



## **Fusion Investigates: How did America's police departments lose loads of military-issued weapons?**

By Daniel Rivero and Jorge Rivas  
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Haunting images of local police officials using military-issued equipment to quell protests in Ferguson, Missouri, have raised new concerns about the Pentagon's controversial program to equip local and state police departments with military surplus weaponry.

The program, now under White House review, has been plagued by messy bookkeeping, bureaucratic confusion and scores of missing weapons.

Fusion has learned that 184 state and local police departments have been suspended from the Pentagon's "1033 program" for missing weapons or failure to comply with other guidelines. We uncovered a pattern of missing M14 and M16 assault rifles across the country, as well as instances of missing .45-caliber pistols, shotguns and 2 cases of missing Humvee vehicles.

"[The program] is obviously very sloppy, and it's another reason that Congress needs to revisit this promptly," said Tim Lynch, director of the CATO Institute's project on criminal justice. "We don't know where these weapons are going, whether they are really lost, or whether there is corruption involved."

More troubling yet is the possibility that some of the missing weapons, which were given to local police departments as part of a decades' old government program to equip cops for the wars on terrorism and drugs, are actually being sold on the black market, Lynch said.

"That uncertainty is very unsettling," he told Fusion.

Since the program began in 1990, more than \$4.3 billion in equipment and weapons has been transferred to more than 8,000 participating police departments, according to the Pentagon.

"Congress' intent with the program is to enhance public safety and improve homeland security by leveraging taxpayer investments in defense technology and equipment," a Pentagon spokeswoman told Fusion.

While local police departments say they have been suspended for losing track of weapons, the Pentagon says no police departments have been suspended for "use or operation of the allocated firearms."

Fusion found that many of the suspensions occur in February, after police departments conduct their year-end weapons inventory. In Mississippi, the Meridian Police Department was suspended last February after their inventory showed four missing M14s, according to the state's Department of Finance and Administration. The same month in neighboring Arkansas, the Lawrence County Sheriff's Department was suspended from the Pentagon program after it discovered a missing M14 assault rifle and a night vision scope that was "damaged and destroyed" without prior approval, according to the state's Department of Career Education, which oversees the program.

The decentralized structure of the program makes it difficult — even for the Pentagon — to keep tabs on the standing of participating police departments, or the weapons they've been issued. Officials at the Pentagon's Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), which runs the equipment-transfer program, were unable to provide specifics about why various police departments were suspended. And many state coordinators refused to speak to Fusion, or claimed they didn't have the information requested.

All military issued equipment transferred to local or state police departments is administered by a designated state agency that varies from state to state; in most states, the program is overseen by the department of public safety, but in some cases those responsibilities are designated to other departments, such as the department of career education in Arkansas. A governor-appointed state coordinator is charged with ensuring local police departments follow federal guidelines. The state coordinator oversees the annual inventory of weapons and reports to the federal government.

The state coordinator for California said he was "not authorized" to speak on behalf of the agency he runs, and instead deferred all questions to the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, which declined repeated requests for details on the 10 suspended programs in the state.

Some of California's local police departments were more forthcoming when reached directly. Huntington Beach Police Department said it was suspended from the program last year after losing an M16 assault rifle.

“It was discovered during an internal audit,” Huntington Beach Police Lieutenant Mitchell O'Brien told Fusion. “An investigation was inconclusive as to how that occurred.”

The Stockton Police Department, in northern California, said it was suspended from the Pentagon program in October after losing two M16s. And the Sutter County Sheriff's Office, also in northern California, acknowledged it was suspended from the program after reporting a missing M14 and two M15s.

In neighboring Arizona, state coordinator Matthew Van Camp spoke more openly about the program, while the local police departments remained tight-lipped. Van Camp told Fusion that there were numerous missing weapons from the Maricopa County Sheriff's Department, mostly .45-caliber pistols and one rifle. It “would take some time to get actual numbers but I think it was 11 or 12,” he said. The department was suspended in September 2012, according to Pentagon records. The Maricopa County Sheriff's Department did not respond to Fusion's requests for comment on the state coordinator's allegations.

In many cases when local police departments get suspended from the Pentagon program, they are cut off from receiving more equipment but still get to keep the weapons that they were already given. Fusion identified one instance where a suspended police department in Georgia was twice reprimanded by the state coordinator for separate cases of missing .45-caliber pistols, leading to their full termination from the Pentagon program. The Sparta Police Department was ordered to return all weapons due to “accountability of weapons” issues, according to the termination letter written by Georgia state coordinator Don Sherrod, and provided to Fusion by the Georgia Department of Public Safety.

U.S. RIFLE

7.62MM .308

WINCHESTER

TRADE MARK

157326

*Photo of the serial number of an M-14 rifle, which the Hall County Sheriff's Office of Georgia lost track of for ten months. The weapon was lost in May of 2013, and was subsequently found in July 2014. Image by Hall County Sheriff's Office.*

The federal government is already investigating non-compliant police departments in some cases. The Office of the Inspector General is currently investigating the Ripley County Sheriff's Department of Missouri, which was suspended from the Pentagon program last February. Authorities would not release information about the nature of the investigation. "The investigation is ongoing and therefore no records are open to the public at this time," Mike O'Connell, a spokesman for the Missouri Department of Public Safety, wrote to Fusion in an email.

Similarly, the Office of the Inspector General investigated seven Florida police departments for missing equipment earlier this year, but the all the equipment was located and the previously suspended departments are now in good standing, according to Ben Wolf, director of communications at the Florida Department of Management Services.

In addition to annual inventory, each state is visited bi-annually for a program compliance review to go over the "records, property, and usage" of its military-issued equipment, according to a Pentagon official.

For critics like Lynch, that's not enough.

"The case for giving military weaponry to these small police departments was already thin in the beginning," he said. "Now that we're finding that there is insufficient accountability for tracking this equipment, then the case is beginning to fall apart."