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Norwegian Police Officers risk perception in Armed Confrontations

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Although Norwegian police officers are legally permitted to use force in armed confrontations, they seldom resort to using their firearms. However, according to the Norwegian Police Threat Assessment, violent crime involving lethal weapons and attempted murder is on the rise. This trend has led to an increase in armed confrontations and, consequently, more situations in which police emergency response officers must decide whether to use their firearms. In such scenarios, officers' understanding of risk—the uncertainty, severity, and potential consequences of the situation at hand, and their ability to interpret the evolving dynamics of the confrontation, are crucial in determining the most appropriate course of action. This paper examines how risk perception develops across different phases of a police armed assignment, including the confrontation itself. The analysis draws on 30 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian police emergency response officers who had been involved in armed confrontations where they believed they were legally justified in discharging their firearms but, for various reasons, chose not to do so. Findings indicate that Norwegian police officers' risk perception—and their subsequent decision not to use their firearms—is influenced primarily by the behaviour and actions of their counterpart in the confrontation. Additional contributing factors include officers' level of expertise, their training in extreme scenarios, and their access to protective equipment such as helmets, bulletproof vests, and shields. Ultimately, however, the foundation of these decisions lies in their ability to read the situation and assess the risks posed by the counterpart.

Keywords: Armed confrontation, Uncertainty, Risk perception,

1. Introduction

On the night of 28 December 2024, the South-West Police District in Norway received an emergency call reporting an unstable armed individual on his way to set a house on fire (PHS, 2025). He was intercepted by an armed police response. When officers approached his vehicle, he opened fire. In the subsequent exchange of gunfire—during which at least 52 shots were fired—one police officer and the gunman were killed (ibid.).

Although Norwegian police officers are legally permitted to use firearms in armed confrontations, they rarely do so. However, the Norwegian Police Threat Assessment reports an increase in violent crime involving lethal weapons and attempted murder (2025). This trend has led to more armed confrontations and, consequently, more situations in which police emergency response officers must decide whether to discharge their firearms. In such circumstances, officers' understanding of risk—including the uncertainty, severity, and potential consequences of the situation—and their ability to interpret rapidly evolving dynamics are critical in determining the appropriate course of action.

Existing research has examined police use of force from several perspectives, including armed confrontation contexts (Bye et al., 2019), stress reactions among police officers (Carlier et al., 1998), situational assessment and decision-making (Flin et al., 2006), mass-casualty and armed incidents (Henriksen et al., 2022; Kruke, 2022), police use of coercive force and firearms (Henriksen & Kruke, 2020a, 2020b), situational awareness in armed confrontations (Henriksen et al., 2025; PHS, 2025), decisions to shoot (Mitchell & Flin, 2007; van den Heuvel et al.,

2014), and handgun shooting performance (Oudejans, 2008; Schakel et al., 2016).

This paper examines how risk perception develops across different phases of a police armed assignment, including the confrontation itself. The analysis draws on 30 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian police emergency response officers who had been involved in armed confrontations where they believed they were legally justified in firing but ultimately chose not to. The findings show that officers' risk perception—and their decision not to shoot—is shaped primarily by the behaviour and actions of their counterpart. Additional factors include officers' expertise, training for extreme scenarios, and access to protective equipment such as helmets, bulletproof vests, and shields. Ultimately, these decisions depend on officers' ability to interpret the situation and assess the risks posed by their counterpart.

2. Conceptual framework

We do no have extensive statistical data on armed confrontations as the foundation for our understanding of risk in such settings. Thus, in such situations with limited data, risk can be understood as uncertainty about and the severity of events and consequences of an event, with respect to something that people value highly (Aven & Renn, 2010). A key component of this perspective is uncertainty, which may arise from limited information, contextual complexity, unpredictability, or dynamic conditions. Related concepts include probability (likelihood of occurrence), consequence (severity of impact), exposure (degree of contact with a threat), vulnerability (susceptibility to harm), and measures (actions taken to reduce probability, exposure, or consequences). Another approach to understanding risk in armed confrontations is the three-factor model—based on guidelines from the Norwegian National Security Authority, the Norwegian Police Directorate, the Police Security Service, and Norwegian Standard 5832—conceptualizes risk as the intersection of value, threat, and vulnerability. Changes in any of these factors influence the level of risk; reducing threat or vulnerability lowers the risk to valued assets.

