



 COMMENTARY CRIMINAL JUSTICE

## Ferguson Could Happen Anywhere

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Protests in Ferguson, Missouri, continue this week following the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old boy, at the hands of a local police officer.

In trying to explain the protests and the strong police response, some news outlets have taken it upon themselves to explore the history of race and space in the St. Louis area, with a focus on Ferguson's peculiar situation as a majority-black town with an almost entirely white police force.

The truth is, though, racial tension aside, the harsh crackdown in Ferguson could have happened anywhere.

That's because, in the past few years, we've developed a system where the federal bureaucracy would much rather arm local police to the teeth than help them improve the way they serve their communities.

## DoD 1033: Military Surplus Store, with Tanks

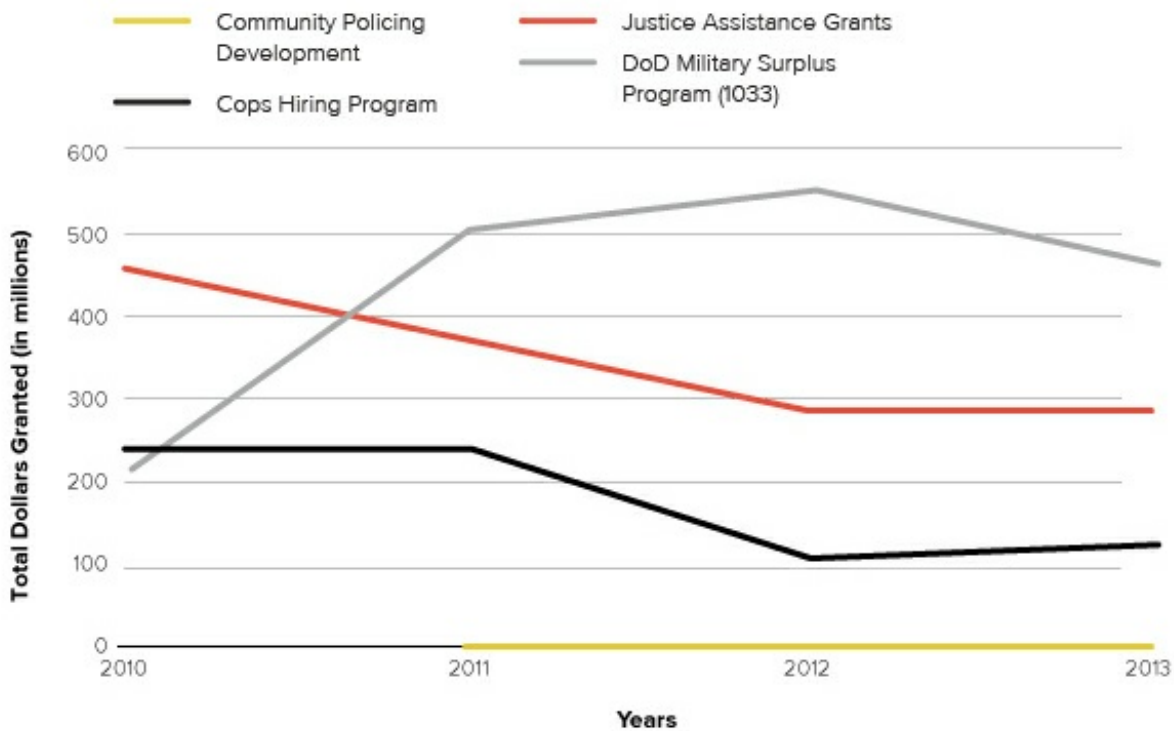
During the ongoing Ferguson protests, increasing attention has focused on the Department of Defense Excess Property Program, also known as DoD 1033, the major pipeline through which local police departments have acquired much of their military gear.

Though it's been around for several decades, DoD 1033 has seen tremendous growth in the last few years. In 2012, the total value of the mine-resistant vehicles, automatic weapons, and other materiel granted to local police through the program peaked at \$546 million.

