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A call to arm Public Safety

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Within the span of five months in 2009, three gun scares — none of which involved real guns — hit the University campus, each renewing calls to allow the University's unarmed Public Safety officers to carry guns.

Currently, the Department of Public Safety employs 28 officers who are sworn police in New Jersey, and each of them is unarmed. These officers receive the same training — including with firearms — and have the same authority as local police officers. The department also employs 31 non-sworn security officers who are not trained to carry guns and would not be considered for arming.

One month shy of the four-year anniversary of the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, at Virginia Tech, the issue has apparently remained unresolved on Princeton's campus.

But for a debate that could surround an issue of life or death, the question of whether to arm the officers rarely enters campus conversation except after scares, and each side's arguments have been repeated countless times.

On one hand, University officials say that arming the officers would hurt student-officer relationships, as Public Safety would be preparing for a shooting that may never occur. Indeed, in a USG survey of students released last year, 57 percent of respondents said they were opposed to arming and nearly half indicated that arming would make them uncomfortable contacting officers. Still, officials said the question of whether to arm the University's officers is constantly reviewed. In any case, the University maintains that armed Borough and Township police officers are capable of responding to a shooting on campus.

The leadership of the local lodge of the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents most of Public Safety's sworn officers, disagrees. The organization says that Public Safety officers ought to be armed so they are equipped to save lives in the event of a shooting and can respond to an array of campus emergencies.

In an interview this week, President Shirley Tilghman said that the question of arming is not “a pressing issue for this campus.” In response to the FOP’s claims that leaving the officers unarmed could put the University community at a safety disadvantage, Tilghman remained resolute.

“They don’t make policy at this University,” she said. “I understand why, if you have been trained in a setting where officers are armed, then it may be disconcerting the first time you come on the campus where there is no need for officers to be armed.”

But a review of this issue spanning more than one year, which was spurred by the campus debate, has cast some doubt on the University’s conclusion that keeping Public Safety officers unarmed would not affect the response to a shooter on campus or that arming would negatively impact relationships between students and officers in an everyday setting.

A 2004-05 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that 65 percent of colleges in the country arm their sworn officers, but when the data set is limited to private schools of 5,000–9,999 students, of which 42 percent employ sworn officers, this number drops to 27 percent.

However, several prominent police experts said that 90 percent of schools that employ sworn officers, such as Princeton, choose to arm their force, a fact supported by the Department of Justice report.

Experts interviewed for this series also questioned the University’s belief that local police officers can adequately respond to shootings inside University buildings when local officers do not conduct training on campus or patrol inside the buildings. Public Safety officers patrol the University daily.

Still, University officials contend that statistics and generalizations are not applicable to the school’s case, especially because the police experts interviewed are not familiar with the University’s specific active shooter protocols. The University declined to release its policy to *The Daily Princetonian*.

Instead, the officials said, Princeton is unique. For example, at many places on campus, students are closer to the Borough police headquarters, which is located near the Rockefeller College dining hall on Nassau Street, than they are to Public Safety headquarters. Furthermore, the officials maintained that the nature of the criminal activity near and on

campus, in addition to the tight coordination with local police, does not create conditions that would necessitate arming.

Original complaint

The debate over arming Public Safety officers can be traced to the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings. About a year after the shootings, in March 2008, the FOP began petitioning the University to allow its officers to carry guns. These requests were denied because, University officials said, local officers provided sufficient protection of the campus.

In June 2008, Public Safety detective and then-FOP president James Lanzi [filed a complaint with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), claiming that the officers were put at risk because they were not armed.

“The University’s actions jeopardize officers’ safety and the community’s reasonable expectation of ... security and safety,” Lanzi wrote in the complaint, which was obtained by the ‘Prince’ last month under the federal Freedom of Information Act.

In a letter to OSHA, University Counsel Sankar Suryanarayan wrote that officers are provided with an “array of personal protective equipment and training appropriate for their duties.” Public Safety officers are armed with batons and pepper spray and wear bulletproof vests. Suryanarayan also said the complaint fell outside of OSHA jurisdiction as the concern was not a specifically recognized occupational safety issue under OSHA guidelines.

OSHA sided with the University, dismissing the complaint later that month.

The proper balance

Treby Williams '84, the University’s assistant vice president for safety and administrative planning, who oversees Public Safety, said an essential component of the University’s argument against arming is the notion that shootings at college campuses are so rare that the University cannot afford to devote all its resources to anticipating them.

Still, she noted, the University is “constantly vigilant” and has a detailed and comprehensive plan in place in the event that officers have to respond to an active shooter.

“I do not at all want to suggest that [a shooter] isn’t a scary situation,” she explained. “But I think it’s important to appreciate the scope and spectrum of campus security issues, many of which, from a statistical basis, are much more likely to harm our campus members.”

“I don’t think it would be prudent to align all of the resources around that one thing,” she added.

Experts agreed that shootings at colleges are quite rare. The commission that investigated the Virginia Tech shootings reported that there are an average of 16 shootings per year among 4,000 institutions.

But, the experts said, while shootings have a low probability of occurring, their effect on the campuses are immense.

“You might actually question whether you need any security at all because, statistically, the risk is very, very low,” explained Steve Ijames, a noted police expert who has developed training for the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the U.S. State Department in 33 foreign countries.

Ijames said schools have a “moral obligation” to take steps to protect their campus, regardless of the statistical rarity of an armed incident. “[If a shooting happens] are you going to be able to ... look parents in the eyes and say ‘I really did the best that I could do?’” he asked.

