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Atlanta police SWAT members search a building for a shooting suspect. (photo: John Bazemore/AP)

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Cops Ready for War

By Andrew Becker and G.W. Schulz, Center for Investigative Reporting

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rsn editor's comment “ Law enforcement is not only stockpiling billions of dollars of military equipment, but a report indicates riot police will soon have a new form of sonic weapon: [New Riot Shields will Suffocate Protestors With Sound Waves](#). -- NFM/RSN ”

If terrorists ever target Fargo, N.D., the local police will be ready.

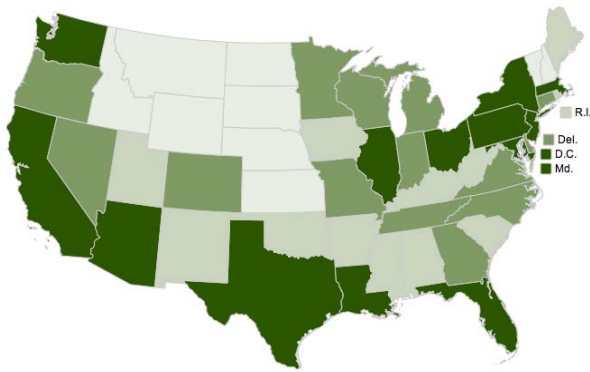
In recent years, they have bought bomb-detection robots, digital communications equipment and Kevlar helmets, like those used by soldiers in foreign wars. For local siege situations requiring real firepower, police there can use a new \$256,643 armored truck, complete with a rotating turret. Until that day, however, the menacing truck is mostly used for training runs and appearances at the annual Fargo picnic, where it's been displayed near a children's bounce house.

"Most people are so fascinated by it, because nothing happens here," said Carol Archbold, a Fargo resident and criminal justice professor at North Dakota State University. "There's no terrorism here."

Fargo, like thousands of other communities in every state, has been on a gear-buying spree with the aid of more than \$34 billion in federal government grants since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon.

The federal grant spending, awarded with little oversight from Washington, has fueled a rapid, broad transformation of police operations in Fargo and in departments across the country. More than ever before, police rely on quasi-military tactics and equipment, the Center for Investigative Reporting has found.

No one can say exactly what has been purchased in total across the country or how it's being used, [because the federal government doesn't keep close track](#). State and local governments don't maintain uniform records. But a review of records from 41 states obtained through open-government requests, and interviews with more than two-dozen current and former police officials and terrorism experts, shows police departments around the U.S. have transformed into small army-like forces.



Since Occupy Wall Street and similar protests broke out this fall, confusion about how to respond has landed some police departments in national headlines for electing to use intimidating riot gear, pepper spray and rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators. Observers have decried these aggressive tactics as more evidence that police are overly militarized. Among them is former Seattle police chief Norm Stamper, [who today regrets his "militaristic" answer](#) in 1999 to the infamous "Battle in Seattle" protests.

[Interactive: How much has your state spent on local homeland security?](#)

Many police, including beat cops, now routinely carry assault rifles. Combined with body armor and other apparel, many officers look more and more

like combat troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. The list of equipment bought with the federal grants reads like a defense contractor catalog. High-tech gear fills the garages, locker rooms and patrol cars in departments across the country.

Although local officials say they have become more cautious about spending in recent years, police departments around the country are continually expanding the equipment and tactics of their jobs, despite, in many cases, the lack of an apparent need.

The share of federal grants for Fargo and the county it anchors is more than \$8 million, a considerable sum for terrorism defense given its remote location and status as one of the safest areas in America. Fargo has averaged fewer than two homicides a year since 2005, and there have been no prosecutions of international terrorism in the state for at least a decade, if ever.

North Dakota's biggest city is a humble place set on plains so flat that locals like to say you can watch your dog run away for two weeks. Yet all patrol officers in Fargo now carry an assault rifle in their squad car.

Fargo police Lt. Ross Renner, [who commands a regional SWAT team](#), said the world is a dangerous place, and the city wants to be ready for anything.

With that in mind, Renner pushed for military-style assault rifles to become standard issue in department patrol cars.

"It's foolish to not be cognizant of the threats out there, whether it's New York, Los Angeles or Fargo. Our residents have the right to be protected," Renner said. "We don't have every-day threats here when it comes to terrorism, but we are asked to be prepared."

