

MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

The Terrifying New Tactic Used to Harass Public Officials

Swatting — falsely reporting a serious emergency to provoke aggressive police response — is on the rise. Fighting this dangerous and distracting trend remains challenging, both legally and technologically.

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Multiple colleges in Florida have been victims of false reports of an active shooter on campus, meant to elicit a large mobilization of first responders.

(Dirk Shadd/TNS)

In Brief:

- Swatting originated decades ago among gamers who used technology to hide their identities and embarrass their rivals. It's on the rise as others adopt the practice, including foreign actors.

- Public officials have been targeted in recent months. Schools are frequently swatted. Police response to nonexistent emergencies can affect students, parents and teachers in the same ways as real ones.
- Training can help detect swatting and mitigate its risks. It is not a specific crime in federal law, or in most states. Changes in federal law could ensure consistent responses and guide state policy development.

In recent years, public officials have unfortunately grown used to protesters showing up at their homes. Now, they face a new form of harassment, known as swatting. People are calling in false reports of shootings or bombs, drawing law enforcement, including SWAT teams, to people's homes.

With police on high alert, this raises the risk that responses could turn deadly. "This is an assassination attempt," Brandon Williams, a Republican member of Congress from New York, said after being **victimized at his home** on Christmas Day.

Williams is not alone. Lately, there's been a **rash of incidents** involving government officials, including Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Missouri Attorney General Jay Ashcroft, Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, as well as Jack Smith, the special counsel investigating former President Donald Trump.

The practice of knowingly making a false report about a crime or emergency to provoke a response by law enforcement originated among gamers as a prank. Once relatively rare, it's happened more often in recent years and touched more segments of the population, including students calling in false reports to shut down schools on test days and the like. Swatting's spread is creating pressure on legislators and law enforcement to find ways to contain it.

It's hard to form an exact sense of the scale of the problem. Swatting is not a specific crime in federal law. While **several states** have enacted laws defining the crime of swatting and creating penalties for it, local law enforcement agencies may simply categorize it as a false police report. A collaborative effort between the FBI and local law enforcement to track swatting incidents has counted more than 550 since it was launched in May 2023.

False reports of shootings or bombs on school campuses have significantly increased tension around swatting. Drawing on a variety of public resources, including media accounts, personal blogs and crowdsourced websites, a K-12 **School Shooting Database** found more

than 770 swatting incidents in 2023 alone.

The old consensus, that swatting doesn't happen often enough to be a priority, is now harder to sustain. It's difficult to find the path toward reducing the potential for harm, however, because this would involve technology, emergency infrastructure, school administration and more than one section of criminal codes.



Lt. Gov. Burt Jones was one of several Georgia politicians to suffer a swatting attack over the Christmas holidays. "We will put an end to this madness," he said.

Arvin Temkar/TNS

Bound to Serve

There's a fundamental dilemma in swatting, which takes its name from the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams sent to deal with serious emergencies. Even if a dispatcher suspects a hoax, they are obligated to send a response. It's too much of a risk to do otherwise. No 911 call sounds "right," says Tina Chaffin, who has worked as a 911 dispatcher for several Texas law enforcement agencies.

Swatters find personally identifying information for their targets through Internet searches, or they may buy it from data brokers or acquire it illegally through phishing, text messages or other means. Readily available phone apps and Internet phone services allow them to

conceal their identity and display a false phone number, while possibly altering their voice. Such spoofing can create the impression that they are calling from the location of an emergency, or a neighboring home.

Automatic number identification and automatic location identifier technology can indicate that a call is not, in fact, coming from where the caller claims to be located. But even authentic calls can look questionable, Chaffin says. The portability of cellphone numbers is another problem. When landlines were the norm, she was never in doubt that a call that appeared to be from Dallas really was. That's not true in the age of cellphones, when so many people retain numbers from states where they haven't lived for years.

Chaffin trains dispatchers and has published a [free course](#) covering best practices for dealing with swatting calls. There are signals that a call may be swatting, such as background sounds that don't match the event being reported. A dispatcher will send a response team in every case, but they can pass along what they have observed.

