

# Routinely Armed and Unarmed Police: What can the Scandinavian Experience Teach us?

Ross Hendy\*, \*\*

**Abstract** This article introduces the author's recent study on the 'strategic impact' of routinely arming the New Zealand Police and discusses how two significant research findings are consistent with published theory. First, the utility of taking a binary, black, and white approach when analysing the 'routinely armed versus routinely unarmed' debate, is limited in terms of considering police officer behaviour. This is because police departmental policies shape police officer risk-taking and behaviour to a considerable degree. Second, despite departmental policies, the routine armament of a routinely unarmed police force, say for health and safety reasons, may be counterproductive; such a change exposes police officers to increased risks. Both findings come from an analysis of Scandinavian police forces. The author's study was primarily concerned with the police forces of Norway and Sweden; however, comparisons were made, at times, within a wider Scandinavian context.

## Introduction

The police forces of most countries are routinely armed. Of the 34 member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), New Zealand and Norway are two of just five that deploy routinely unarmed police.<sup>1</sup> However, in 2010 the New Zealand Police Association (NZPA) called for the routine arming of police officers to increase officer safety (New Zealand Police Association, 2010). A survey of NZPA members in 2010 found that 72% of all members supported a move to routine arming, although support decreased to 63% in a similar

survey conducted in 2013 (New Zealand Police Association, 2013). Similarly, in 2011 the Norwegian police federation conducted a nationwide survey of its members on the issue and found that 60% of members voted to remain routinely unarmed, with 20% unsure, and 20% advocating routine armament (F. Haga, personal communication).

Some commentators believe that routinely arming<sup>2</sup> a routinely unarmed police force is undesirable as it will cause the nature and character of the police to change (Sarre, 1996a, b; Locke, 2008; Buttle, 2010; Punch, 2011; M. Bott,

\*Constable (on leave), New Zealand Police, Wellington, New Zealand.

\*\*Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK. E-mail: rhendy@mac.com.

<sup>1</sup> The other OECD countries include Iceland, Ireland, and the UK (excluding Northern Ireland).

<sup>2</sup> In this instance, routinely armed police is taken to mean routinely armed with a firearm, as police who deploy with expandable batons, pepper sprays, are indeed armed with weapons.

unpublished data). Arguments are made that such a change will result in police officers becoming more aggressive when interacting with the public (Sarre, 1996b; Buttle, 2010; M. Bott, unpublished data) and that it will increase the risk of injury to the public and police (Buttle, 2010; Punch, 2011; M. Bott, unpublished data). Yet, the New Zealand public, as surveyed by the NZPA in 2010, supported routine armament: 58% of the public supported routine armament, 14% were unsure, and 28% were opposed. A similar survey was conducted in 2013, which found that 56% were in support, 7% were unsure, and 37% were opposed (New Zealand Police Association, 2013).

This article introduces the author's recent study on the 'strategic impact' of routinely arming the New Zealand Police (Hendy, 2012) and discusses how two significant research findings are consistent with published theory. First, the utility of taking a binary 'black and white' approach when analysing the 'routinely armed versus routinely unarmed' debate, is limited in terms of considering police officer behaviour. This is because police departmental policies shape police officer risk-taking and behaviour to a considerable degree (e.g. Waddington *et al.*, 2008). Second, despite departmental policies, the routine armament of a routinely unarmed police force, say for health and safety reasons, may be counterproductive; such a change exposes police officers to increased risks (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Squires, personal interview; Knutsson, personal interview).

Both findings come from an analysis of Scandinavian police forces. The author's study was primarily concerned with the police forces of Norway and Sweden; however, comparisons were made, at times, within a wider Scandinavian context. Although there are differences in language and culture, there are cultural similarities among English (such as England and Wales or New Zealand) policing histories, and those of Norway and Sweden

(Bayley, 1985). For instance, English and Scandinavian police share more civilian characteristics than *gendarmierie* policing models prevalent in Europe (Bayley, 1985; Lutterbeck, 2004). They also share the English 'policing by consent' approach (Bayley, 1985; Knutsson, 2010b; Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 8, personal interview). Høigård links the Scandinavian policing approach with the Scandinavian welfare model, 'a strong state, generous and universal welfare systems, and high economic productivity' (2011, p. 265) which is akin to New Zealand's social history (King, 2003).