Because risk concerns the future, it is inherently linked to uncertainty. Although future conditions can be projected to support planning and decision-making (Endsley, 1995) in armed confrontations, such projections are shaped by experiences gained in previous confrontations, but also during police training and exercises. Thus, risk may also, from a weak social constructivist perspective, be understood partly through how it is interpreted within different socio-cultural contexts and embedded in social systems and risk management practices (Engen et al., 2021). These interpretations are strongly influencing police officers risk acceptance in armed confrontations, i.e. the level of risk we are willing to tolerate.

However, risk is not static. Our understanding of risk in a dynamic armed confrontation is influenced by the quality of risk communication between involved actors, risk communication understood as "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups and institutions (National Research Council, 1989). Effective communication aims to ensure that risk messages are understood, build trust between communicators and audiences, encourage appropriate responses, and facilitate conflict resolution (Renn, 2008). Finally, we need to understand or perceive the risk at hand in armed confrontations. Risk perception refers to how individuals interpret and respond to risk. Differences in risk perception often explain disagreements about appropriate courses of action (Slovic, 1987). Risk perception is influenced by knowledge, experience, values, and trust in information sources (Engen et al., 2021). Slovic (2016) describes it as the subjective assessment people make regarding the characteristics and seriousness of risk, subjective assessments due to cultural values and group affiliations influencing how risks are interpreted, which may lead to differences in perception between social groups (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983).

3. Methods

Following an abductive approach, the data for this study were derived from document analysis and, primarily, from 30 semi-structured interviews with Norwegian police emergency response officers who had experienced armed confrontations. In each of the 30 cases, the officers believed they were legally justified in discharging their firearms but ultimately chose not to do so. Informants with this specific experience were recruited through snowball sampling (Neuman, 2000) within the Norwegian police and through an article published in the Norwegian police magazine Politiforum.

Accessing officers with this type of experience proved challenging, partly due to the sensitivity of armed confrontations. The research team was therefore composed with this in mind and included an experienced police officer with an extensive professional network. The two other researchers were affiliated with the Norwegian Police University College (PHS) and the risk and societal safety research environment at the University of Stavanger. In terms of researcher positionality (Brown, 1996), the team thus consisted of an insider–insider (the police officer), an insider–outsider (the civilian researcher at PHS), and an outsider–outsider (the independent researcher with no affiliation to the police) (Brown, 1996, pp. 180–186). The police officer contributed both as a researcher and as a gatekeeper, facilitating access to relevant professional environments. The aim was not to obtain a representative sample but to recruit informants with direct experience of armed confrontations in which they chose not to fire their weapons. The informants represented 11 of Norway's 12 police districts. Most interviews were conducted at the informants' workplaces, while others took place at PHS, via Microsoft Teams, or by telephone.

Each interview began with a free narrative in which the officer described the confrontation in their own words. This initial account was followed by more focused questions concerning events leading up to the confrontation, the confrontation itself, perceptions of risk, and the decisions made. Notably, even when the events had occurred several years prior to the interview, informants were able to provide detailed and vivid descriptions of the situations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using transcription software (TSD), after which the transcripts were manually reviewed for quality assurance. The material was then imported into NVivo and analysed using Braun and Clarkes six stages of thematic analysis (2006, 2012). We started with familiarisation with the data, followed by initial code generation, generating themes based on patterns within the codes, theme accuracy and relevance of themes, defining and naming theses, and, finally, writing up the results. Then the results were carefully reviewed to ensure anonymity. Some confrontations contained distinctive characteristics that could reveal locations or identities. To protect confidentiality, selected quotations are therefore presented in slightly modified verbatim form, without altering their substantive meaning.

4. Results

The findings in this study stem mostly from a period with unarmed police. Norwegian police officers were unarmed in daily service as a rule until general armament was introduced July 1st, 2025. The findings start off with some statistics on the use of force, and on the conditions of the subject. Then follows data from interviews with emergency response personnel on their experience with risk related to armed confrontations.

