



The Military Equipment Gravy Train Is Ending for Local Police Departments

By Colleen Curry

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In Camden, New Jersey today President Obama announced an executive order that will slow the flow of military-grade equipment from the Department of Defense to police departments nationwide.

"We've seen how militarized gear can sometimes give people the feeling like there's an occupying force as opposed to a force that's part of the community, that can alienate and intimidate local residents," Obama said to a group of law enforcement officers and community members in Philadelphia suburb, which has long struggled with high crime rates.

"We're going to prohibit some equipment made for the battlefield that is not appropriate for local police departments. There is other equipment that is maybe needed in some cases, but only with the proper training, so we're going to ensure that departments have what they need, but also the proper way to use it," he said.

The [executive order](#) will ban certain items from being sold or given away by the Pentagon to police, including grenade launchers, high caliber weapons, and some camouflage uniforms, and will create a second class of "controlled equipment" that the federal government may continue to sell to police with increased oversight and controls in place.

The controlled equipment list will include armored and tactical vehicles, specialized firearms, explosives, and riot equipment, which describes much of the military-style equipment that was seen on police during protests in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, which led to a national [discussion](#) about the militarization of police.

Moving forward, police departments will have to get approval from their local civilian governing bodies — town councils and mayors — to apply for the equipment, agree to comply with new community policing standards, and provide detailed and "persuasive" reasons for needing it, according to the report issued by the White House describing the program.

"The administration is making clear here, and is going to make clear with all of its police reforms, that if you're receiving resources from the federal government, there's going to be

accountability," Kanya Bennet, legislative counsel with the ACLU, said about the new restrictions. "We're happy to see that."

The president chose Camden as the backdrop for the announcement to emphasize the city's approach to community policing principles, which his administration is [advocating](#). The city, which has had one of the nation's highest violent crime rates for decades, disbanded its police department and created a new county police force in 2013, with a focus on community policing and increasing the number of officers on the streets. Murders in the city dropped from a high of 67 in 2012 to 33 in 2014, according to the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#), though it is still the most dangerous city in New Jersey.

"The approach the Chief has taken in getting [officers] out of their squad cars into the community so they are familiar with the people they're serving, they're enjoying their jobs more because they feel that over time they can have more of an impact and get more help from the community because they feel they've known or seen them before an incident occurs," Obama said today.

Today's announcement of an increase in controls was met with praise by many police reform advocates, though some warned that it will not immediately demilitarize police departments, it will just begin to stem the flow of free or subsidized military grade equipment into communities. Police departments will still be able to buy equipment from manufacturers if they can afford it.

"Technically this doesn't demilitarize police departments, but what it does its put more brakes on the funding streams that support those," Sam Bieler, a research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, told VICE News.

"Before they would have been able to just get the gear. Now, if they want a grenade launcher, they have to pay for it out of local money, and once costs come into play, you start to get a lot more thought about what they really need versus what's a nice toy," Bieler said.

Though Obama has outlined clear guidelines for the program, there could still be pushback from the defense industry, which has benefitted from the federal government selling and giving away equipment to police departments and therefore needing to purchase new gear frequently, according to Tim Lynch, director of the Project on Criminal Justice at the CATO Institute.

"It encourages federal purchasing, so it can become a vicious cycle if we don't get a close look at what's happening," Lynch told VICE News.

Lynch added that the flow of equipment from the federal government to local police departments is valued in at least tens of millions of dollars. "But it's so hard to say because so much of it has been on the QT [quiet]," he said.

"That's why we're going to have to follow this to make sure there aren't loopholes in the executive order, make sure the White House or members of Congress aren't making a gesture toward this without really making changes, and follow up to make sure it's good policy instead of just one speech," Lynch said. "To have Congress do this by law would be even better, because to

do this by executive order means the next president who comes in might just quietly change it, reverse it."

Still, the new rules will effect positive change, advocates and experts agree.

"Federal subsidies and giveaways have played a significant role in spreading military equipment throughout American police departments, so this change in policy is likely to have some effect, and the effect will be positive. It certainly won't demilitarize departments in one fell swoop, but it is a step in the right direction," David Sklansky, a Stanford law professor and former federal prosecutor, told VICE News via email.

Small towns will likely not have the money to purchase high-grade military equipment on their own, though large cities likely still will, and all towns and cities will now have to get civilian permission to apply for the equipment, Lynch said.

"The bigger item for me is that there needs to be more local control over the process, someone from the mayor's office, a civilian who decides what material police can have. That's really going to be one of the most significant changes we get out of this whole process, putting civilians back in control," Bieler said.

"American policing is so much a local enterprise, done at township level, so how much of a change this makes in American policing is going to be very dependent on how town councils and mayors and police chiefs decide to go to respond to this order," he added.

Bennet said that that the use of military equipment at protests in Ferguson and Baltimore, which "only escalates violence," highlighted the widespread use of military equipment in the day-to-day execution of search warrants and in low-level drug offenses.

"Treating our communities like war zones doesn't do anything to quiet or quell those situations," Bennet said. " But the administration here is tackling something beyond what we saw in Ferguson. Certainly Ferguson gave the issue the attention of the country and allowed it to receive national discourse, but many of our communities have long been militarized."