



## **Do local police departments need military equipment?**

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WASHINGTON – Ohio and Kentucky police departments have snagged nearly \$80 million worth of military equipment – everything from grenade launchers to body armor to M16 rifles – through a federal program that allows local law enforcement agencies to get surplus equipment from the Pentagon.

The federal program has come under new scrutiny after police in Ferguson, Missouri, responded to the civil unrest there clad in body armor and camouflage, driving armored vehicles, and carrying assault rifles. The overwhelming police response further inflamed tensions in that St. Louis suburb over the fatal shooting of an unarmed 18-year-old African-American by a Ferguson officer.

It has also sparked a national debate about the "militarization" of local police, with a particular focus on the merits of the Pentagon program. Supporters say the equipment is vital for strapped local agencies that need to be prepared for dicey situations – including possible terrorist attacks – while critics say local law enforcement officials now look more like they're prepared for combat in Iraq than for patrolling local communities.

One thing is certain: Police agencies in the Cincinnati region have taken full advantage of the Pentagon initiative.

Ohio ranks 11th in the nation for the value of military equipment that local sheriffs and police officers have received from the Pentagon – \$40.3 million since 2006, according to a Gannett Washington Bureau analysis of Department of Defense data. Kentucky ranks 12th – taking \$38.3 million worth of military goods from the Department of Defense.

Some examples: The Butler County Sheriff's Office has received an explosive tool kit, 15 M16 rifles and a half-ton pickup truck. Law enforcement officials in Hamilton County

got two mine detection sets. And in Kenton County, officials have received 44 night-vision goggles, 34 pieces of body armor, 22 assault rifles, 20 pistols and one mine-resistant vehicle.

"One of the most alarming trends we've seen has been the militarization of American policing," said Tim Lynch, director of a criminal justice project at the Libertarian Cato Institute. He said paramilitary units – like SWAT teams – were initially only in big cities, but now they're in small towns across America.

"And they are not just being used for extraordinary situations, as they were in the beginning," he said, citing, for example, a hostage standoff. "Nowadays, they are called out for routine policing."

### **Newport gets a Humvee ... used for inclement weather**

Newport Police Chief Tom Collins said a hard-shell Humvee and two half-ton pickup trucks that his department received are used during inclement weather.

Last winter was harsh, Collins said, and police used the vehicles to get doctors and nurses to their offices, to get medicine for elderly people who could not go outside, and simply for driving in deep snow and thick ice.

His view: "It could be used in a SWAT call-out sometime. It's used for inclement weather. You couldn't afford to have eight to 10 four-wheel drive vehicles. We're assigning them in the winter, and the taxpayers of Newport have literally paid nothing for them."

Covington police acquired an armored rescue vehicle in 2013 from a U.S. Homeland Security program that allows law enforcement agencies to obtain surplus military weapons, tactical vehicles, aircraft and other equipment at no cost. The surplus items must have a direct application to the police agency's work.

Covington police had the vehicle's military colors painted over in black. They've used it once: in a hostage-situation standoff where a man who'd barricaded himself into his home late in December with his three children was firing shots out of a third-story window.

"It's one of those things. You hope that you'll never need it, but it proved to be vital to getting the children to safety," Covington Police Chief Spike Jones said.

The vehicle was struck by bullets that police say were fired from the window. The suspect, Michael Vaughan, 43, of Covington, is in the Kenton County jail. He was indicted in February on six counts of attempted murder, arson and wanton endangerment.

The Oxford Police Department has received two Humvees and 150 boxes of chemical light sticks through the program in the last five years, said Police Chief Robert B. Holzworth.

"The program is very helpful and provides local agencies access to specialized equipment," Holzworth said.

"Part of the role of police today is to develop the ability to respond tactically to situations that require a tactical response."

He said only a small percent of the calls they receive require an "escalated response," but "it's imperative that we ... have the ability and expertise" to handle those situations.

Tom Scheben, spokesman for the Boone County Sheriff's Office, said the department has acquired several items, from night-vision goggles to helmets and rifles for patrol cruisers.

Congress first created the military surplus program in 1990, authorizing the Department of Defense to send "excess" equipment to state and local law enforcement agencies for counter-narcotics efforts. Lawmakers expanded the program in 1997, allowing the equipment to be sent to law enforcement agencies for other purposes.

### **Socks, boxing gloves, copiers among nonweapons here**

On its website, the Defense Logistics Agency, the Pentagon branch that oversees the program, says local police use the equipment for everything from drug interdiction to patrolling the streets. It also fills more mundane needs, "such as file cabinets, copiers and fax machines" that local sheriffs might not otherwise be able to afford, the DLA website says.

Campbell and Kenton counties' law enforcement agencies have received a variety of equipment, from self-protection clubs to boxing gloves to military rifles to a pair of men's socks.

Since 1997, the program has provided \$5.1 billion of equipment to local law enforcement agencies around the country, usually at little or no cost.

Other supporters say the military equipment is useful as police confront dangerous situations – such as entering a drug house.

Anthony Dwyer, the chief deputy sheriff in Butler County, said the key is making sure police are properly trained to use the equipment and knowing when to use such heavy-duty tools – and when to leave them behind.

"You don't want to take an armored vehicle to execute an arrest warrant for someone for theft," Dwyer said. "However, we've executed some search warrants on drug operations where you do need that type of equipment. Once you get in the house, you find

numerous short and long weapons that would be able to defeat a typical (police) cruiser."

Dwyer said his officers don't regularly use most of the equipment Butler County has received through the federal program. Some of the body armor is outdated, he said, and eight M1 rifles it received are only used for ceremonial purposes. "They're not weaponized," Dwyer said.

They do have some of the 15 M16 rifles in circulation, he said, in case officers are dealing with someone armed with an AK-47 or other long guns.

"Having (such equipment) available is one thing," Dwyer said. "Putting it to use in a situation that doesn't require it is another."