4.1. *Statistics on use of force, subject conditions, informant specifications and details on the 30 confrontations*

For the Norwegian police to use their firearms in daily duty was relatively rare. In fact, in the period 1985-2002, the police used firearms (warning shots and aimed shots), the Norwegian police had an average of 2.8 incidents per year (PHS, 2025). In the period 2005-2018, the police fired aimed shots at people in an average of 2 incidents per year. However, in the period 2010-2024 the police experienced a sharp increase in the number of missions where they arm themselves (ibid.). That said, the number of incidents where police threaten to use firearms constitutes only a small proportion of the armed operations, and there are few incidents where people are injured or killed because of police firing.

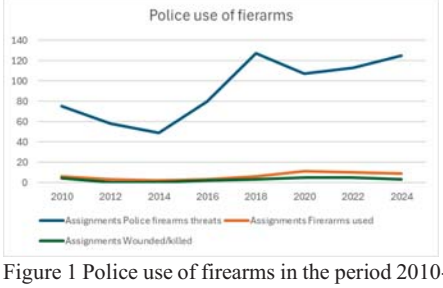

Figure 1 Police use of firearms in the period 2010-2024

To sum up, Norwegian police officers do not have extensive experience with armed confrontation. They do however have experience with the use of force in less dramatic confrontations. In a study on the Norwegian police use of coercive force, a questionnaire was distributed to the Norwegian police emergency

response personnel in operational service (Henriksen and Kruke, 2020a). The survey was distributed to 3772 potential respondents, of which 1637 police officers completed the survey anonymously (ibid.). The subjects (n = 1571) were reported to be intoxicated and/or to have a mental illness in 92% of the confrontations in which coercive force was used (see Table 1).

Table 1. Condition of the subject(s). Percentage reported (n = 1571)

Experience	Percentage
Not intoxicated	8%
Intoxicated (alcohol)	37%
Intoxicated (narcotics)	20%
Mentally ill	14%
Mentally ill and intoxicated	21%

Police personnel are divided into categories based on their competence level and differences in annual training (POD 2021):

- IP1: Police Special Intervention Unit.
- IP2: Dignitary protection.
- IP3: Police Response Team.
- IP4: Ordinary police emergency response officers, with weapons approval.

IP2-personnel are specialized in dignitary protection. IP1 and IP3-personnel undergo far more training and education than IP4. Whereas IP3 service personnel has 103 hours of yearly obligatory training, the IP4 personnel have 48 hours (POD, 2021). In this study, and at the time of the confrontation, 4 officers served in the Police Special Intervention Unit (IP1), 15 officers in the Police Response Team (IP3) and 11 were police emergency response officers (IP4). The interviewed mean average age was 36 years, and their mean service period was nine and a half years, with a span between 1-24 years.

If we then look to the subjects in the armed confrontations, 26 male and 4 female subjects confronted police officers. Most of them were armed with various kinds of weapons (table 2). In most confrontations, the subject was armed with a knife or a stabbing weapon. In 11 out of 30 cases the subject was armed with a firearm or a replica. A subject with a firearm poses a direct risk to third-parties and police officers, whereas a subject with a replica most of all put himself at risk due to the possibility of being perceived by police officers of wearing a real firearm.

Table 2. Subject arming (n = 30)

Subject arming	Number
Firearm or replica	11
Stabbing weapon (i.e. knife)	15
Unarmed (deployment information to be armed)	2
Striking weapon	1
Pretended to be armed	1

When the armed confrontation was resolved, the average distance between the police officer and the subject was approximately 4 meters. 18 of the confrontations were within the span of 1-10 meters, in 4 of the confrontations the distance was estimated to be longer than 10 meters, and 8 of the confrontations were resolved using physical contact. 17 confrontations had a duration of less than 1 minute, i.e. the time from when the confrontation occurred until the situation was resolved. 8 confrontations lasted only seconds. 6 confrontations lasted less than 5 minutes, 2 less than 10 minutes, and 5 incidents more than 10 minutes.

4.2. *Risk in armed confrontations*

The armed confrontations were not always perceived as posing a severe risk to the police officers. Informant 10 argued that although the subject was armed, “I think that this attack doesn't pose any danger to us yet.” The subject “was allowed to hit the shield twice” because the attack was perceived as “a damn bad attack,” and the officers’ protective equipment and training meant that shooting would have been disproportionate. According to the informant, they could “easily take him out in another way without exposing ourselves to a very big risk.” Informant 13 expressed a similar perception, stating that “it's my subjective perception of him. That my life wasn't in such great danger that I would take his life, in a way.” Informant 18 talked about an armed subject in a residential area, a subject they learned to be intoxicated, with a replica gun, and thus possessing no harm to the police. Other informants reflected on the quality of their equipment and training and that they felt being in control during the confrontations.

