

DEMILITARIZATION OF THE POLICE

ACLU
Hawai'i

WHAT IS “POLICE MILITARIZATION”?

Current U.S. federal programs empower state and local law enforcement agencies to receive millions of dollars-worth of military equipment for use in their locales each year—most notably through the Department of Defense’s “1033 Program.” As a result, police departments across the country are consistently outfitted with military gear, including armored vehicles, assault rifles, and other weapons designed for combat. Militarization of the police has exploded since the 1990s, when Congress first created the 1033 Program as a means of fighting the “War on Drugs.” Since then, images of police wearing riot gear, carrying deadly weapons, and arriving in combat vehicles have become commonplace.

WHY IS POLICE MILITARIZATION A PROBLEM?

County and state law enforcement have acquired these weapons with little to no transparency or input from the impacted communities, and have used these weapons to silence peaceful demonstrators. At Mauna Kea and Sherwood Forest, state law enforcement brought out a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), also known as a “sound cannon,” which, when deployed to its fullest capacity, can cause permanent hearing damage or loss. County police departments have also acquired military armored trucks called BearCats, described as “tactical intervention vehicle[s] with chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and explosive capabilities.”

Policing should be about protecting and serving our communities, not engaging in combat. Equipping law enforcement with military gear sends a signal that the police are “at war” with citizens. This mentality can dangerously escalate interactions between police and community members, and lead to increased, unnecessary violence. Seeing police prepared to engage in deadly combat terrifies people, chills free speech, and undermines public safety.

Police militarization has also had a harsh, disproportionate impact on communities of color and low-income residents, whose neighborhoods were targeted in the failed “War on Drugs.” These communities overwhelmingly bear the burdens, harm, and losses that directly result from police brutality and racial profiling.

SOLUTION: DEMILITARIZATION

The Hawai'i State Legislature should pass legislation that bans law enforcement from acquiring military-grade weapons and vehicles. Until this happens, the city and county councils must pass ordinances ensuring that weapons of war will not be used in our communities. Hawai'i should work toward alternative visions of public safety that rely less on force, violence, and intimidation, and more on collaboration, community-building, and the provision of needed services.