Other communities also have ramped up as well. In Montgomery County, Texas, the sheriff's department owns a \$300,000 pilotless surveillance drone. In Garland County, Ark., known for its pleasant hot springs, a local law enforcement agency acquired four handheld bulletproof protective shields costing \$600 each. In East Baton Rouge, La., it was \$400 ballistic helmets. In Augusta, Maine, with fewer than 20,000 people and where an officer hasn't died from gunfire in the line of duty in more than 125 years, police bought eight \$1,500 tactical vests. And for police in Des Moines, Iowa, it was two \$180,000 bomb robots.

Homeland security and law enforcement officials say the expenditures and modern training have helped save civilian and police lives. Do the armored vehicles and combat dress produce a sort of "shock and awe" effect? Lt. Jeremy Clark of the West Hartford Police Department in Connecticut hopes so. He said it can persuade suspects to give up sooner.

"The only time I hear the complaint of 'God, you guys look scary' is if the incident turns out to be nothing," said Clark, who organizes an [annual SWAT competition](#).

But the gear also can be used for heavy-handed - even excessive - tactics. In one case, dozens of officers in combat-style gear raided a rave in Utah as a police helicopter buzzed overhead. An [online video](#) shows the battle-ready team wearing masks and brandishing rifles as they holler for the music to be shut off and pin partygoers to the ground.

Arizona tactical officers this year sprayed the home of ex-Marine Jose Guerena with gunfire as the man stood in a hallway with [a rifle that he did not shoot \[PDF\]](#). He was hit 22 times and died. Police had targeted the man's older brother in a narcotics-trafficking probe, but nothing illegal was found in the younger Guerena's home, and no related arrests had been made months after the raid.

Police say greater firepower and more protective equipment became increasingly necessary not only as everyday criminals obtained deadlier weapons, but also in response to 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. They point to a 1997 Los Angeles-area shootout with heavily armed bank robbers and the bloody 2008 shooting and bombing attack in Mumbai, India, which left 164 people dead and 300 wounded.

Every community in the country has some explanation for why it needs more money, not less, to protect against every conceivable threat. It could be a shooting rampage at an amusement park, a weapon of mass destruction hidden at a manufacturing plant, a nuclear device detonated at a major coastal port. Nothing short of absolute security seems acceptable.

"The argument for up-armorizing is always based on the least likely of terrorist scenarios," said Mark Randol, a former terrorism expert at the Congressional Research Service. "Anyone can get a gun and shoot up stuff. No amount of SWAT equipment can stop that."

Law enforcement leaders nonetheless bristle at the word "militarization," even if the defense community itself acknowledges a convergence of the two.

"I don't see us as militarizing police; I see us as keeping abreast with society," said former Los Angeles Police Chief [William Bratton](#), now chairman of Kroll Inc., the security consulting firm. "And we are a gun-crazy society."

SWAT Competition Underscores Training

They appear on a grainy video in slow motion, wearing battle fatigues, helmets and multi-pocketed vests.

Figures move through the scene as though on a mission. One large man with a pistol strapped to his hip swings a battering ram into a door. A colleague shoots a flash-bang grenade into a field. A third man points an assault rifle into the distance, peering at his target through a scope. A fourth, holding a pistol and wearing a rifle strapped to his back, peeks cautiously inside a bus.

The images unfold to the pulsing, ominous soundtrack of a popular video game, "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2."

These are not soldiers in a far-flung warzone. They are members of the Massachusetts State Police competing at a SWAT team competition in Connecticut. The video, [posted on YouTube](#), underscores the training and devotion tactical officers bring to their jobs. It also illustrates the level of force police units across the country can now deliver.

The annual [Connecticut SWAT Challenge](#), hosted by the West Hartford Police Department, is one of numerous contests and exercises that have flourished since the terrorist attacks, as ultra-equipped, better-trained units sought to enhance their skills. The number of participating units more than doubled in five years, to nearly 40 teams by 2009, and dozens of sponsors seek to ensure their products and logos are on display.

One such sponsor sells ThunderSledge breaching tools for smashing open locked or chained doors. Another, [Lenco Armored Vehicles](#), assembles black, bulletproof box-like trucks on oversized wheels that can fit up to 15 officers. Options include radiation detectors and hydraulic rams. [KDH Defense Systems](#) markets body armor to police that matches protection "used by some of the world's most elite warfighters."

Clark, of the West Hartford police, says he started the competition precisely because of the new counterterrorism spending. State and local governments weren't willing to match it with costly training necessary for the gear to be used effectively and safely. Clark is startled by the number of SWAT teams falling below the 16 hours of minimum monthly training recommended by the [National Tactical Officers Association](#). Without proper maintenance, only luck remains.