Despite the small number of routinely unarmed police forces, the question of routine arming a routinely unarmed police force does have a broader utility: recent research findings, including the present study, suggest that routinely armed police take greater risks than routinely unarmed police. The relevance of the findings of this study, then, is applicable to all policing jurisdictions which seek to minimize harm to their employees.

### The Norwegian–Swedish case study

The objective of the study was to gain an understanding of the potential effect of the transition to a routinely armed police force, and how this might alter the relationship between the public and police if it was implemented in New Zealand. This question became relevant when the NZPA (2010) publicly called for routine armament in response to increased violence directed towards police officers, particularly violence involving death or grievous bodily harm. The research approach in the case study relied primarily on a comparative analysis of the police forces of Norway and Sweden:<sup>3</sup> the Swedish police are routinely armed but the Norwegian police are not. The case study was informed by literature and field research, the latter comprising of 25 interviews with practitioners

<sup>3</sup> The study also included a case study of the police of England and Wales; however, findings arising from comparison of that case study are not discussed in this article.

**Table 1:** Interviewee demographics

Jurisdiction	Site	Criminologists	Police practitioners	Combined
England and Wales	England (UK) and Wellington (NZ)	6	7	13
Norway	Oslo	3	3	6
Sweden	Stockholm	1	7	8
		10	17	27

and criminologists. Prospective interviewees were identified by the author through contact with cited authors, located during the literature search, and referred to the author by police unions in each jurisdiction. A total of 41 candidates were approached but ultimately only 25 agreed to participate. Table 1 above shows the demographic breakdown of localities and specialism of interviewee.

The total sample size of 27 reflects that some interviewees had expertise in multiple jurisdictions. The interviews consisted of a structured interview format using a consistent set of questions for all interviewees. The questions were aimed at gleaning the interviewee's personal opinions as well as their perceptions of the wider public opinion. The interview format allowed time for free discussion, which created opportunities for exploration of related literature, or relevant experiences, not directly addressing the research question.

The first stage of analysis in the case study focused on factors that had the potential to destabilize police legitimacy. The common fear, held by; M. Bott, unpublished data, Buttle (2010), and Sarre (1996a, b), that a barrier would emerge between the public and police if the police become routinely armed is not consistent with the findings of the research in the present study. The concern was considered unfounded by the majority of the Swedish interviewees. There was a consistent view amongst the interviewees that if police in Norway, or in England for that matter, became routinely armed there would be an initial period of public 'discomfort' but that this would recede provided that there was not an increase in police aggression. Similarly,

most interviewees believed that routine armament is unlikely to impact significantly on the police's ability to 'police by consent'. This view was most strongly held by Swedish practitioners; they believed that they were able to police by consent despite their armed status. There was a more varied response in the potential for routine armament to result in an increased use of force. Knutsson (personal interview) argues that the likelihood of an increased use of force would depend on the officer's perception of risk. The strongest risk to the police-public relationship was found to be the potential for unlawful or accidental deaths. This risk was discussed in depth in the literature (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Squires, personal interview) and there was a consistent fear held by interviewees from all jurisdictions that police make mistakes and accidents do happen. Another notable finding was the realization that the Norwegian public observed different demeanours of police officers when they were armed as a result of an incident. It is believed that they attributed this to the fact that police were wearing firearms, not because of the nature of the incident they were dealing with.

The effects of routine armament were also examined. The key finding was that routinely arming police might lead to a reduction in police safety, as officers may be more inclined to engage in dangerous situations. This will be discussed in more detail in the second part of this article. Similarly, threats to public safety were evaluated and an increased potential risk of injuries and deaths among mentally ill people appears to be a likely consequence (Hendy, 2012).

### 1. Police policies can affect the way in which firearms are used by police officers and therefore they can be an effective method of enhancing safety

Although some commentators argue that a routinely armed police officer will behave differently to the way an unarmed officer will when dealing with the public (Locke, 2008; Buttle, 2010; M. Bott, unpublished data), variances in the policies of Scandinavian police forces suggest that a binary approach—routinely unarmed versus routinely armed—ignores the subtlety of procedural and cultural influences on officer behaviour. Such behavioural variances are illustrated in the 2008 study of differences among routinely armed forces of differing cultures (Waddington *et al.*, 2008).

