

Militarization of Police

Photos like these—of heavily armed police confronting protesters in Ferguson, brought to American TV screens, newspapers, and web browsers—brought the militarization of American police forces crashing into the public consciousness in the summer of 2014.



Voices of America, Public Domain

In the 1940's and '50's, liberals wanted local police forces professionalized and trained so they would better protect blacks from white violence. Conservatives went along with this because they hoped to use police to curb "lawlessness" on the part of blacks protesting for civil rights. The 1968 Safe Streets Act gave block grants to the states for training and equipment, but left control of the funding almost entirely up to state governments. State politics and racial animus led to the almost universal direction of money towards riot control and militarization, rather than crime prevention and rehabilitation.¹³⁸



Photo by Jamelle Boule, Creative Commons License

The 1033 program, instituted in 1997, allows the Department of Defense to share equipment it no longer needs with state or local law enforcement agencies. This can include the range of items used by America's military—clothing and office supplies, tools and rescue equipment, vehicles, rifles, and other small arms.

There's no federal requirement for state or local lawmakers to approve or have oversight of the equipment transfers.¹³⁹ That's part of why "[critics] call it a shadowy program that lacks oversight and lets police request anything they want, regardless of whether they need it."¹⁴⁰ Nine states (California, Connecticut, Indiana, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Vermont) have bills in process that would ban or cut back police militarization.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Gottschalk, p. 144-5, 147

¹³⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/24/states-police-militarization_n_6932576.html

¹⁴⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/24/states-police-militarization_n_6932576.html

¹⁴¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/24/states-police-militarization_n_6932576.html

Another way the police have become militarized is in the increasing prevalence and use of SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) teams. Originally created to help police deal with hostage situations, active shooters, and the like, these are increasingly being used as part of the drug war—for instance, to execute ‘no-knock’ search warrants in the middle of the night. Police burst into a home with guns drawn, often forcing their way through the front door or window. The results are often chaotic and deadly.

Police respond that criminals now have access to more powerful weaponry, police too need better equipment in order to remain safe. (We would say that is an argument for better gun control.) Isolated examples in which police in rural areas have deployed heavy vehicles wisely¹⁴² do not, however, answer for the systemic problem. Use of military equipment by police scares citizens and creates a hostile

climate on the streets. This practice also can affect the approach of police officers. When you are dressed and armed like a soldier, you’re more inclined to think like one.¹⁴³

“In October 2014, I went to Ferguson with other T’ruah rabbis to stand in solidarity with local black communities facing systemic police violence. After spending 24 hours preparing for a clergy action, feeling strong and confident, I approached a line of police to explain the Jewish concept of *teshuvah*, asking for forgiveness, and to ask them to engage in the process. When I looked up at their stoic faces, though, and saw their bodies clad in riot gear, faces shielded with thick plastic, I felt a wave of terror I had never experienced in my life. My formerly stiff upper lip quivered with fear as tears began to stream down my cheek, and I realized I was getting just the tiniest glimpse into everyday life for the incredible young people I had come to support.”

- Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer

In May 2015, President Obama announced steps to eliminate some of the most militarized equipment, but analyses of the 1033 program show that the new policy makes little difference in practice; the restricted categories made up a tiny percentage of the equipment that was previously released.¹⁴⁴

Further Reading

“War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing.” ACLU, June 2014. <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/jus14-warcomeshome-report-web-rel1.pdf>

¹⁴² http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2015/04/west_michigan_police_beefing_u.html

¹⁴³ <http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/08/how-militarizing-police-can-increase-violence.html>

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/05/21/407958035/white-house-ban-on-militarized-gear-for-police-may-mean-little>

Facts and Figures

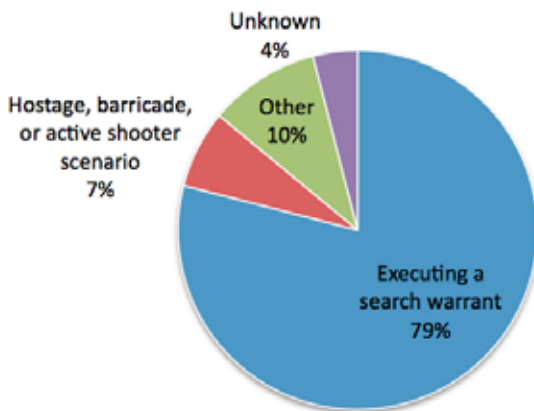
1033 Program:

- Since its inception, the 1033 program has transferred more than \$5.4 billion worth of property, including \$980 million in 2014—meaning the flow of supplies has accelerated.¹⁴⁶
- 60% of the United States is classified by the Drug Enforcement Agency as a “high-intensity drug trafficking area,” which means police there get priority for military tactical vehicles.¹⁴⁷
- In 2014, the San Diego Unified School District police department received an armored combat vehicle through the 1033 program.
- 184 police departments across the country have been suspended from 1033 for misplacing equipment, including assault rifles, shotguns, and Humvees.¹⁴⁸

No-Knock Warrants

18-month-old “Bou Bou” Phonesavanh was sleeping when a SWAT team burst into his aunt’s Georgia house, where his family was staying, in the middle of a spring night in 2014. Police were there under a “no-knock” warrant to arrest Bou Bou’s 30-year-old cousin for selling methamphetamine. They threw a “flashbang grenade”—a military diversionary tactic—that landed in Bou Bou’s crib, burning him severely and collapsing one of his lungs. The cousin was not in the house and, in fact, had not been seen for weeks. In the aftermath, the agent who secured the warrant resigned, the drug task force she worked on was disbanded, the judge who approved the warrant retired, and a grand jury called the investigation “sloppy” but did not recommend charges. The Phonesavanh family is over \$1 million in debt from medical bills. The flashbang grenade, introduced for special forces’ use in the 1970’s, transformed a deeply problematic police tactic—charging unannounced into a person’s home in the middle of the night—into a gut-wrenching, costly, near-deadly encounter.¹⁴⁵ For more on flashbang grenades, including 50 more profiles of Americans harmed by them, see <https://www.propublica.org/article/flashbangs>.

Use of SWAT deployments, 2011-2012¹⁵²



SWAT deployments were to execute search warrants.¹⁵¹

SWAT Teams:

- The number of SWAT teams nationwide has expanded dramatically, and smaller and smaller police departments are outfitting them. From the mid-1980’s to the late 1990’s, the number of SWAT teams in cities of over 50,000 almost doubled, to 89% of police departments. In cities of between 25-50,000 people, the rate soared from 20% in the mid-1980’s to over 80% by 2007.¹⁴⁹
- In 1980, there were about 3000 incidents of SWAT deployments nationwide. Today, the number is 50,000 annually.¹⁵⁰
- An ACLU study found that, from 2011-2012, 79% of

¹⁴⁵ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/family-toddler-injured-swat-grenade-faces-1m-medical/story?id=27671521>

¹⁴⁶ <http://www.dispositionservices.dla.mil/leso/pages/default.aspx>

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/08/14/the-pentagon-gave-nearly-half-a-billion-dollars-of-military-gear-to-local-law-enforcement-last-year/>

¹⁴⁸ <http://fusion.net/story/6371/fusion-investigates-how-did-americas-police-departments-lose-loads-of-military-issued-weapons/>

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21599349-americas-police-have-become-too-militarised-cops-or-soldiers>

¹⁵⁰ <http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21599349-americas-police-have-become-too-militarised-cops-or-soldiers>

¹⁵¹ <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/jus14-warcomeshome-report-web-rel1.pdf>

¹⁵² <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/jus14-warcomeshome-report-web-rel1.pdf>