

Extended Abstract for the Population Association of America Annual Meeting 2015

Does Demographic Change Predict Police Militarization?

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Introduction

The culmination of some US military operations overseas has coincided with increasing visibility of the military in communities across the country. Since 1997, the US Department of Defense has transferred \$5 billion worth of surplus military equipment to state and local law enforcement agencies under its Excess Property “1033” program (Defense Logistics Agency, 2014). The type of equipment available under this program varies considerably, ranging from weapons and tactical vehicles to computer or gym items used for daily operating purposes. Although priority is given to requests for equipment used for drug enforcement and counter-terrorism purposes, agencies seeking equipment for other purposes can still be authorized to procure military-grade equipment.

Prior work has primarily focused on the *outcomes* associated with the “militarization” of police departments. For instance, some argue that the procurement of military-grade equipment by law enforcement will encourage the use of excessive force by police (Paul and Birzer 2008). The policy and legal literature has focused in particular on the implications of police militarization for communities of color, such as through the disproportionate deployment of SWAT teams in these areas (ACLU 2014)

However, rather than investigating the outcomes associated with police militarization, identifying areas where police have most actively participated in 1033 may be particularly informative for understanding police-community relations. Power threat theory suggests that increases in the size of certain minority groups is perceived to constitute a threat to dominant groups (Blalock 1967). Moreover, the two main types of threats to which the 1033 program is meant to respond – drug-related crime and acts of terrorism – are distinctly racialized in the United States. Black Americans experience disproportionate rates of arrest (US Census Bureau 2012) and incarceration (Carson 2014) for drug-related crimes. In the post-9/11 era, immigration – particularly illegal immigration from Latin America - has often been conflated with crime (Rumbaut et al. 2006), while Muslim and South Asian immigrant communities have been subject to police surveillance (Goldman 2012). As a result, law enforcement officers may view increases in the size of these respective groups as threats to maintaining public safety and to respond by equipping their facilities with military-grade equipment.

This analysis uses governmental data to examine the extent to which power-threat theory, as measured by changes in the size of the African American and immigrant populations, respectively, is predictive of a county’s participation in 1033 and its acquisition of military equipment. Examining whether socio-demographic factors are predictive of police militarization may provide important information on police perceptions of the communities they serve. Given the legacy of often tenuous relationships between police and communities of color (Bass 2001), this analysis thus has implications for identifying potentially problematic police-community dynamics so that they can ultimately be improved.

Data and Methods

This study uses data from the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) on police agencies participating in 1033 and all general and tactical equipment received between 2006 and 2013. Because information on the acquisition of tactical equipment is county-rather than agency-specific, the county will be the unit of analysis. DLA data is supplemented by arrest rate information from the Uniform Crime Reporting program and

information on law enforcement systems from the 2008 Census on State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies (CSLLEA), both from the US Department of Justice (DOJ). In addition, socio-demographic information is obtained from the American Community Survey and data on political affiliation is from *The Guardian*. The analytic sample consists of the full population of approximately 3,000 US counties for which data is available.

I use a generalized linear model with a logit link and the binomial family to predict the dependent variable, the proportion of police agencies in a county that have participated in 1033 at any time between 2006 and 2013. Approximately 8,000 state and local law enforcement agencies currently participate, out of a national total of 18,000. This analysis includes the change in the proportion of African American and foreign-born residents, respectively, since 2000, as well as other socio-demographic controls (median income, educational attainment, unemployment, and arrest rates for violent and drug-related crimes). It also contains characteristics pertaining to law enforcement systems (budget, size, presence of a drug or terrorism task force), and partisanship (% voting Republican). A potential second analysis uses fixed effects models for two dependent variables measuring the extent of militarization: the total (logged) annual dollar value of tactical equipment received by a county and the annual number of weapons acquired per thousand residents. For these analyses, annual data on socio-demographic characteristics will be used and time-invariant variables will be omitted.

Looking Ahead

This analysis will contribute to literature on the social demography of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. If, in fact, changes in the African American and foreign-born populations, respectively, significantly predict law enforcement militarization, this will provide evidence that police agencies are acquiring equipment in response to perceived threats by these demographic groups and require further analysis on the precise mechanisms through which this may occur. On the other hand, if measures of power threat theory do not predict 1033 participation, it will suggest that research in this area should examine other potential motivations for police acquisition of military equipment.

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