The study of firearm policies of the Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish police is advantageous in this discussion. The most striking difference between these police forces is that Norwegian police are not routinely armed; they carry firearms in patrol vehicles but in almost all circumstances must seek permission from a higher authority to deploy with them (Knutsson, 2010a; Myhrer and Strype, 2010). The Finns, Danes, and Swedes wear a sidearm as a matter of routine (Knutsson and Norée, 2010). As such, in contrast to the Norwegians, their officers have ‘immediate’ access to firearms. The Norwegians, however, must wait, sometimes up to 4–5 min, for permission and permission is not always granted (Interviewee 5, personal interview).<sup>4</sup>

The consequence of the ‘Norwegian delay’ has been considered by Knutsson by comparing data from the Swedish National Police Board and Norwegian Police University College. He found that the mean and median number of staff present at ‘armed’ incidents in Norway, between 1996 and 2006, was more than double that of similar incidents in Sweden (2010a). The mean present were 7.4 and 3.2; and median present was 5 and 2 officers, respectively. He surmised

that the increased number of staff present at incidents correlated to an increased level of safety as it provided resources for more effective tactics (Knutsson, 2010a, b; personal interview; Knutsson and Norée, 2010). This view was consistent with those of some of the Norwegian interviewees in this study. For instance, one Norwegian officer believed that time delay to seek the authorization and issue of firearms gave other officers vital time to mentally prepare for the incident; it enhanced time to plan the tactical approach and allowed for additional police staff to arrive (Interviewee 6, personal interview).

We have, as you may know, the firearms . . . with us in the cars. It take[s] me less than a minute to take them out and be ready to use them. In my opinion the most sufficient argument is that it gives us time to think instead of getting the sidearm on the hip and just running in to solve a case . . . . As a result of not thinking over the situation, they [are] getting into [a situation where] they will be forced to use their firearm instead of using time to think. It’s not that much time I am talking about, maybe a minute, two minutes, three minutes; maybe we get some assistance as four officers are a better job than two. . . . It’s important for the mental preparation (Interviewee 6, personal interview).

Another officer also commented that the time delay experienced by Norwegian officers was seen favourably by colleagues in the routinely armed Danish police:

We had an interesting experience when we visited our Danish colleagues . . . they have been armed for many years. Their

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian policy does allow for officers to arm themselves without permission in emergency situations.

new strategy...now is to stop and think. And we stop and think when we get our weapons on...we pull [ourselves] back, secure the crime scene, get forces and colleagues with us and it's better (Interviewee 5, personal interview).

This was reiterated by Interviewee 6:

One of the reasons that started this project in Denmark—stop and think—was they had 30 to 50 warning shots every year. Quite many, I don't remember the exact number of officers but quite many of them went on the sick leave after firing the warning shots. So that's basically the reason [the Danish] started the project because they realised that officers were on sick leave...So they have to try to start to find something new to do, like 'Stop and Think'. That's what we've been doing in Norway since, well before I started in the force almost 25 years ago (Interviewee 6, personal interview).

Interviewee 6 discusses a common 'Scandinavian' policy that the use of firearms is not limited to effective fire (where an officer fires directly at a person). The policies allow an officer to 'threaten' the use of a firearm, the act of presenting a firearm at a person and/or issuing a verbal warning without firing a round, as well the ability to escalate to firing a 'warning shot' (Knutsson, 2010a, b, c; Myhrer and Strype, 2010). The figure below (Fig. 1) shows the average number of incidents where police officers in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have used firearms (either as a threat or effective fire). Statistics collected on Swedish police shooting incidents varies from the other Scandinavian countries; the Swedish police do not report armed threats (Knutsson, 2010a). The dark bars denote the annualized quantity of shots fired by police use of firearms per million

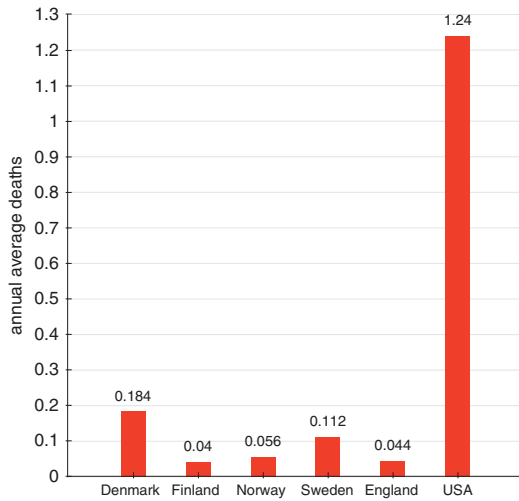


**Figure 1:** Annual average number of incidents where police officers in service have used firearms for threat or effective fire per million inhabitants, Denmark (1996–2006), Finland (1997–2006), Norway (1996–2006), and Sweden (1996–2004) (Knutsson and Norée, 2010).

