

How the ‘use of force’ industry drives police militarization and makes us all less safe

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From the Force Science Institute in Mankato, Minnesota to the ecological reserve outside Rio de Janeiro that houses Condor Non-Lethal Technologies’ police training center, the “use of force” industry has grown into a worldwide marketplace. Beginning on October 9, Hoffman Estates will host the five-day conference of the Illinois Tactical Officers Association, or ITOA. To greet them, a coalition of community groups and organizations from the Chicago area are assembling under the banner #StopITOA. These diverse groups, including AFSC-Chicago, CAIR-Chicago, Assata’s Daughters, Black Lives Matter-Chicago, the Arab American Action Network and War Resisters League, argue that government officials should prioritize spending for human needs not for militarization and violence.

Racial and ethnic fears and prejudices are deeply bound up in law enforcement anxieties over control and their use of excessive force. The coalition organizing around the ITOA conference are particularly concerned about this year’s keynote speaker, Dr. Sebastian Gorka, who is a regular talking head on Fox News known for his Islamophobic rhetoric, and was a consultant to Donald Trump. According to a [recent expose](#) by journalist Sarah Lazare, among other extremist claims, he has argued for the tracking and monitoring of Syrian refugees.

Speakers like Gorka “depend on and nourish cultures of fear,” said Jesse Solomon of the War Resisters League. “This fear preys on a growing vulnerability across many marginalized communities and is then used to justify militarism and policing, leaving people’s actual needs unaddressed.”

Why protest SWAT conventions?

The ITOA conference brings together tactical officers and first responders from across the state of Illinois, as well as further afield. This includes special response teams (that are usually referred to under the umbrella term SWAT) from the Illinois State Police and the Northern Illinois Police Alarm System, as well as SWAT from major cities and nearby states.

With workshops, keynote speakers and product exhibition halls, these conferences serve as a site for use of force training, knowledge exchange and business transactions. While many community organizations and the Police Executive Research Forum [agree](#) that courses in de-escalation and social work could improve policing, the trainings on offer at these tactical conferences focus on weapons skills development and promote combative mindsets that see community streets as battlegrounds. Exhibiting vast arsenals of military-grade guns, Tasers and riot control gear, the ITOA conference begs the question: Is this really what the country needs right now? As Solomon explained, these conferences are sites “that market masculinity, defense industry solutions and

militarized mentalities.” In a time of tension, anger and mistrust, should use of force be what the police are peddling?

What funds this use of force industry?

Brimming with public-private partnerships, events like the ITOA conference and the use of force industry more broadly are largely supported by taxpayers through government grant and funding schemes.

“Police militarization conventions and SWAT trainings are happening 365 days a year, all over the world,” Solomon said. “In the United States, they are where the arms industry meets law enforcement and emergency response, with the federal government footing much of the bill.”

One of these schemes, the Pentagon’s much-debated 1033 program, was set up in the 1990s to transfer disused military equipment to law enforcement agencies. The program facilitated police departments in small and large cities, universities and even schools in receiving everything from armored helicopters to assault rifles. By late 2014, over \$5 billion in equipment had been transferred from the military to law enforcement agencies before President Obama set restrictions on the program.

In addition to this hardware funding program, there are also schemes that provide money for use of force training, including Homeland Security’s Urban Areas Security Initiative, or UASI. This funding program “assists high-threat, high-density Urban Areas in efforts to build and sustain the capabilities necessary to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from acts of terrorism.” For 2016, \$580 million was earmarked for 29 “high threat, high-density” areas, with 25 percent of that funding designated for training.

By parceling out millions for counter-terrorism initiatives, civil service agencies (including the police and other emergency services) are encouraged to frame their funding needs in militarized terms and to enroll their officers in high conflict-based training. According to Hoda Katebi, communications coordinator for the Chicago chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, or CAIR, such training can contribute to the use of excessive force on people of color in the community.

“Just two months ago CAIR-Chicago filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against members of the Chicago Police Department on behalf of a young female Muslim student,” Katebi said. “She was physically attacked, publicly strip-searched and humiliated, and falsely arrested, among other abuses. One of the officers involved in this case professed to have received counter-terrorism training.”

In some states local organizations like Illinois Law Enforcement Alarm System, or ILEAS, work as a clearinghouse for national government funding and equipment management and transfers. Supported by this Homeland Security money, the ILEAS works with over 95 percent of officers and deputies in Illinois and doles out funding to more than 900 organizations. In addition to the \$15 million of SWAT equipment it has purchased, ILEAS funds officers and departments to partake in conferences and trainings.