Only two fatalities have been associated with swatting, but every swatter creates danger by diverting resources needed for real emergencies. Chaffin is currently traveling around the country to help support understaffed agencies, where dispatcher shortages can run as much as 40 to 60 percent.

"Stand your ground" laws in Texas and other states mean serious risk for first responders; homeowners surprised by strangers bursting into their homes have the right to shoot. There's also the matter of trauma, possible at a much greater scale when schools are swatted.

Incidents of School Violence, 2022-2023 School Year

No outside threat is present when police respond to false reports of bombs or shooting on school campuses. But the potential for harm to responders or school staff due to misunderstanding or heightened tensions is real. Moreover, faculty, students and parents can be traumatized in the same ways as if they were actually under threat. (Figure based on data analysis by the Educators School Safety Network.)

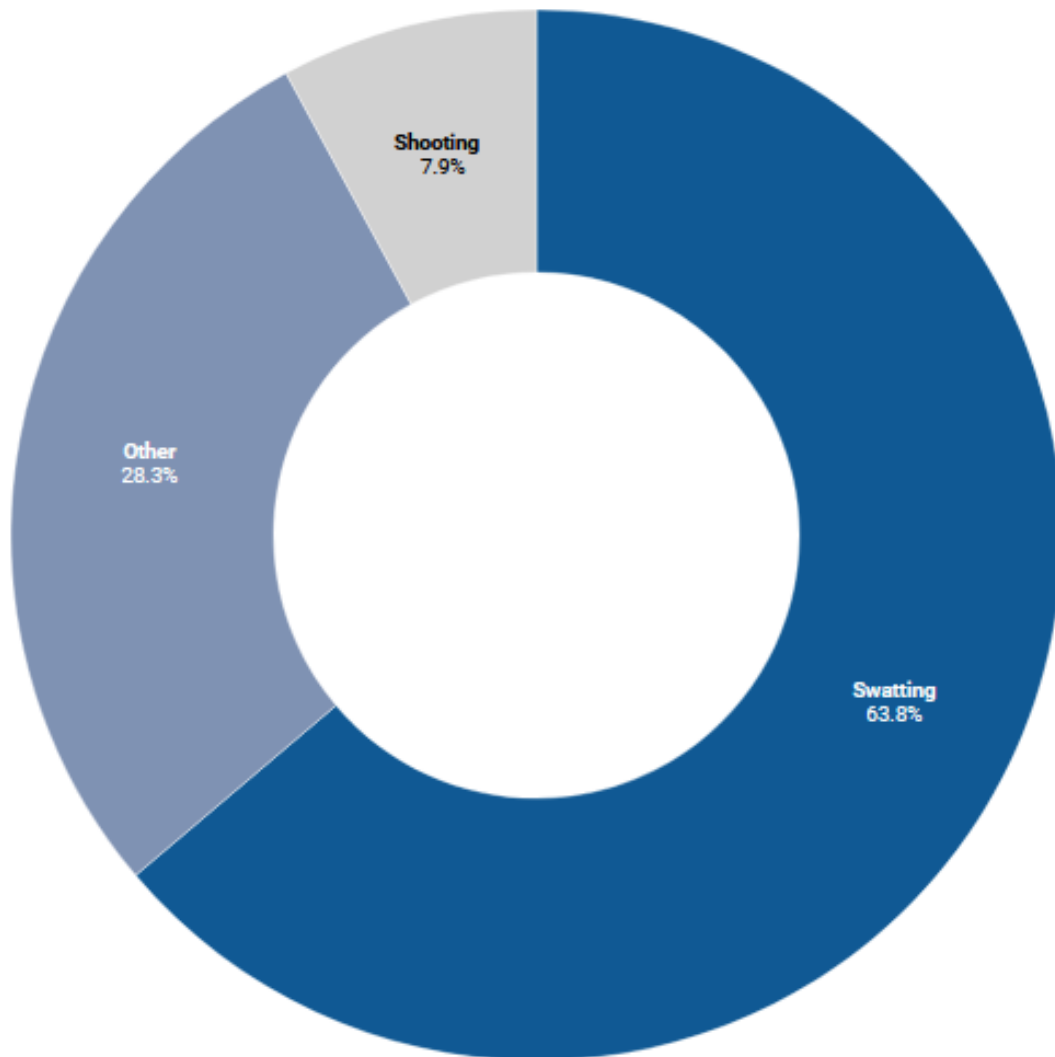


Chart: Governing • Source: [ESSN](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