inhabitants, adjusted for population (Denmark = 2.6; Finland = 2.5; Norway = 0.5; and Sweden = 2.9). The light bars indicate the quantity of threats made.

The most striking observation—aside from the absence of threats by Swedish police—is the high rate of threats reported in Denmark when compared with those reported in Finland and Norway. These figures support the observations made by Danish colleagues of Interviewees 6 and 7 about the high prevalence of firearms use by Danish police. Another question arises when observing threats reported in Finland and Norway. It seems surprising that Finnish police, who are routinely armed, use their firearms to a lesser degree than the routinely unarmed Norwegian police. Knutsson accounts for this disparity by citing differences in policy and suggests that the Finnish police have a higher threshold to meet before drawing firearms (Knutsson and Norée, 2010).

Knutsson's statistics suggest that a subject is less likely to be shot in Norway than in the other Scandinavian countries. However, when considering the likelihood of a subject dying by police shooting, such conclusions are not so easily drawn. The figure below (Fig. 2) shows population-adjusted annualized shootings among the



**Figure 2:** Annual average number of deaths by police shooting per million inhabitants (1996–2006) (Knutsson and Norée, 2010).

Scandinavian countries with England and Wales and the USA included for comparison.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to compare deaths caused by English and Finnish police. The data shows that in England there are more deaths per capita by shots fired by the routinely unarmed English police than in Finland where the police are routinely armed. It is of further interest to observe the difference between the English and Norwegian results. This may be explained by observing the differences in policies; all Norwegian police officers have access to firearms (Knutsson, 2010a), whereas only a small proportion of English police have access to firearms (Waddington and Wright, 2010).

This discussion has highlighted that departmental firearms policies can play a more important role in minimizing harm than simply considering whether police officers should be routinely armed or not. The data from Finland provides the most striking illustration of this.

2. A routinely armed police officer is likely to be exposed to increased danger, and likely to engage in situations that are more hostile than a routinely unarmed police force.

There is an emerging view in the literature that suggests providing a police officer with a firearm increases his or her ‘sense’ of safety to a detrimental degree (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Knutsson, personal interview). Squires explains that the firearms create an ‘illusion of safety’: the police officer ‘feels’ safer by ‘believing’ they are better equipped to deal with a situation because they are armed with a firearm. Knutsson makes similar observations, believing that an officer armed with a firearm is more likely to rush into a dangerous situation than an officer who is not armed with a firearm (2011).

The comparative nature of the study of Norwegian and Swedish police provides an opportunity to observe differences in the way each force deploys staff at firearms incidents. The research shows trends consistent with the literature. First, consider the following reflection by a Swedish police officer:

When I’m thinking about it . . . I would feel naked to go out [on patrol] without a gun. I could not do it now because I started with a gun. . . . I have heard [stories] from other officers who have been working in the suburbs; they are more likely to have less cops out there. There are bigger groups of criminals and when they meet a group of ten-to-fifteen quite heavy criminals it has no effect if you pull out your baton or pepper spray. The only way . . . is to pull the gun and fire a warning shot. . . . So in those situations, if I would have

<sup>5</sup> This graph is based on the same prepared by Knutsson (2010a) but with English data added by the author.



ended up in some situation like that, I would be really glad to have a pistol. . . . I am feeling a little bit safer when I put my gun on because there are more situations I can handle (Interviewee 9, personal interview).

Interviewee 9's statement is consistent with [Squires and Kennison \(2010\)](#); the officer attributes the utility of his firearm in overcoming his sense of inadequacy to deal with the potentially dangerous encounter. This is not a course of action available to a routinely unarmed officer; yet the routinely armed officer relies on his firearm for operational safety. It is difficult to establish how the routinely unarmed officer would approach this. Knutsson's earlier statistics (the different mean and median numbers of officers present at firearm incidents) might provide an insight (2010a).

