

US police received over \$760 million of military gear in the past two years

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24 June 2020

In the past few weeks, police have marched through the streets of American cities, in paramilitary fashion, equipped with military gear, firing tear gas, rubber bullets, smoke bombs and pepper balls at peaceful protesters and journalists. The protests demanding an end to police violence, sparked by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have been confronted by police in combat gear and accompanied by military equipment including armored vehicles.

According to a CNN analysis of federal data, the Department of Defense (DoD) has sent at least \$760 million worth of military equipment to local law enforcement agencies since August 2017. This includes \$5.3 million of gear used to quell protests, such as riot shields, gas masks, tasers, and other materials local law enforcement requested for “crowd control.”

Across the country, more than 8,000 police departments have been supplied with such equipment, at no cost, through the 1033 program, which allows the DoD to donate surplus combat material to law enforcement agencies.

The program was originally created during the administration of Republican President George H.W. Bush as a part of the “War on Drugs” and limited officers to using the equipment in drug raids. The program was subsequently expanded by Democratic President Bill Clinton in 1996, under the National Defense Authorization Act, which allowed “all law enforcement agencies to acquire property for ... purposes that assist in their arrest and apprehension mission.”

Local police departments welcomed the Democratic Party’s expansion of the program and have amassed immense stockpiles of military equipment for use against the population in the subsequent decades.

Under the program, police are required to use the

equipment in their communities within a year, which is a major incentive for excessive force and surveillance. Since its inception, more than \$5 billion worth of military gear has been doled out to the police.

Between 2006 and 2014, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) found that police agencies stockpiled more than \$1.5 billion of military equipment, including: 79,288 assault rifles, 205 grenade launchers, 11,959 bayonets, 3,972 combat knives, 422 helicopters, 479 bomb-detonator robots, more than 15,054 battle uniforms, and \$39 million worth of electric wire.

Additionally, 500 departments acquired Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, built to withstand blasts from roadside bombs and mines during the US occupation of Iraq between 2003 to 2011. MRAPs cost between half a million and one million dollars each.

The ACLU report found that law enforcement departments in Arizona alone used the 1033 program to amass 712 rifles, 64 armored vehicles, 42 forced-entry tools, 32 bomb resistant suits, 704 night-vision accessories, 830 units of surveillance equipment, and “a .50 caliber machine gun that shoots bullets powerful enough to blast through the buildings on multiple city blocks.”

The CNN report found that in the last two and half decades more than 250 departments, including the Baltimore Sheriff’s Office, Virginia Beach Sheriff’s Office, and Hartford Police Department, received 12-gauge riot guns used to fire tear gas canisters or other projectiles into crowds of protesters.

CNN also noted that the Houston Police Department had received 38 riot training suits worth more than \$64,000 and 91 riot control shields worth \$12,000. The Milwaukee Police Department in southeastern Wisconsin as well as university police departments at

Clemson University and Alabama State University received riot shields and face shields. Moundsville, a small town in West Virginia, recently received a MRAP vehicle and San Diego Unified School District briefly obtained one in 2014.

Multiple police agencies in California, Oregon and Colorado have been the recipients of long-range acoustic devices, or LRADs, sound weapons which emit high pitch frequencies which cause significant pain. LRADs have been deployed against protesters across the country in recent weeks.

According to experts, applying for equipment is quite easy and the program suffers from a lack of accountability. In 2017, the US Government Accountability office created a fictitious website and was able to receive \$1.2 million worth of equipment through the 1033 program, including night vision goggles, simulated M-16A2 rifles and a simulated pipe bomb. While ostensibly for training, the rifles and pipe bomb could have been made operational with commonly available parts. There have also been reports of police fraudulently acquiring, transferring, or embezzling gear or even losing track of the military grade equipment.

After the police murder of Michael Brown, police in Ferguson, Missouri readily utilized military equipment. Images of what seemed like a warzone, including officers aiming rifles at protesters from gun nests on the top of armored vehicles, spread through social media and sparked national outrage. Aiming to assuage popular anger without any fundamental changes, President Barack Obama issued an executive order which placed some limitations on the 1033 program. The order took back a small amount of the gear which had been doled out, including 126 armored vehicles, 1,623 bayonets, and 138 grenade launchers, according to the *New York Times*.

However, in 2017, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions spearheaded the Trump administration effort which reversed the Obama order. “It sends the message that we care more about public safety than about how a piece of equipment looks, especially when that equipment has been shown to reduce crime, reduce complaints against and assaults on police, and makes officers more effective,” the Justice Department wrote in an announcement of the decision.

Police officials in Democratic and Republican

controlled cities have defended the program. Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo told CNN that in “one of the most violent nations in the civilized free world” it was necessary for police departments to use military-grade combat equipment.

The diffusion of military equipment throughout local law enforcement agencies, freely given by the federal government, is a serious threat to the working class and reveals the shortsightedness of appeals to “defund the police.” As Lenin and Engels explained, police are “special bodies of armed men” utilized by the state. The fight against police brutality cannot be separated from the fight against capitalism.



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