False Alarms, Real Harm

Four in 10 parents **fear for the safety** of their children while they are at school. False reports about shooters on school campuses made up almost two-thirds of violent incidents on school campuses during the past school year, **according to** the Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN).

ESSN categorizes swatting as an incidence of violence because it provokes the same response and causes the same trauma among students, staff and parents as when a shooter actually is present, says Amy Klinger, ESSN's director of programs. As is true for 911 dispatchers, school administrators have to respond even if they suspect a false report.

Chaffin, the 911 dispatcher and trainer, notes that students in Texas have on occasion made false reports to disrupt mandatory testing days. Klinger, a former teacher and school principal, worries that young people unaware of the consequences of such actions could alter the course of their lives. (In Texas, a child as young as 10 can acquire a criminal record.)

Last year, a good portion of swatting attacks originated from outside the country, Klinger says, sometimes targeting multiple schools simultaneously. She's concerned that the disruption they caused, and the media attention they received, might inspire other bad actors. One possible silver lining is that a swatting event can expose weaknesses in a school's ability to respond, communicate and prevent harm in a real emergency.

ESSN advocates an "all hazards" approach to planning for emergency operations that considers all possible events and the response and risk mitigation each requires. (ESSN offers a no-cost **School Safety 101** course to help with this.) Training is the key to realizing the benefits of such planning.

"Investing in people is much more cost-effective than buying incredible amounts of technology that we don't know will actually work," Klinger says. "We know that training people in what to look for, and how to respond, does work."

Congress Could Help

Lauren Shapiro, an associate professor at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, dedicated a chapter to swatting in her 2023 book, *Cyberpredators and Their Prey*. Federal statutes relating to matters including interstate communications and threats, protection of personal information of public officials, access device fraud and wire fraud and conspiracy have all informed federal prosecutions of swatters, she writes. State prosecutions have used similar statutes, with charges ranging from misdemeanor to felony.

The integral role of technology in perpetrating swatting makes it an interstate matter, Shapiro says, and fair and equal treatment of offenders would be best accomplished if federal law established definitions and penalties for the crime. States could use this as the basis of their own statutes.

Clear definitions would help with accurate counting and uniform sentencing, but these aren't the only benefits. Accurate counts could guide funding allocations to train dispatchers, pay detectives to find perpetrators of anonymous crimes and provide support to responders experiencing the same stresses that come with real events as well as the moral injury of being exploited for a malicious purpose.

There have been attempts at a federal statute since the early 2000s, Shapiro says. Critics of such proposals have said they violate First Amendment rights to free speech and Fourth Amendment rights to privacy. “Sometimes there’s a fear that if we criminalize reporting that a crime is occurring to 911 and a crime is not occurring, you could be charged,” says Shapiro.

But there may be more impetus to act now that members of Congress and other prominent officials have been targeted. A **new bill** was introduced in Congress this month, which has the backing of the National Association of Police Organizations and the National Sheriffs’ Association.

Up to this point, swatting has seldom had a fatal consequence, but it’s harassment that can cause false arrest, reputational damage and cost local governments thousands of dollars — even tens of thousands — per incident. Ongoing problems recruiting and retaining officers mean that there are none to spare for false reports.

The swatters that have been arrested are predominantly juveniles and young adults. Chaffin’s school presentations are built on an unflinching message: “Not only are we going to catch you and you could be in trouble, you are potentially putting someone’s life in danger.” *Click on a state to see what it has proposed. Click on it again to return to the complete map.*