So, are Swedish officers engaging in more dangerous situations because they are routinely armed? Analysis of police shooting incidents in the southern Swedish region of Skåne provides an insight.<sup>6</sup> This data set comes from interviews of the police officers involved in 77 police shootings in the region between 1985 and 2004. Of the total incidents, nearly two-thirds of the incidents (59%) involved first response units,<sup>7</sup> whereas specialist SWAT units were only involved in a fifth of the incidents. The initial calls for service varied. The most common were burglary (16%), disturbance (15%), and vehicle pursuit (14%), none of which would ordinarily trigger the deployment of specialist squads such as SWAT. While the majority of these incidents did not initially present as serious firearms incidents, 45% of incidents resulted in a shot directed at the offender, 35% effective

shots directed at an offender, and 10% warning shots.<sup>8</sup> Self-defence was the reason cited for firing in 82% of incidents (which is comparable with 80% found in the Silverudd study of shootings in Sweden between 1985 and 1998 ([Knutsson, 2010b](#), p. 107)). Unfortunately, the data is silent on the nature of the self-defence—whether it was for the protection of an officer or another person—which makes it difficult to conclude that the Swedish officers are facing more dangerous situations.

These data feature a set of unique insights which help understand the Skåne police shootings. Many of the incidents occurred unexpectedly or before an officer had made mental preparations to engage a firearm. For instance, just over one-third (37%) of incidents occurred when an officer had the firearm holstered; and over half (56%) before the officer was 'mentally prepared' to shoot. Respondents described that over in one-third of incidents (37%), they reacted in a 'panicked' state, as opposed to a controlled state, and this rate rose to nearly half (47%) when officers attributed the cause of shooting to be in 'self-defence'. Half (50%) of incidents occurred between 0 and 3 seconds after the initial 'threat' was perceived, with 42% occurring with a distance of zero to three metres between officer and subject. Two-thirds (63%) occurred when the officer was moving.

How do we interpret the Skåne data? An argument could be made that the Swedish policing environment is so unpredictable that routine incidents can rapidly escalate into armed situations, without warning or without giving cause for police to predict such an outcome. Alternatively, it could be that an officer's knowledge of being armed decreases risk

<sup>6</sup> The data were collected by a police tactical firearms trainer during interviews of police officers involved in the incident at the completion of procedural and criminal investigations. The trainer believed that waiting until the investigations had been completed allowed for a deep level of reflection and self-assessment of the officer without the fear of recrimination or sanction. As such, interviewees speculated on subjective self-assessments relating to 'mental readiness' and 'panic', topics of discussions that would arguably be omitted from discussions with investigators.

<sup>7</sup> First response units include routine patrol, traffic, and dog units.

<sup>8</sup> About 47% of the remaining incidents involved a warning shot not fired at the offender and 8% were the result of accidental fire.

perception and masks any apparent risk factors. Remember the earlier comments of Interviewee 9: he felt that he was safe to engage with a criminal group as he was armed with a firearm but would not feel safe to engage if he did not. Squires suggests that providing a firearm to police increases an officer's 'presumption of capacity' to effectively deal with armed incidents—the ability to deliver deadly force enhances his or her safety—which in turn leads to an inevitable illusion of safety (Squires and Kennison, 2010; Squires, personal interview).

Could Knutsson's observation that more officers are deployed at armed incidents in Norway than Sweden (2010a), and the high number of rapid/panicked shootings found in the Skåne data, suggest a wider cultural variance between Norwegian and Swedish police officers? Comparable data on deployment levels in Finland or Denmark was not available at the time of analysis so it is difficult to draw an analysis in a wider Scandinavian context. The question of cultural variances was not considered at length in the interviews but most Norwegian and Swedish interviewees commented that their own 'policing ethos' differed from that of their counterparts. A common theme emerged from discussions with Swedish officers. A number of them placed a high level of importance of 'retaining control' at a critical incident and said that being routinely 'unarmed' would diminish their sense of control. For instance, consider the following:

I don't believe in the thinking that an unarmed police will get kinder criminals. It might be so but [that way] we leave the control to the criminals whether they want to be nice or not. If they are not then we are really in bad trouble if we are unarmed... I don't want to hand over the control of the situation to the criminal (Interviewee 12, personal interview).