"Luck is not for cops. Luck is for drunks and fools," Clark said. "Invariably, what happens with a police officer is he slips and falls, he breaks his back, he's paralyzed for the rest of his life. Some suspect gets shot with an M4 (assault rifle) through the neck, and he's out of the hospital in a day. Police officers and military guys never seem to have that kind of stubborn luck."

Competitions in the San Francisco Bay Area and Boston use grant cash to create realistic and elaborate challenges, said Alameda County Sheriff Greg Ahern, who created the [Urban Shield](#) event in 2007.

In one scenario, officers with goggles, rifles and fatigues swept through the cabin of a boat. Flames poured from an exploded vehicle during another. Video of the [2009 Urban Shield](#) - with its own heart-thumping doomsday music - depicts tactical teams moving carefully through darkened quarters, roping down the sides of buildings and leaping from a van. Images of 9/11, the Columbine shootings and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in California appear with the words "train, adapt, overcome."

Special ops supplier [Blackhawk Industries](#) - founded by a former Navy SEAL - was among several elite Urban Shield sponsors this year.

Ahern points to a real-life recent case that tested area responders. A gunman killed three people and injured seven others in October at a Cupertino, Calif., cement plant where he reportedly clashed with co-workers. These incidents aren't infrequent, Ahern insists.

"When you say low probability, I think we deal with these issues on a fairly regular basis," Ahern said, adding that police "identify infrastructure, potential targets, in our area and try to have our teams train at those actual sites."

No one knows for sure the number of SWAT teams nationwide. But at a time when the crime rate has been dropping, the number of police associated with SWAT duties has gone up. The National Tactical Officers Association, which provides training and develops SWAT standards, has about 1,650 team memberships, up from 1,026 in 2000, according to Executive Director John Gnagey.

"What we've always said is if you don't have a specific need, you shouldn't have one," Gnagey said, referring to SWAT units.

Convention Showcases Latest Tactical Gear

The giant showroom in Chicago's McCormick Place convention center provided a vivid picture of how the nation's law enforcement agencies are arming and armoring themselves.

Chicago hosted the annual [International Association of Chiefs of Police](#) conference in late October. Some 800 exhibitors set up booths in 180,000 square feet of noisy space, many displaying military-style gear as thousands of police and other law enforcement professionals wandered the expo, dazzled by the latest gadgetry.

The sights and sounds are bewildering for a casual observer.

Electronic blasts and booms pour from the [IES Interactive Training](#) booth, where attendees chose among a shotgun, handgun and assault rifle with realistic recoil to aim at uncooperative suspects and inanimate targets on a life-size screen. Other booths offered combat-style apparel, such as one vest with a "Never Forget" patch, stirring up the memory of 9/11. At the Blackhawk booth, a mannequin was dressed head to toe in heavy-duty dark attire, a rifle slung from its neck and an additional sidearm strapped to its thigh. Another mannequin wore a full-face black mask.

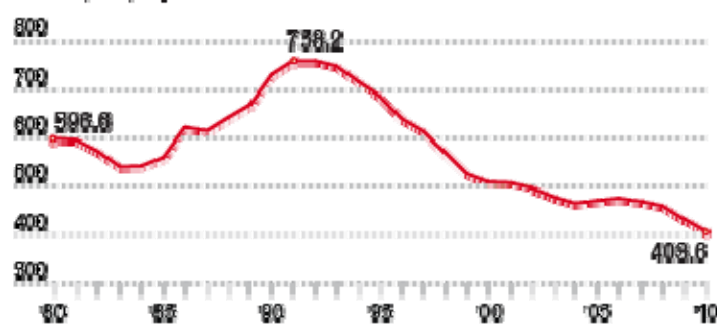
Then there was the panoply of weapons. [Colt's Manufacturing Co.](#) offered a selection of assault rifles. The most popular among cops? An M4 semi-automatic, "closest to what the military issues," a salesman said.

Elsewhere, police officials admired a jumbo armored vehicle in camouflage green emblazoned with the words, "Greater Salt Lake." It was built by Massachusetts-based truck maker Lenco, which also

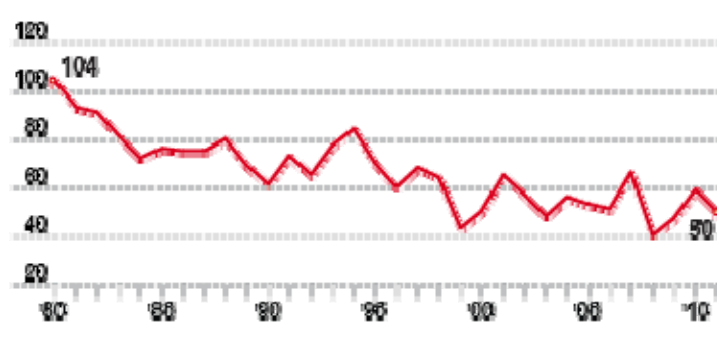
Crime down, but police militarize

With federal homeland security grants, law enforcement agencies around the U.S. have spent years since 9/11 scooping up sophisticated and expensive equipment, from armored vehicles to combat-style apparel. But violent crime had been declining since the early 1990s, along with the number of police officers killed by gunfire.