The training and equipment awarded to law enforcement agencies often does not match their size or the reality of crime in their community. Using school shootings and terror attacks as

justification for always being prepared for the worst 365 days a year, small departments, rural towns, universities and schools are buying up both equipment and use of force training. Jonathan Blanks from Cato's Police Misconduct Project said that the problem comes "when officers get new toys." Because SWAT or tactical equipment is expensive to maintain, police wanting to keep their toys must justify the expense, so they create opportunities and use them for things like minor drug raids. "This feeds a warrior mentality that can fuel aggressiveness and antagonism when deployed in a community," Blanks said.

The College of Lake County Police Department, where ITOA Vice President and SWAT trainer Ed Mohn is commander, sees very few violent offenses occur, yet dozens of hours of heavily armed training were provided to staff in 2015. The amount of time devoted to firearm training at the college was much greater than training in trauma or other kinds of community and social services that police are far more likely to be called out to deal with, especially in an educational setting with young people.

Who profits off police violence?

This public money for equipment and training funnels out of government budgets into the pocketbooks of private corporations and "use of force" entrepreneurs. Like many major events in other industries, tactical officer conferences and expos receive corporate sponsorship. This year the ITOA conference in Illinois is primarily sponsored by Safariland Training Group.

Under various company names, Safariland has long been in the police equipment business. Begun as a body armor company in 1964, the company expanded in the mid-1990s under the leadership of Warren B. Kanders by purchasing other equipment suppliers. By the early 2000s, Kanders's company was a major player in the national and international police markets, offering a "one stop shop" for outfitting and arming police forces. In 2008, the company was purchased by British military contractor BAE Systems, but was quickly sold back to Kanders in 2012. The period between 2008 and 2012 saw a number of corruption lawsuits against the company. Since 2012 Kanders has continued to expand the now rebranded Safariland Group.

By offering branded trainings at tactical officer conferences, companies like Safariland are able to showcase and demonstrate their weapons. Much like testing out apps that are offered exclusively by Apple or Android, this pairing of weapons demos and trainings is designed to create brand loyalty and lock customers in. Commercial benefits, like on-the-day purchase discounts, loyalty card schemes and insider updates are just as prevalent, if not more so, in the police weapons business as they are in other industries.

In addition to primary sponsorship from the Safariland Training Group, the ITOA conference will also host a number of other for-profit businesses that sell tactical weapons and equipment. Among them are Sage Control Ordinance and Sage International, which sells weapons like tear gas and rubber bullets, alongside their range of enhanced battle rifles. Also present will be Ultimate Training Munitions, a British company partnered with the NRA that specializes in non-lethal "safety" ammunition for weapons training. While this focus on less-lethal products might look at first glance like an alternative to excessive force culture, companies like Ultimate Training Munitions are instead a breeding ground for increased violence, allowing for wider usage of guns through less-lethal training. This is why it is beneficial for the NRA to partner with them.

Because these corporate-police business deals often take place beyond the public eye, connecting the dots between private interests and police use of force can be difficult. Journalist Matt Stroud began following these money flows for his project Official Police Business, which collects data and journalism “about the companies selling technology and weapons to cops — and the machinations police officials go through to squeeze those products into police budgets.”

According to Stroud, “If no one’s paying attention to the particulars of those sales pitches — or monitoring the resulting business deals — corruption can result, as well as dangerous weapons ending up on the belts and in the cruisers of police officers all over the country.”

Use of force training

There are also independent and small business trainers. It is common for ex-military officers who went into police work to become members of SWAT teams and tactical squads. Other times, officers with security or athletic backgrounds might choose this route. Some of these officers go on to become tactical trainers. These trainers can lead courses locally, nationally or internationally, depending on what certifications they have. There is a wide array of certification courses available to police, from hand-to-hand combat techniques to specialized rifle equipment.

As in other industries, training can come with both social and financial benefits. Trainers are often well-respected, travel a lot, get offered additional speaking and writing opportunities as “thought leaders.” Most importantly, they get paid fees in addition to their usual salaries. And because officers are civil servants, they have set contract hours, opening up time for working second or even third jobs. ITOA trainings on offer include active shooter drills, “urban tactics” for city-based sieges, a variety of rifle and pistol trainings, less-lethal certifications and use of force warrant servicing.

