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On Campus, Grenade Launchers, M-16s, and Armored Vehicles

Dan Bauman

15–18 minutes

The U. of Maryland shows off its armored rescue vehicle during community events like Maryland Day. "It's never been deployed against our students, nor could I ever envision it being deployed against our students," the police chief says.Chronicle photo by Julia Schmalz

Should the campus police at the University of Central Florida ever need a grenade launcher, one sits waiting in the department's armory. Repurposed to fire tear-gas canisters, the weapon was

used several years ago for training exercises, according to Richard Beary, the university's chief of police. It hasn't left storage since.

At Central Florida, which has an enrollment of nearly 60,000 and a Division I football team, the device was acquired, a police spokeswoman said, for "security and crowd control." But the university's police force isn't the only one to have come upon a grenade launcher. Hinds Community College—located in western Mississippi, with a student population of 11,000—had one too. (Campus police officers at Hinds declined to comment. A woman who worked for the department but declined to identify herself said that the launcher had been repurposed to shoot flares but that the college no longer possessed it.)

Both institutions received their launchers from the same source: the Department of Defense. At least 117 colleges have acquired equipment from the department through a federal program, known as the 1033 program, that transfers military surplus to law-enforcement agencies across the country, according to records *The Chronicle* received after filing Freedom of Information requests with state governments (see table of equipment).

Campus police departments have used the program to obtain military equipment as mundane as men's trousers (Yale University) and as serious as a mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle (Ohio State University). Along with the grenade launcher, Central Florida acquired 23 M-16 assault rifles from the Department of Defense.

Ask participants in the program, and they'll say it provides departments, particularly those with limited budgets like campus police forces, with necessary gear at very little cost (colleges pay

only for shipping). Responsible departments, advocates say, develop plans for specific instances in which the equipment will be used—crowd-control situations, say, or active-shooter incidents like the Virginia Tech massacre. Outside of those cases, community members are unlikely to know that the gear even exists.

But on campus and off, there are detractors. Some argue that the procurement of tactical gear doesn't help with the types of crimes that occur more frequently on college campuses, like alcohol-related incidents and sexual assault. Others worry that military equipment is an especially poor fit for college campuses, fearing that it may have a chilling effect on free expression.

The 1033 program has received heightened scrutiny in the wake of protests in Ferguson, Mo. After the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, reporters and phone-wielding protesters captured images of police officers armed with military-grade guns, camouflage, and armored vehicles. Observers characterized the police response as heavy-handed and criticized officers for improperly using their weaponry.

In Washington renewed attention to the transfer of military weapons has led some lawmakers to call for a review of the 1033

program. Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat from Missouri who heads the oversight subcommittee for the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, led a hearing on Tuesday to consider revisions in the program. She suggested that local police departments that enjoy cost savings from free military equipment be required to receive 200 hours of training.

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Significant Savings

The scrutiny may be increasing now, but the 1033 program has been available to colleges for quite some time. In 1990, Congress passed a version of the National Defense Authorization Act that allowed for the transfer of excess Department of Defense equipment to federal and state agencies if gear was deemed "suitable for use by such agencies in counter-drug activities." In 1996 the law was reauthorized, with Section 1033 allowing for the transfer of equipment for terrorism-related purposes as well.

Now more than 8,000 federal and state law-enforcement agencies—many campus police departments among them—are eligible to participate. Participating agencies don't buy equipment; they are given it. They are prohibited from reselling or leasing the gear, and required to provide updates on the location of "tactical" gear, like armored vehicles and weaponry. When a police department decides a piece of equipment has outlived its usefulness, it is returned to the government.

After the buildup and winding down of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the amount of surplus equipment available to law-enforcement agencies increased drastically. At colleges, where terrorist attacks and shootouts with drug cartels are virtually unheard of, the active-shooter scenario became the primary justification for colleges to acquire tactical gear.

Central Florida got eight of its M-16 assault rifles in 2011, and 15 more were transferred to the department in February of the following year. At campus police departments, much like their counterparts at the local, state, and federal level, the most popular weapon procured through the 1033 program is the M-16 assault rifle.

At least 60 institutions have acquired M-16s through the program. Arizona State University holds the most, with 70 in its arsenal, followed by Florida International University and the University of Maryland with 50 M-16s each. Central Florida received its grenade launcher in 2008; Hinds acquired its in 2006.

Gear through the 1033 program is free to participating departments, with receiving agencies having to pay only delivery and maintenance costs. The University of Louisiana at Monroe

paid $507.43 for 12 M-16 rifles; the University of Alabama at Huntsville paid $220.40 for the transfer and shipping of five M-16s.

“For me, this is a cost savings for taxpayers,” said Jen Day Shaw, associate vice president and dean of students at the University of Florida and chair of the Campus Safety Knowledge Community, a forum for members of Naspa: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. When police departments “have the ability to get equipment that will help them do their jobs at a greatly reduced price,” Ms. Shaw said, “it is a benefit for the whole campus.”

“It is a force multiplier for us,” said David Perry, chief of police at Florida State University and president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. “Typically, we are not staffed at optimum levels. We are not given budgets comparable to some large cities and municipalities, so we need to find ways to make it reach.”