Other accounts reflected more uncertain threat assessments. Informants 1 and 19 described situations in which the opponents had the initiative, holding a gun at close range. Informant 11 assessed their position as relatively safe and considered alternative courses of action if the subject exited the house, recalling "mentally preparing myself that now I'll probably have to shoot him in the leg." In retrospect he reflected that "maybe it would have been important to shoot. Because when I chose not to shoot, I increased the risk that a third person would be hit by a crazy guy with a gun." He also noted that "there's something about it being a real bullet when you shoot, a slightly higher threshold." Informant 14 similarly reflected on the dilemma of not shooting. At the time, the informant "read him in a way that nothing was going to happen," yet afterward expressed both relief at not having shot and concern about the risk posed to a third person. Comparable reflections were described by informant 16, who considered the possibility that the subject might reach nearby bystanders. Although the informant assessed that "it was likely that he will do something that puts the third person in danger," he ultimately judged the immediate risk as limited and chose instead to "run him down" to gain control of the subject. Informant 2 described a similar decision. While his initial plan had been to shoot, the subject's behavior during the confrontation reduced the perceived threat, creating a "window" to physically tackle and disarm him.

In other incidents, officers described situations in which the threat level allowed for tactical distance and patience. Informant 20 noted that although the confrontation was dynamic, the subject did not pose an immediate threat to officers or bystanders, allowing them to "step back a little and create distance" while waiting for an opportunity to intervene. Informants 23 and 25, however, emphasized the risk of withdrawing when others might be exposed to danger. Informant 23 stated that "the alternative to fight with a man like that is to pull out and let the risk fall on others." Informant 25 similarly assessed that he had an opportunity to shoot, and firing would not have endangered nearby third persons because they were "well positioned behind me." Informant 26 described a comparable situation in a residential area that was not busy, meaning that third persons were not in immediate danger. As a result, officers had time to pursue alternative solutions rather than immediately resorting to firearms.

Several accounts highlighted how the absence of risk to third persons altered officers' perceptions of the situation. Informant 30 explained that once it became clear that the subject was alone in a room and that no third persons were at risk, the situation shifted from an initial "full throttle" response to a calmer operational context. The informant described experiencing "that calm, when there's no danger to a third person." Informant 5 expressed a similar perspective but noting that police may eventually have to confront a subject who isolates himself in a room or building. After waiting outside for an extended period and realizing that "it didn't lead to anything," the officers decided to enter and confront the subject. Despite having "an insane amount of time" and no indication that others were present, the confrontation ultimately involved increased risk to the officers themselves. The informant also reflected on the potential role of communication, drones, and electroshock weapons (ESV) in such situations.

Informant 6 described how initial information and discussions during the deployment shaped the officers' strategy. Suspecting a potential suicide-by-cop scenario and concerned that a third person might be injured and in need of immediate medical assistance, the officers decided to leave most of their protective equipment behind and confront the subject directly using only a shield. Upon arrival, however, they learned that the subject had left the building and was now outside in a residential area. Reflecting on the incident, the informant stated that although the risk was borne by the police officers and "should lie with the subject," they ultimately hesitated to shoot: "still you don't dare shoot." The officers later reflected that they had never actually seen a gun and that their prior discussion of suicide by cop influenced their decision-making. As the informant explained, "we were terrified to help him with that," and concerns about public scrutiny and media portrayal further reinforced their reluctance to fire. Consequently, they chose to accept greater personal risk rather than make the decision to shoot. Informant 9 likewise described receiving initial information indicating mental illness and threats involving a lethal weapon. However,

because no third persons were in harm's way and the subject had been effectively cornered, the officers assessed that they had sufficient time to explore alternative solutions rather than immediately resorting to firearms. Informant 7 described a somewhat related dilemma. He reflected that "if I shoot now, I have the right to do so. It was the last resort. But if I wait until he runs… I have to shoot until he stops," due to the potential danger posed to third persons.

Summing up some experiences from armed confrontations:

- They needed time to assess the risk possessed by the subject
- The perception of the subject as posing a risk to police officers and/or to third persons
- The risk involved in shooting the subject, including the potential media storm
- The risk of hitting someone else.

