

A 'swatting' epidemic

Hoax callers menace thousands of people a year by getting armed police sent to homes and schools. Can they be stopped?

How big a problem is swatting?

Since the FBI began tracking such crimes in May, police have reported more than 550 swatting attempts—false emergency calls that claim a mass shooting or other violent crime is underway to draw a response from armed police, often a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. But that FBI number is likely a vast undercount. U.S. schools alone were swatted more than 770 times in 2023, according to the independent K-12 School Shooting Database. And the number of hoax calls appears to be rising, with politicians and public figures making up more of the targets. On Christmas Day alone, swatters targeted Boston's Democratic Mayor Michelle Wu, Justice Department special prosecutor Jack Smith, and Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), and Brandon Williams (R-N.Y.), among others. Williams had to emerge from his home with his hands up after an anonymous caller told police he'd shot someone at the lawmaker's address and was ready to kill again. It was "an assassination attempt," said Williams. "It's not a prank." Most swatting responses end without police using force. But at least two innocent people have died as a result of such calls—one was shot by officers, the other had a heart attack—and many others have suffered bodily injuries and lasting psychological trauma.

How did this trend begin?

It started in the online video gaming community in the early 2000s "as some sort of joke," said Lauren Krapf, a tech expert at the Anti-Defamation League. Players would target rivals who were livestreaming themselves, thinking it was funny to see a SWAT team arrive at their opponent's door. This form of harassment became so prevalent that some swatters began to advertise their services for hire. In 2017, Tyler Barriss of Los Angeles was asked by a *Call of Duty* player to target a rival in Wichita. The SWAT team arrived at the intended victim's former address, and amid the confusion fatally shot current resident Andrew Finch—a 28-year-old father of two—as he came to the door. Barriss, who charged about \$10 per SWAT, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for the murderous hoax. He later admitted to enjoying the thrill of swatting. "It was like a kind of online power," he said, "knowing that you're breaking the law, and knowing that they won't be able to find you...and knowing you could do that over and over again."

When did it spread beyond gaming?

In the early 2010s, swatters made a wave of calls targeting celebrities, including Tom Cruise, Miley Cyrus, and Justin Bieber. At the time, the FBI said most swatters were motivated by "bragging rights and ego." But as the list of swatting targets expanded to include schools, hospitals, houses of worship, and political figures, law enforcement analysts noted a growing list of motivations,



A hoax led officers to swarm this New York home.

including personal or societal grievances, a general desire to cause havoc—and financial gain. On the Telegram messaging app, one swatting-for-hire group advertises the possibility of "extreme harassment" for \$100 a day. Swatting has also become a favorite weapon of online hate-mongers, who use it to terrorize their perceived racial and ideological foes. Federal officials in 2020 arrested five members of a neo-Nazi group whose targets had included Black churches, a mosque, and a Black newspaper columnist. And in a single weekend in December, nearly 200 synagogues and Jewish schools across the country were swatted in a seemingly coordinated campaign; the FBI said the threats appeared to originate outside the U.S.

Are many swatters caught?

Identifying offenders can be difficult because they have multiple ways to cover their tracks. Swatters often make calls over the internet using a Voice over Internet Protocol service (VoIP), which can provide a phone number that appears to be in the same area code as their victim, and also hide their locations using a virtual private network. A recent wave of school swattings, for example, was traced by investigators to an IP address in Ethiopia, but the perpetrators could have been almost anywhere in the world. Some swatters also use AI-generated or synthesized voices and effects to further disguise their identity. Three Senate office buildings were evacuated last year after a call from overseas reported an ongoing mass shooting; sounds of people screaming and glass shattering could be heard in the background.

Are authorities trying to crack down on swatters?

Swatting is not a crime in most states or at the federal level, so suspects are typically charged under statutes that cover threats, fraud, and conspiracy. That requires prosecutors to "match the elements of a particular law with what actually is happening," said Lauren Shapiro, of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "It's like a puzzle-piece way of trying to prosecute the offender." But with swattings against lawmakers rising, Congress seems more motivated to take action against hoaxers—Republican Sens. Rick Scott and Tommy Tuberville recently introduced a bill to make swatting punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Beyond criminal sanctions, VoIP services could be required to tighten user-identification requirements and emergency dispatchers trained to better filter out fakes. Some police worry that requiring dispatchers to ask extra questions could delay response times in a real emergency and cost lives. But for sci-fi author Patrick Tomlinson, the victim of nearly 50 swatting attempts, the emergency is ongoing. "It's taken away our sanctuary," Tomlinson said. "We don't know when the door's going to get kicked in."

A teenage swatting kingpin?

On the Telegram messaging service, an account named Torswats offered a menu of unique services. For \$75, Torswats claimed, it could shutter a school. For \$50, it would orchestrate "extreme swattings," in which law enforcement handcuff the target and search the house. Recordings of nearly 20 hoax calls threatening locations across the U.S., including numerous schools, were shared on the channel. In January, authorities arrested the suspected mastermind behind Torswats: 17-year-old Alan Filion of Lancaster, Calif. He was extradited to Florida for making a false police report about a mass shooting at a Seminole County mosque, and his arrest warrant blames Filion for dozens of other swattings, including at historically Black universities, government buildings, a Jewish children's hospital, and his own home. But was Filion the only culprit? Two days after his arrest, a new message appeared on the Torswats Telegram channel. "I am pretty sure I'll never be arrested," it read. "Seems ridiculous that a few bucks a month can allow someone to do crazy s--- and never go to jail."