police use of force, especially lethal force. The attention has come with demands that the police exercise greater use of de-escalation techniques before implementing force. While some activists, politicians and journalists may have unrealistic expectations that de-escalation techniques will eliminate *all* uses of force, it is certainly true that the employment of verbal and tactical de-escalation techniques can reduce the likelihood of violence in many volatile police-citizen encounters. In addition to reducing the likelihood of violence, de-escalation techniques can also help agency leaders in communicating to the public that all reasonable precautions were taken before force was utilized.

While the Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) has been a training leader in verbal de-escalation techniques for nearly a decade, there are also important *tactical* de-escalation techniques for dealing with potentially violent persons. These techniques, routinely practiced by SWAT teams and patrol personnel for years, include:

- Slowing down the situation to wait the individual out
- Physically securing the area to contain the dangerous individual
- Removing other people from the area
- Maintaining a safe distance from the dangerous individual
- Utilizing cover to reduce the likelihood of injury
- Engaging in calm conversation with the individual

Even while applying these tactical de-escalation techniques, officers are often still at risk of injury when engaged in various operations such as trying to locate and communicate with barricaded individuals. Gathering intelligence about the situation, such as whether or not the individual is armed, what type and number of weapons are possessed, and whether or not the individual has any hostages, often involves risks to the safety of officers. If the officers are observed by the individual, and he or she reacts violently, both the officers and the barricaded individual are in danger of being harmed.

Unmanned drones are tools that may be used in such circumstances to assist officers in de-escalating the situation, while simultaneously increasing officer safety. Flying aerial drones and ground-traversing wheeled drones have been used by the military for intelligence gathering in dangerous situations for two decades now. In Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel have used various types of drones from the command level all the way down to the platoon and squad level. Soldiers and Marines have used small drones to look around street corners and explore buildings before sending humans or canines into harm's way.ⁱ **As drones are so prevalent and affordable today, perhaps they should be used more often to perform functions that would otherwise put a law enforcement officer at risk.**

Consider the following examples: Patrol officers from a Midwestern city police department attempted to stop a car occupied by two individuals, one of which had an active felony arrest warrant. After a short vehicle pursuit, the two individuals bailed out of the car and ran on foot through a densely populated residential district. Responding patrol officers cordoned off the block and a police canine was used to track the scent of the suspects to an abandoned house. Unsure of where within the house the suspects were hiding, the canine was sent into the dark house, followed by its handler and additional officers. One of the suspects opened fire on the dog before officers returned fire and killed the suspect. Could this scenario have gone differently if the officers had access to a tactical field drone? Could a remote-controlled drone equipped with video, audio, and maybe even low-light or thermal surveillance capabilities have been sent into the house to search for the suspects, without risking the lives of the officers or the dog? The suspect still may have fired on the drone, but could the information gathered from the recording equipment have revealed the suspects' exact location? Undoubtedly, the financial costs associated with utilizing a drone would have been a better alternative than the risks of injury or death involved in such a pursuit.

In the Southeastern U.S., three officers arrived at a home to serve involuntary commitment papers on a 23-year-old man who had made suicidal and homicidal statements to his family and therapist. While standing in the living room of the home, the man fled from the officers and ran upstairs. After calling up the stairwell with no response, the officers proceeded up the stairwell after the man. The mentally disordered individual reappeared at the top of the steps with a handgun and began firing at the officers. The first officer up the stairs was killed, and the other two officers were wounded by the gunfire. The surviving officers, dragging their incapacitated partner with them, retreated from the house as the assailant barricaded himself in an upstairs bedroom.

Additional officers and a SWAT team arrived, and a standoff ensued for many hours before the assailant took his own life. If the officers had access to a tactical patrol drone, could they have sent it up the stairs before heading up the “fatal funnel” of the stairwell themselves? Might the video camera on the drone have revealed that the man was armed? Could the drone have been used to negotiate with the assailant from a safe distance?

