

See Spot Gun

Robots are often used by emergency services to ensure the safety of responders. For instance, firefighters and emergency medical personnel use Boston Dynamics' robot dog Spot to assess dangerous situations and to search hard-to-access areas before sending in personnel. Police departments often use bomb defusing robots to maintain officers' safety in the case of a failed defusing. However, in 2016 the Dallas Police Department ended a standoff by attaching an armed explosive to a defusing robot, sending it toward the suspect, and detonating it to kill him.¹ This unprecedented strategy was justified as being under an extraordinary circumstance that called for the use of the robot outside of its intended functions.

Recently, on November 29, 2022, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to advance a policy allowing the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) to deploy robots equipped with lethal weapons in extraordinary circumstances. This controversial policy launched heated discussions across the nation and was temporarily banned in a second hearing on December 6, 2022. Supporters of the policy highlight its focus on the safety of SFPD officers. They argue that if there's a technology that can help end violence and save lives, then it should be used. If officers don't have to put themselves in the line of fire, they'll be able to save more lives more effectively. Opposition to the policy highlights its dangers. Lowering the consequences of aggressive policing could increase the likelihood of police violence. Also, these robots are controlled by a remote transmitter and could be hacked or stolen, putting dangerous weapons in the hands of criminals.

Several robotic technology companies including Hyundai's Boston Dynamics have also taken a stance on the issue stating that they will not design their robots to be weaponized, nor will they support anyone who wishes to do so. They assert that robots can be extremely beneficial to humans without weaponization, opting to instead design household and workplace assistants.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who should be held accountable for damages caused by lethal force robots?
2. In what kinds of situations, if any, would the use of lethal force robots be permissible?
3. Do the benefits in terms of potential lives saved override ethical concerns with the use of lethal robotics?

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/08/485262777/for-the-first-time-police-used-a-bomb-robot-to-kill>