5. Discussion

This section first discusses risk and risk communication, followed by risk perception and the development of the confrontation.

5.1. *Risk and risk communication*

A widely cited definition by Aven and Renn describes risk as uncertainty about events and their consequences with respect to something that people value (Aven & Renn, 2010). Armed confrontations clearly fall within this understanding, as life and health may be at stake. A defining element of the concept is uncertainty, which may stem from insufficient information, contextual complexity, unpredictability, or rapidly changing dynamics.

In armed confrontations, several actors may be directly exposed to risk, including the subject, police officers, and potential third parties such as bystanders. Although police officers are equipped with protective gear intended to reduce the consequences of an armed attack, they may, as the subjects and bystanders, be vulnerable in armed confrontations. In such situations, risk communication may be an important tool for police officers when addressing colleagues, but also the subject and third parties. Risk communication can be understood as an interactive exchange of information and perspectives regarding the nature of risk (National Research Council, 1989).

However, effective risk communication during armed confrontations is challenging. Stress, time pressure, and situational complexity may make it difficult for officers to communicate clearly with colleagues, subjects and bystanders. In addition, effective communication depends on whether the message is understood, whether the police are perceived as credible and trustworthy, whether recipients adapt their behaviour accordingly, and whether communication contributes to resolving the conflict (Renn, 2008).

The findings of this study—where 30 armed confrontations were resolved without the use of firearms—may indicate that risk communication can contribute to de-escalation and effective risk perception. However, a closer examination of these cases reveals a more complex picture.

5.2. *Risk perception and development of the confrontation*

Risk communication alone cannot fully explain behaviour in armed confrontations. Risk perception—how individuals perceive, assess, and respond to risk—is also central. Differences in risk perception often shape decision-making and may lead to disagreements about the most appropriate course of action (Slovic, 1987).

The findings from this study indicate substantial differences in risk perception among the actors involved. First, subjects themselves are often unaware of the risks they pose or face. In many cases they may be intoxicated or experiencing mental illness. Previous research on police use of force reports that subjects were intoxicated and/or suffering from mental illness in 92% of confrontations (Henriksen & Kruke, 2020a). Second, bystanders may unintentionally place themselves in danger without fully understanding the situation. Third, the Police Control Room may receive incomplete or inaccurate information from callers, which can affect the quality of information relayed to responding officers. Fourth, police officers themselves may arrive at the scene with limited (deployment) information (Henriksen et al., 2025), making risk assessment difficult.

Risk perception may also be influenced by experience, cultural values, and group affiliation. These factors can lead to different interpretations of the same situation and variations in how risks are assessed (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). For example, one highly trained officer described perceiving a knife attack as less threatening based on the subject's body language and what was interpreted as a "very poor attack" (Informant 10).

Another officer suggested that the subject posed limited threat, influencing the decision not to use lethal force (Informant 13).

Several additional dynamics were identified in the interviews. In some cases, the speed of the police response placed officers directly in harm's way (Informants 1 and 19), effectively transferring the immediate risk from the subject to the officers themselves, as the decision to use firearms ultimately rested with the subject. In other cases, deciding not to shoot transferred risk to nearby bystanders (Informants 1, 23 and 25). Inaccurate or incomplete deployment information from the Police Control Room could also increase risk for officers, subjects, and third parties (Informant 6).

Conversely, the absence of bystanders allowed officers more time to attempt de-escalation without placing others at risk (Informants 5, 20, 26, and 30). In these situations, the risk to both officers and subjects was reduced.

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined how risk perception develops across different phases of police armed assignments. The findings indicate that officers' understanding of risk evolves significantly upon arrival at the scene. Their risk perception—and their decision not to fire their weapons—is shaped primarily by the behaviour and actions of the subject and by the officers' ability to interpret the situation and assess the risks involved.

Armed confrontations that end without the use of firearms may be considered successful outcomes. However, choosing not to use firearms may also shift risk to police officers or third parties present at the scene. In addition, the officers' risk perception may be complicated by the fact that many subjects in such confrontations are intoxicated or experiencing mental illness. Further research is therefore needed on the role of subjects in violent confrontations, and police emergency response personnel may benefit from increased training and knowledge related to recognizing and assessing signs of mental illness.

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