In a Northwestern state, officers responded to a domestic battery call. When they arrived at the apartment building, the officers met with the victim who had been beaten and choked by her boyfriend. The boyfriend, who was not believed to be armed, had fled into a wooded ravine behind the apartment complex when the officers arrived. A canine unit arrived to sniff out the suspect. As the officers fanned out and started moving into the ravine, the suspect opened fire with a gun, killing the dog and wounding one of the officers. In danger of hitting the occupied apartments on the other side of the ravine, and still unable to determine the assailant’s exact location, the officers did not return fire. They retreated, cordoned off the area, and (with the assistance of additional officers) waited the suspect out. At daybreak, the suspect surrendered to police. What if the officers had access to a tactical patrol drone before heading toward the wooded ravine? Might the officers have pinpointed the location of the suspect from the safety of cover if they had been equipped with a small aerial drone with infrared or night vision capability?

As law enforcement agencies across the nation simultaneously face personnel shortages and public demands to avoid use of force whenever possible, robotic drones appear to be useful tools to increase officer safety when dealing with violent individuals. In recent years, many law enforcement agencies have acquired small unmanned aerial systems and ground-traversing drones to enhance agency operations and improve officer and public safety. Each year, more public safety agencies are recognizing the benefits these relatively inexpensive tools can offer. **Remotely piloted or driven vehicles with mounted cameras and listening devices can be used to locate, isolate and communicate with potentially dangerous individuals from a safe distance, while avoiding the necessity of placing a human or canine officer in the line of fire.**

Tactical drones offer law enforcement agencies a tremendous opportunity to leverage technology in a way that enhances agency operations and improves officer and public safety. **While there are numerous benefits to utilizing drones, one crucial benefit that should not be overlooked is their ability to de-escalate volatile and potentially deadly interactions between law enforcement officers and individuals they encounter in the field.**

About the Author

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Richard R. Johnson, PhD, is a trainer and researcher with Dolan Consulting Group. He has decades of experience teaching and training on various topics associated with criminal justice, and has conducted research on a variety of topics related to crime and law enforcement. He holds a bachelor's degree in public administration and criminal justice from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) at Indiana University, with a minor in social psychology. He possesses a master's degree in criminology from Indiana State University. He earned his doctorate in criminal justice from the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati with concentrations in policing and criminal justice administration.

Dr. Johnson has published more than 50 articles on various criminal justice topics in academic research journals, including *Justice Quarterly*, *Crime & Delinquency*, *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Police Quarterly*. He has also published more than a dozen articles in law enforcement trade journals such as the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, *Police Chief*, *Law & Order*, *National Sheriff*, and *Ohio Police Chief*. His research has primarily focused on police-citizen interactions, justice system responses to domestic violence, and issues of police administration and management. Dr. Johnson retired as a full professor of criminal justice at the University of Toledo in 2016.

Prior to his academic career, Dr. Johnson served several years working within the criminal justice system. He served as a trooper with the Indiana State Police, working uniformed patrol in Northwest Indiana. He served as a criminal investigator with the Kane County State's Attorney Office in Illinois, where he investigated domestic violence and child sexual assault cases. He served as an intensive probation officer for felony domestic violence offenders with the Illinois 16th Judicial Circuit. Dr. Johnson is also a proud military veteran having served as a military police officer with the U.S. Air Force and Air National Guard, including active duty service after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Before that, he served as an infantry soldier and field medic in the U.S. Army and Army National Guard.

His training courses include [*Reporting Accurate Traffic Stop Data: Evidence-Based Best Practices*](#) and [*Safe Places: Protecting Places of Worship from Violence and Crime*](#).

References

ⁱ Shachtman, Noah. "Army's Drones of the 'Future' Head to Iraq, Now." *Wired* (June 17, 2008). Accessed: <https://www.wired.com/2008/06/the-defense-sec/>