REPORTED VIOLENT CRIMES
Per 100,000 people



OFFICERS KILLED BY GUNFIRE



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program; Officer Down Memorial Page, funded in part by the Bureau of Justice Assistance

BRIAN GRADIN / CALIFORNIA WATCH

assembled the beefy BearCat that the Fargo-area SWAT team began using last year. The display vehicle had a battering ram affixed to the front. A man who answered questions about it showed off a remote gas delivery system that can be attached to the ram for spraying tear gas into a building from a long steel spear.

Advertising materials throughout the expo send a uniform message: The world is fraught with peril, and new high-tech gear is a solution.

"As criminal organizations are increasingly armed with military-style weapons, law enforcement operations require the same level of field-tested and combat-proven protection used by soldiers and Marines in Iraq, Afghanistan and other high-risk locations," reads one brochure for the Oshkosh Corp.'s burly ["tactical protector vehicle."](#) Minus passengers and cargo, it weighs more than two standard F-150 pickups built this year.

Colt makes its own appeal for a family of assault rifles: "The fundamental law enforcement mission profile has undergone drastic changes since the days of Sam Colt's 'gun that won the West.' ... Colt's current law enforcement products have benefitted from decades of field and combat experience."

Security Market for State, Local Agencies Growing

Security analyst [Dilip Sarangan](#) of Frost & Sullivan, which tracks the homeland security industry, said security spending by governments and the private sector is "event-based." Both are suddenly willing to budget more when tragedy ignites new anxieties, such as after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, the 2005 London train bombings, the Mumbai terrorist attacks and, most of all, the 9/11 hijackings.

"That's what their business is, unfortunately - anytime something bad happens, they make money," Sarangan said.

The homeland security market for state and local agencies is projected to reach \$19.2 billion by 2014, up from \$15.8 billion in fiscal 2009, according to the [Homeland Security Research Corp.](#)

New opportunities are making major defense corporations more a part of our domestic lives.

Lenco, manufacturer of the BearCat and other SWAT vehicles, has sold more than 300 of its trucks to law enforcement agencies around the country. It also markets vehicles to the Defense Department, some for use in fighting improvised explosive devices. The company does not disclose sales figures, but a spokesman said more have been sold since 9/11.

In 2007, British defense giant [BAE Systems](#) spent \$4.5 billion to buy a company called Armor Holdings, which had subsidiaries that made and supplied police equipment, such as riot shields, hard-knuckle gloves, Delta 4 tactical helmets and laser sight mounts for AR-15 assault rifles.

Minnesota-based [Alliant Techsystems](#), the Army's primary provider of small-caliber ammunition, acquired in recent years two major tactical equipment suppliers, Blackhawk Industries and [Eagle Industries](#). Company executives told shareholders that Blackhawk was a "highly profitable business," with \$115 million in predicted sales this year.

While such companies also outfit sporting enthusiasts and the military, law enforcement agencies are cast by Alliant as essential customers "in the rapidly growing security market."

Local officials assert that homeland security grants, used to pay for the type of equipment showcased in Chicago, have slowed. But the grants still add up to a lot of spending: The Department of

Homeland Security awarded [more than \\$2 billion in grants this year](#), and President Barack Obama's 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act [pumped more than a half-billion dollars](#) into existing grant programs.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is largely responsible for distributing homeland security grants. It operates a website known as the [Responder Knowledge Base](#), which serves as a sort of war-on-terror catalog listing what local governments are allowed to buy with readiness funds.

One item featured is an [armored bulldozer with a thick front shield](#) and propelled by "tank-like, all-terrain tracks." The manufacturer, Dolmen Corp., says police operate in an increasingly violent world, where the arms race between good guys and bad guys is constantly escalating.

The firm says the military-style vehicle allows police to "gain the edge on crime."