Indeed, many police departments use the 1033 program to acquire basic supplies along with tactical equipment. “Aside from body armor and weapons,” Mr. Perry said, “there is furniture, hand sanitizers, bandages. There are all types of equipment, materials, and supplies we need to support our overall mission.”

‘Better to Be Prepared’

At Central Florida, Chief Beary said, M-16 rifles are stored in vehicles for emergencies, like the one his officers responded to at midnight on March 18, 2013. Answering a call for a pulled fire alarm, officers eventually raided the dormitory room of James Seevakumaran, 30, and found a handgun, an assault rifle, more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition, and four homemade bombs. Mr.

Seevakumaran was also in the room, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The police said the would-be gunman had intended to force students into the hall with the fire alarm, where he would be waiting with his weapons.

“What was once the unthinkable has become the inevitable,” Mr. Beary said. “These bad guys have plans and are heavily armed, and law enforcement needs to be able to keep up with them. In order to do that, police officers need to be highly trained, well equipped, and ready to respond to any scenario.”

Michael Qualls, an associate professor of criminal justice at Fort Valley State University, in Georgia, agrees. A retired Army officer, Mr. Qualls worked for several campus police departments before he began teaching. “If we continue on with the 1033 program, as those items become obsolete at the military level and if they become available, why not get ’em?” Mr. Qualls said. “It’s better to be prepared than not prepared.”

But seeing that much firepower on college campuses is worrisome to some observers like Peter Kraska, a professor at Eastern Kentucky University’s School of Justice Studies. Mr. Kraska has studied police militarization since the late 1980s.

“The typical college-campus chief of police might say, ‘Look, we’ve had serious incidents occur around the country on college campuses,’” said Mr. Kraska. “The flaw in that thinking is that they are not going to be able to respond, even if they have all of that stuff. Those incidents are usually over very, very quickly”—25 minutes, tops. Longer than that, Mr. Kraska said, and the campus police will be joined by local and state law-enforcement officials, who will have greater capability and firepower.

For Mary Anne Franks, an associate professor of law at the University of Miami, the possibility that an extraordinary event could occur doesn't justify the procurement of assault rifles and armored vehicles. The real danger Ferguson residents faced came not from a terrorist attack, she said, but from police officers armed with this sort of equipment.

"Mostly, I'm wondering why," she said. "As much as one might wonder about why major cities are getting this type of equipment—which I think we should wonder about and ask questions about—it seems even stranger to talk about it happening in voluntary communities that don't experience much violent crime."

Ms. Franks raised another concern: As students become aware of the military gear some police departments possess, she said, that may curtail their willingness to express themselves and protest.

"It's not just the question of what happens in any one particular incident, but the tone it sets about what an environment needs to be," Ms. Franks said. "This presumption of danger—this presumption of hostility—is really toxic in many ways and avoids the problems that the community might actually be suffering from."

'A Profound Cultural Impact'

To alleviate some of the apprehension surrounding the use of military weapons on a college campus, said Linda J. Stump, the University of Florida's police chief, transparency is key. The University of Florida police department acquired an armored truck in 2007 under the 1033 program. Ms. Stump said the vehicle would be deployed only during an active-shooter situation and never for a civil disturbance.

Campus police officers are professionals, with processes in place to maintain their training levels, she said, and communities will be better served if departments explain that.

Administrative oversight and communication are also necessary, said Mr. Perry of Florida State. Administrators outside the police department should be briefed not only on what type of equipment is being acquired but also on the circumstances under which such gear would be used.

When the Florida State police department acquired a Humvee through the 1033 program, Mr. Perry said, he briefed administrators on the instances in which the vehicle would be used —in active-shooter scenarios, for example, but also during a hurricane or at events for community outreach.

When Ms. Stump talks about the value of transparency, she's also tackling the issue of training: Are college police officers experienced enough to handle assault rifles and other military gear?

Yes, as long as they've had the training required for departmental accreditation, said Mr. Perry.

To earn accreditation from the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators, for example, an organization must show proof that officers have attended training to use any new weapon, vehicle, or tool they acquire, Mr. Perry said. Training must be proctored by third-party instructors who know how to use the gear proficiently. Neither the Department of Defense nor the association administers the training. The Department of Defense does not require any training to obtain or keep the gear.

"At a nonaccredited school, there is not an expectation for

formalized policies and procedures," Mr. Perry said. The association's website lists 40 accredited college departments. Another group, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, has accredited 70 college police departments, according to its website.

The University of Virginia's police department purchased 12 M-16 rifles through the 1033 program, and the university converted them to patrol rifles—guns that cannot be fired automatically. Officers who are issued patrol rifles receive three levels of training, said Mike Coleman, a captain in the department. Training sessions cover marksmanship, safety, decision making, and threat identification. The police department at the University of Virginia is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, as is the University of Florida.

"The public is not aware of much of the training that university police officers receive," Mr. Coleman said. "Our department not only attends the same police academy that municipal officers attend; they teach at that academy."

Professors like Mr. Kraska remain concerned about how the 1033 program could affect campuses.

"It can have a profound cultural impact on a small police department when you start adding weaponry, battle-dress uniforms, all the advanced military technologies," he said. "That small agency can go rapidly from one of protecting and serving to one of viewing the community as the enemy, and a potential threat."

Lance Lambert and Max Lewontin contributed to this article.