We don't leave control of the situation to the bad guys [and] we have a fair

chance of taking the command (Interviewee 13, personal interview).

And another, reflecting on the merit of disengaging as opposed to taking immediate control, which is what the Norwegian policy requires, suggests:

Yes, that is one way to do it—but then you leave the control to the criminal. (Interviewee 10, personal interview)

In contrast, a number of Norwegians talked more about 'public safety' than 'control'. For instance, an experienced Norwegian officer remarked:

So if a thief gets off so what? It's better than somebody getting hurt; we'll catch them anyway. Like in the American [movies], 'we can't let them go', [but if you] first pull your gun it's hard to reverse it (Interviewee 5, personal interview).

This philosophy was also evident in the discussion about police vehicular pursuits:

In Norway, it is the opposite to the American cops, you know they have a car chase, it goes for five hours with helicopters filming and two or three TV companies. Why don't they let him go and let the chopper see where they land? They put a lot of people in danger doing it so that's not the way we do it in Norway. (Interviewee 6, personal interview)

Evidently these individual Swedish and Norwegian officers approach a critical situation from different starting points: the Swedes from a point of situational control and the Norwegians from the perspective of situational safety. Although inferences could be drawn that these views are representative of a wider cultural policing 'ethos', further research is warranted to measure how such an ethos is affected by the armed status of the police force.



In summary, the study illustrates the misconception that a routinely armed police officer is 'safer' than a routinely unarmed police officer. Data from the Skåne research and the interviews with Swedish police officers help us to interpret Squire's premise that an increase in the sense of safety experienced by a routinely armed officer can be illusory. The study also identifies that policing philosophies can influence situational decision making.

## Conclusion

So, what does the 'Scandinavian research' teach us? First is that individual departmental policies can be an effective method of influencing officer behaviour in critical firearm incidents, perhaps more so than whether a force is routinely armed or not. One might consider that an officer staring down the barrel of a gun may not necessarily factor in the subtleties of whether a warning shot is appropriate, or whether it would be best to shoot for the leg or chest, especially in a critical incident. Yet the variation found in these data from routinely armed police from Denmark, Finland and Sweden shows that this can be the case: while the Finish police fire at approximately the same rate as the Danish police, the Finish police threaten to 'shoot' proportionally less than the Danish. Further, the Norwegian 'threat to shoot' rate is nearly three times that of Finland. This suggests that there is merit in valuing the influence of specific departmental policies as opposed to simply viewing the question in a binary form: 'routinely armed' or 'routinely unarmed'. In other words, when considering the impact of routinely arming a routinely unarmed police force, these data show us that it is more likely that departmental policies will have a greater effect on the police officer's decision-making process than whether the officer is routinely armed or not.

Second is that a routinely armed officer is not necessarily 'safer' than a routinely unarmed

counterpart. The research findings, especially that of the Swedish police officer relying on his firearm for his personal safety, are consistent with the literature in that the mere presence of a firearm on an officer enhances his or her 'sense' of safety, but not necessarily his or her actual safety. The Skåne data tell us of the rapidly evolving nature of unpredictable critical incidents. Knutsson's observations of fewer officers attending 'armed incidents' in Sweden than similar incidents in Norway, suggests a potential 'command and control' deployment dilemma. Departmental policies, and those who 'command and control' real-time incidents, need to be conscious of the perceived utility of a 'routinely armed officer'; routinely armed officers may be more readily equipped to deal with dangerous firearm incidents, in terms of their ability to have immediate access to firearms, but their armed status does not necessarily equate to an increase in their safety.

While the aforementioned research findings and case-study analysis have informed the above observations, it is important to note that these have originated, for the most part, from qualitative research. While the qualitative research process does not invalidate the findings, further analysis of the issues raised in this article could be tested through quantitative methods, in order to test the emergent themes as well as to explore the views and experiences of larger sample of police officers across Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Nonetheless, the 'Scandinavian experience' as discussed in this article illustrates that a binary approach to routine armament of routinely unarmed police does not necessarily equate to increased safety. Policy makers and police officers therefore need to be conversant with the inherent risks associated with the immediate access to firearms, some risks of which have become apparent through the discussion in this article. Ultimately, though, this article proposes that routine armament may not necessarily be the silver bullet to improve police safety, as some believe it might be.

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