

Warrior cop mentality bad for communities

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The death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, shot and killed by Ferguson, Missouri police on Aug. 9, has sparked, among other things, questions about the increasing militarization of civilian police forces across the United States.

Last year, Radley Balko, a longtime analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, who now writes for the Washington Post and other publications, wrote a book called “The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces.” Balko points out that the “War on Drugs” in recent decades led to the creation of SWAT (Specialized Weapons and Tactics) teams across the country. The growing militarization of local police forces is promoted by many U.S. military leaders and by private companies that make military equipment, such as tanks, other armored vehicles and high-power weapons.

This new culture of civilian police acting like soldiers in a war zone creates conditions that can result in something like the shooting of Brown, Balko has since said in a television interview.

It also contributed to the Ferguson police’s mishandling to public reaction to the shooting.

Ferguson is about two-thirds black, but 52 of the town’s 55 police officers are white, Balko pointed out. When residents protested yet another death of a young black American man at the hands of white law enforcement, Ferguson police responded with armored vehicles, stun grenades and high-tech weapons.

Ferguson is currently the center of national, even international, attention, but it could easily be another town, another state. In June, the American Civil Liberties Union published a powerful critique of this trend, “War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing.”

“Militarization of policing encourages officers to adopt a ‘warrior’ mentality and think of the people they are supposed to serve as enemies,” the ACLU report states. “American policing has become unnecessarily and dangerously militarized, in large part through federal programs that have armed state and local law enforcement agencies with the weapons and tactics of war, with almost no public discussion or oversight.”

In West Virginia, nearly 2,000 pieces of military equipment and supplies have flowed to various police departments since 2006, the New York Times reported. The weapons and other equipment come through a Defense Department program created by Congress in 1999.

Balko documents past misuse of high-powered weapons and equipment, including local SWAT teams and officers who target innocent people of all races and ages; they have broken into homes and assaulted and even killed people who have done nothing wrong.

The militarization of local police forces has occurred with very little public oversight, the ACLU report stresses.

Of the many reactions to the tragic death of Michael Brown, a new public attention to the quality and mindset of local police is certainly one of the most important and responsible.