To their credit, journalists and watchdog groups were examining the troublesome expansion of DoD 1033 well before the Ferguson crisis.

Yet precious little attention has been given to one ancillary problem with this build-up: the incredible degree to which the size of DoD 1033 now dwarfs funding for the kinds of federal smart-policing initiatives that might have actually prevented the events in Ferguson.

## SELECT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT GRANT PROGRAMS FOR LOCAL POLICING, 2010-2013



Source: <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=2450> (CPD); <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=2357>, <http://www.gao.gov/products/gao-13-521> (CHP); <https://www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ProgramID=59#horizontalTabB> (JAGs); <http://rt.com/usa/police-weaponry-military-pentagon-205/>, <http://bigstory.ep.org/article/ap-impact-little-restraint-military-giveaways>, <http://triblive.com/news/allegheeny/6258829-74/mrep-vehicle-police#xxz3ASH15TTX> (1033).

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The graph above shows the extent of the changes. As DoD 1033 has expanded, funding has decreased for two of the biggest Department of Justice grant programs: the COPS Hiring Program (CHP) and the Justice Assistance Grants, or JAGs.

### Trading Training for Bigger Guns

CHP, which operates out of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, is a funding program intended so that local police can hire new officers or prevent layoffs of existing officers.

To qualify for the grant, the police departments must actively engage in “community policing,” a strategy that calls for hiring cops who intimately know the communities they serve and are willing to work proactively with important local stakeholders to fix the underlying problems that cause crime.

It’s a smart program, and the crime-prevention strategies can be deceptively simple, such as having officers actually walk their beats and chat with citizens rather than just driving around in a cruiser.

But funding for the program has been meted out haphazardly. Last year, the Government Accountability Office reported that from 2008 to 2012, 48 percent of the grants went to just six states (Missouri wasn’t one of them).

Since then, the amount of grant money has declined—the total awarded in 2013 was 50 percent less than in

2011. Same goes for the JAG program, which is a more general pot of money that local police forces can use to buy equipment and expand their ranks—though the program rules forbid the purchase of military-style vehicles like those used in Ferguson.

Last but not least, there's the tiny Community Policing Development initiative, which awards grants to criminal-justice groups and police departments to jump-start “innovative policing projects,” many of which are designed to improve community-police relations. Its funding? A puny \$8.5 million in 2013 for the entire country. Most of the grants are below \$50,000—a quarter of the retail price of the BearCat armored vehicle seen around Ferguson.

Interestingly, scholars have found that the correlation between these community-policing programs and reductions in violent crime is weak at best—in part because police departments are often hesitant to implement them beyond the minimum degree required to qualify for federal funding.

## Respect More Effective than Assault Rifles

As far as Ferguson is concerned, however, that fact is almost beside the point. The New York Times has noted that violent crime in Ferguson is lower than in some surrounding towns.

No, the problem in Ferguson isn't violence. It's simply a lack of respect between residents and the people whose job is supposedly to protect them.

And respect is something community policing can improve. As one academic survey concluded, “citizens' satisfaction (or lack thereof) with their contacts with the police remain[s] a significant predictor of their broader perceptions of police services.” No wonder that Ferguson, a majority-black town with only three black police officers, falls short in this regard.

One indicator of the potential success of a community policing approach can be seen in the lightning change in protesters' demeanor in Ferguson when enforcement efforts were put in the hands of Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, who grew up in the area and who received hugs when he attended the demonstration.

So, it's not just that we put so much money into militarizing our police forces, it's also that we put so little into making them organizations that communities want to trust. We have taken away the playbook in favor of providing superior firepower.

The death of a single 18-year-old was the proximate cause of the problems in Ferguson. An unarmed black teen killed by a member of a mostly white police force no doubt would—and probably should—result in some unrest.

But it is our national approach to funding and supplying local police that virtually guaranteed the outsized standoffs seen in Ferguson would happen *somewhere*.

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