Gnagey, of the tactical officers association, said there's a sense among some local police that the price increases when makers know it's being paid for with federal funds. The minute new equipment arrives, he joked, "if it's painted black and called SWAT, the price doubles."

But the evolution continues. In the Phoenix area, Sheriff Joe Arpaio claimed this year to have his own air armada of private pilots he could dispatch to monitor illegal border crossers. He called it Operation Desert Sky. Arpaio also picked up a full-size surplus Army tank, complete with treads.

The city of Ogden, Utah, is about to launch a 54-foot, remote-controlled "crime-fighting blimp" with a powerful surveillance camera affixed to its belly by the end of the year.

Standard-duty officers seen daily on the streets of Los Angeles were retrained to break in and kill terrorists without negotiating, under an assumption that the attackers could have a death wish and not be interested in resolving matters peacefully. Many officers were also equipped with assault rifles.

Bratton, the former police chief, said in an interview that terrorism had been a low priority early in his career. By the time he retired in 2009, it consumed a significant part of his workday. After the Mumbai attacks, Bratton believed he had to act fast to prepare for such an event.

"We were not structured for that type of attack," he said. "Within six months, we were."

Las Vegas rushed forward as well. Everyday patrol officers were given additional training, and each shift now has "in-the-box" squads that can meet at a pre-determined location and respond as a group to would-be campus or casino attackers. Squad members carry additional gear in their cars, including gas masks, body armor and high-powered rifles.

"When you go to a substation now at a police department and you see someone walk out to their car to start their shift, no longer are they just walking out there with a briefcase," said Las Vegas Sheriff [Doug Gillespie](#). "They've got other equipment they're taking with them that if the situation arises, they put that on and they use it."

[Charles Ramsey](#), who was police chief in Washington, D.C., during 9/11, said officers in the nation's capital began to train for multiple simultaneous attacks. The Mumbai bloodshed, which took place after Ramsey headed to Philadelphia in 2008, also served as a spur for him to make further changes and spend more money to up-armor his force.

Some 1,500 beat cops in Philadelphia have been trained to use AR-15 assault rifles - akin to the high-powered weapons issued to war fighters.

"We have a lot of people here, like most departments, who are ex-military," Ramsey said in an interview. "Some people are very much into guns and so forth. So it wasn't hard to find volunteers."

Preventative Measures Critical, Fargo Police Say

Fargo is not a place anyone associates with crime or terrorism. Its combination of friendly folk, low housing prices and high employment has garnered it recognition as one of the best places in the country to live. It is home to one of Microsoft's largest campuses and North Dakota State University.

Officials in Cass County, which includes Fargo, began buying gear in 2002. The spending on police gear rose from tens of thousands a decade ago to millions.

Police there said such spending is more than justified as a preventative measure. North Dakota has what could be perceived as targets, and the FBI established in Fargo one of its 104 [Joint Terrorism Task Forces](#). Critical energy and agriculture sectors drive the booming economy in the remote border state. Drones used in the war on terror and homeland security are stationed at or operated from air bases in Grand Forks and at the local Fargo airport.

In addition, they say, some right-wing militias and white supremacists have been long-standing threats.

Fargo police justify the purchase of their SWAT truck, saying that with regular maintenance and low miles, it could serve the force for 30 years. They point to past shootings, like a 2004 incident in which a former Army ranger shot at SWAT team members and pinned down one officer who could have been aided by the truck.

In their minds, if it saves even one life, it's worth the cost.

Other purchases, like the bomb-detection robots, are shared with federal agencies in Fargo that have outposts, but not the resources. The local police also say they've taken a regional approach to spend wisely, leveraging federal grants to buy equipment that has multiple uses.

"It doesn't make sense if we only use it for terrorism activity, and it doesn't make sense if we only use it for criminal activity," said Fargo police Capt. Patrick Claus, a former SWAT commander.

Some residents agree. Tim Kozojed, a corn and soybean farmer in Hillsboro, 40 miles north of Fargo, said he believes police ought to have the equipment they need. But he also believes they must spend money wisely. He's not certain that's happened with the grants.

"I'm very reluctant to get anxious about a terrorist attack in North Dakota," Kozojed, 31, said. "Why would they bother?"

Claus, who was responsible for buying some of Fargo's military-style gear, including the BearCat truck, understands such thinking. But he contends it's misguided, and he and other law enforcement authorities are obliged to prepare as well as they can.

"We prepare for the worst and hope it never happens," he said. "But how many fires do you have to have before you buy a fire engine?"

This story was edited by Robert O'Harrow, Robert Salladay and Mark Katches. It was copy edited by Nikki Frick.