Indeed, FOP secretary and Public Safety officer Paul Krzewinski said the advantage of having armed officers would not be limited to their responding to a shooting. Public Safety officers are currently not allowed to conduct traffic stops except under the most extreme circumstances because of the threat posed to the officer about what could be in the car, Krzewinski explained.

FBI statistics on law-enforcement officer killings indicate that traffic stops and pursuits are among the most dangerous activities in which an officer can engage.

Krzewinski emphasized the “unknown risks” to many calls that officers must respond to, including burglaries and confronting strangers on campus, in promoting the apparent necessity of arming.

Still, he said, in routine incidents to which officers respond, a gun's presence is not necessary. "Day-to-day we don't have a need for a firearm," he said, noting that it is only rare incidents that require a gun. However, those rare incidents have the greatest potential for injuries or death.

Doug Wyllie, a senior editor at the website PoliceOne who has reported on the Princeton debate, said he sees the University's position as common among schools that consider arming.

"I think, unfortunately, for too many places there's still ridiculous levels of denial," he said. "'Never gonna happen here' was Columbine minutes before those two assailants made their attack ... 'Not gonna happen here' is not a strategy. 'Not gonna happen here' is denial."

The local response

The OSHA complaint and the University's response form the core of the key issues in the debate: whether the campus is in danger without the presence of armed officers, despite the presence of two nearby police departments.

Between the Borough and Township police staffs, there are roughly 60 armed police officers employed in the close vicinity of the University campus, a number that does not include the response capabilities of the Mercer County Sheriff's Office and county SWAT team. However, only a small fraction of the officers in each department are on patrol at any given time.

Many factors can affect officer availability. More officers are available for response during the day, for example, because officers with desk jobs typically work these hours. Krzewinski emphasized that, while local police availability is a variable, there are always trained Public Safety officers patrolling the campus.

The University has also conducted detailed and complex tabletop drills with the Borough and Township to rehearse responses to an active shooter scenario, according to Public Safety director Paul Ominsky. However, the most recent drill, scheduled for last year, was cancelled; the drill focused on responding to a weather emergency.

Nevertheless, the University has taken steps to familiarize local officers with campus buildings. When the new Frick Chemistry Laboratory opened this fall, for example, Captain Donald Reichling of Public Safety invited Borough and Township police and fire departments

to a walk-through of the building, which some officials attended, according to documents obtained under the N.J. Open Public Records Act.

“We are confident that, in an emergency, the Borough and Township police would be able to respond appropriately,” Ominsky said in an e-mail. “They are equally familiar with the layout of our campus as they are with the greater town that they cover.”

Krzewinski, however, asserted that Public Safety officers are much more knowledgeable about the campus than local officers are. Krzewinski said that Public Safety officers are familiar with a slew of seemingly minor details about University buildings — from different room numbering systems to how to get onto roofs — that could prove critical in a crisis situation.

“I don’t believe that that level of knowledge is transferable to the municipal police agencies unless they devote quite a bit more resources and train alongside us,” he explained. “Which is not currently happening.”

Indeed, Borough and Township officers do not train inside University buildings — which is a concern, several police experts said. Indeed, the Virginia Tech commission recommended that universities hold training drills for local police inside school buildings.

“The close relationship of the Virginia Tech Police Department and Blacksburg [Virginia] Police Department and their frequent joint training saved critical minutes,” the report said. “They had trained together for an active shooter incident in university buildings. There is little question their actions saved lives.”

Still, Ominsky said that regardless of the scenario, Public Safety officers could keep local officers informed.

“The good news is that Public Safety is often at any event where the Borough and the Township are called to, and we have a lot of information that we share, and can share, with them,” he added.

Another key factor for relying on a local response is the time it would take for officers to respond. But representatives from Public Safety and the Borough and Township police declined to provide exact response times, citing security concerns.

Perimeter plan

If a shooting were to occur, Public Safety officers are not permitted to intervene, even if they are the first to respond. Instead, they are in charge of forming a large perimeter to ensure no one gets near the shooting area.

Krzewinski has publicly said, including in a Whig-Cliosophic Society Senate debate in February 2010, that officers are instructed not to engage an active shooter.

Williams said the University's response plan specifies the actions to be taken by each department that would respond to a shooting.

"There are a number of extremely important roles in a response," she said. "There's the perimeter role. There's, you know, traffic. There's making sure people don't go in the buildings. There's people who actually go into the buildings to address the situation."

However, Public Safety's perimeter role appears to run counter to the accepted best practices for police officers who respond first to a shooting, several of the police experts said.

The widely-accepted national best practice instructs the first officers on scene to confront the shooter, according to the police experts. Yet because Public Safety officers are unarmed, they cannot fulfill that role.

Retired Army Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, who is an author of multiple books on school shootings and trains police organizations around the country on school safety, laughed when he was told of the University's perimeter plan.

"What kind of perimeter are unarmed people [going to] form?" he asked. "They can't do a damn thing until armed officers show up," he added, noting that unarmed officers could not stop an armed shooter from leaving the perimeter. "Remember, every second is another potential life lost," he said.

Because Public Safety officers cannot intervene, Krzewinski said, "that active shooter or that suspect has a lot more time to do a lot more damage."

Still, Tilghman reiterated, University officials must weigh the potential cost of arming to the campus considering that actual shootings are rare.

University officials "are weighing the likelihood of risk to the campus by not having officers armed against the potential change in the culture of the campus by having weapons on

campus,” she said. “And I think they are using their best judgment about where we should come down on this spectrum.”

This is the first part of a [three-part series](#) about the debate over arming Public Safety officers. Check back tomorrow for a look at nationwide trends and whether arming officers could hurt student-officer relationships at Princeton. For feedback or tips, please e-mail investigations@dailyprincetonian.com.