Always on duty?

While many use of force gurus train officers to take on a combatant attitude in everyday duties, a look at what is happening inside police culture suggests a different story needs to be told. Reluctance to address the traumas associated with the violence of police culture has resulted in what police studies researchers call an epidemic of off-duty violence, abuse, alcoholism, depression, PTSD and suicide.

These kinds of tactical trainings and the promotion of a warrior mentality produce police who are “always on duty.” As ITOA founding member and president Jeff Chudwin wrote for ITOA News in 2013, “I have always taught that ‘off duty, does not mean off watch.’ Keep your gear close to hand, always armed with spare ammo, and a plan.”

An eight-month-long investigation by the *Chicago Tribune* in 2008, found that one in every four police shootings occurred off duty. More recent data from the Police Misconduct Project suggests that little has changed, with over 40 percent of recorded reports of police misconduct in 2015 occurring off duty.

“We are trying to point out the number of people killed by police off duty,” said Debbie Southorn, the Wage Peace program associate AFSC-Chicago. “Many of these shootings involve police lies and cover-ups and no real consequences for the cop involved.”

Authoritarian training styles and repeated training exercises in the use of coercive force are also linked to a “spillover” of violence at home. Police have much higher rates of domestic and child abuse in the family than the general population. While empirical data is limited due to the failure of law enforcement to monitor its crimes or provide public figures, a major study conducted by the Feminist Majority Foundation’s National Center for Women and Policing in the early 2000s suggested that the rate of domestic abuse in policing is up to four times higher than the national average, with 40 percent of families experiencing abuse of some kind. More recent data from criminologist Philip Stinson and his team’s research, as well as from the Police Misconduct Project, suggest that at least one in every five cases of police crimes are for domestic and family abuse.

Silent circles of trauma?

This spillover of abuse from training to the streets to inside the home is linked with depression and PTSD. In the recent book “Police Suicide: Is Police Culture Killing Our Officers?” Ron Rufo, a long-time Chicago police officer and advocate for reform in police training, reports that for every one officer killed in the line of duty, three take their own lives.

Reflecting on this epidemic of violence within police culture, campaigners both inside and outside of law enforcement have long argued that the suppression of emotion and emphasis on eliminating weakness in order to always be in control can have damaging and violent effects on officers, their loved ones and the communities they serve. “The training tactics that are presented to new recruits,” Rufo argues, are designed to keep them alive on the streets. But this combination of survival skills, a control mentality and a belt full of loaded weapons, can leave an officer, “unable to survive his own distorted emotions and crumbling sense of well-being.”

While the problem of PTSD and suicide in military veterans is now openly discussed (due to the ceaseless activism of organizations after the Vietnam War), it is still seen as largely taboo to mention the effects of trauma in relation to policing, violence and use of force. This current reluctance to confront excessive force not only as a problem of institutionalized racism and violence, but as a psychological epidemic, limits the ability for any real change to occur.

Challenging use of force cultures

While the talking heads on TV rarely pause to take account of this complexity, the public spotlight now on police violence offers a moment of opportunity. People are paying real attention to the voices calling for new approaches to police use of force.

The coalition of groups that will be protesting the conference in Hoffman Estates are calling for the community to #StopITOA. Southorn says there are many ways to get involved and support the movement, whether it is by donating time for support work or taking part in a range of pressure-based actions. “Folks can share our campaign memes, read up on the issue, contribute to the #SWATStories project, submit to the #noSWATzone zine against police militarization, sign the petition and join the call-in day,” she said.

Whether advocates endorse police reform or rally for abolition, for real change to occur these use of force cultures must be made visible. Campaigners are connecting the dots, making links between the killings of unarmed black men, the aggressive SWAT raids of migrants’ homes and

corporate-sponsored tactical training conventions like ITOA. Between warrior mentalities and the untreated PTSD and family abuse that spills over at home.

The ITOA conference is just one event in this international use of force industry. “Our organizing to end these trainings requires collaborating city to city,” Solomon said. “Across communities, with an array of tactics and political views, we are demanding shifts in funding, and real solutions to our many crises.”

These forms of nonviolent resistance go beyond calling for policy and legislation reform, to confront the financial, social and emotional problems with policing. “The culture of policing as violent and aggressive, on and off duty, reminds us that we need to reimagine safety and push for massive divestment from policing and the use of force industry,” Southorn said.