

Police Militarization and Civilian Harm

Domestic Militarization Watch

Brief Series

PEP DMW brief series • No. II • 02.20.26



Executive Summary

This research brief synthesizes empirical evidence on the relationship between police militarization and civilian harm in the United States. Drawing on large-scale quantitative studies, quasi-experimental designs, and public health research, the analysis demonstrates that militarization, operationalized through federal equipment transfers, tactical unit deployments, and adoption of military doctrines, is consistently associated with increased civilian deaths, injuries, and arrests, with harms concentrated disproportionately in Black and economically marginalized communities. Rigorous empirical evaluations find no evidence that militarization improves crime control or officer safety; several

studies document increased violence risks for both civilians and officers. The evidence supports substantial policy reforms including restricting federal equipment transfers, prohibiting militarized tactics except in narrowly defined circumstances, investing in community-centered alternatives, and establishing robust accountability mechanisms. Demilitarization coupled with legitimacy-building strategies represents a more effective and equitable approach to public safety than current militarized paradigms.

Introduction and Scope

Police militarization refers to the acquisition of military equipment, adoption of paramilitary organizational structures and tactical doctrines, and cultivation of military cultural orientations within civilian law enforcement agencies.¹ This transformation has unfolded over decades, accelerating during the War on Drugs and intensifying after September 11, 2001, as counterterrorism frameworks penetrated local policing.² Contemporary law enforcement agencies routinely obtain surplus military

hardware, assault rifles, armored vehicles, tactical gear, and surveillance technologies through federal programs while adopting doctrines emphasizing "warrior" identities and high-risk tactical operations.³

Central to militarization are federal programs subsidizing equipment acquisition and tactical development. The Department of Defense 1033 Program, established in 1997, authorizes transfer of surplus military equipment to local agencies at minimal cost, having distributed over \$7.4 billion in military hardware to more than 8,000 agencies with limited oversight or evaluation.⁴ Complementary Department of Justice and Homeland Security funding streams further support tactical capabilities under rubrics of drug enforcement and counterterrorism.⁵

This brief addresses three core questions: First, what is the empirical relationship between militarization and civilian casualties, injuries, and arrests? Second, through which mechanisms does militarization generate harm? Third, how are these harms distributed across race and class? The analysis draws primarily on peer-reviewed empirical research from leading criminology, sociology, and public health journals, focusing on national patterns while acknowledging persistent data limitations and causal inference challenges.

The analysis engages theoretical frameworks on police legitimacy, procedural justice, and structural inequality. Procedural justice theory demonstrates that communities perceiving police as fair and trustworthy exhibit higher cooperation, greater crime reporting, and reduced resistance.⁶ Militarization undermines these foundations by signaling that communities are threats requiring suppression rather than partners in safety.⁷ Critical scholarship on racialized state violence examines how ostensibly neutral policies systematically concentrate harm in Black and Latino communities, functioning as mechanisms of social control reproducing hierarchies of citizenship and political belonging.⁸ Public health

frameworks conceptualize police violence as a population health issue with significant mortality, morbidity, and trauma consequences requiring structural interventions.⁹

Defining and Measuring Militarization

Militarization encompasses material, organizational, tactical, and cultural dimensions.¹⁰ Materially, it involves acquiring military-grade firearms, armored vehicles, tactical gear, and surveillance technologies fundamentally altering police capabilities.¹¹ Organizationally, it manifests through specialized paramilitary units, particularly SWAT teams evolving from rare emergency resources into routine operational components deployed thousands of times annually for warrant service and patrol functions.¹²

Tactically, militarization involves military-derived doctrines including dynamic entry raids (no-knock and quick-knock warrants executed with overwhelming force), prioritizing speed and surprise over de-escalation.¹³ Culturally, it entails "warrior cop" ideologies framing police work as combat, communities as battlegrounds, and aggressive enforcement as heroic, displacing guardian and service-oriented professional identities.¹⁴

Empirical research operationalizes militarization through multiple proxies. Common approaches quantify 1033 Program equipment transfers as dollar values per capita or per officer, enabling longitudinal panel analyses exploiting temporal and jurisdictional variation.¹⁵ Studies also measure SWAT team presence, deployment frequency, and specific militarized incidents including no-knock raids and armored vehicle deployments.¹⁶ Survey instruments assess organizational culture, tactical priorities, and warrior versus guardian orientations.¹⁷

Critical methodological considerations involve distinguishing militarization from legitimate specialized capacity. Genuinely exigent circumstances may warrant tactical capabilities;

concern arises when militarized practices diffuse into routine functions, become normalized for low-level offenses, or deploy disproportionately in marginalized communities absent genuine threats.¹⁸ Despite measurement challenges and data limitations, no comprehensive national registry tracks all militarization dimensions, convergent findings across multiple operationalizations strengthen confidence in observed patterns.¹⁹

Empirical Evidence: Militarization and Civilian Mortality

Large-scale quantitative studies provide rigorous evidence linking militarization to civilian deaths. State-level panel analyses employing fixed-effects models estimate that each additional \$100 of surplus military equipment per officer associates with more than 1% increases in civilian deaths, translating to approximately 52 additional fatalities nationwide annually attributable to 1033 transfers, even controlling for crime rates, drug use, demographics, and other confounders.²⁰ These effects are particularly pronounced in jurisdictions with larger Black populations, indicating militarization interacts with racialized policing patterns to produce disproportionate lethality.²¹

Complementary research using alternative datasets corroborates these findings. One widely cited analysis combining administrative records with quasi-experimental variation estimates militarization produces approximately 64 additional police killings annually while simultaneously increasing risks to officers, contrary to safety justifications, with roughly 12,400 additional assaults on officers and more than 2,600 additional officer injuries attributable to militarized practices.²² Proposed mechanisms involve escalation dynamics: heavily armed tactical approaches provoke defensive responses from suspects perceiving mortal threats, generating violent confrontations less aggressive methods might avoid.²³

Research on SWAT deployments reveals stark racial disparities. Large-scale panel analyses document that jurisdictions with higher Black population proportions are significantly more likely to form SWAT units and deploy them frequently, even controlling for crime rates, poverty, and structural characteristics.²⁴ Effect magnitudes are substantial: some specifications estimate 10 percentage point increases in Black population share correspond to proportional increases in SWAT deployments per capita, while white neighborhoods with comparable crime experience far fewer operations.²⁵

Critically, intensive militarized policing in Black communities produces no measurable safety benefits. Nationwide panel data find no evidence SWAT teams reduce violent crime; several specifications associate SWAT formation with modest crime increases.²⁶ Survey experiments demonstrate exposure to militarized police imagery significantly reduces respondents' confidence, funding support, and cooperation willingness, with effects particularly pronounced among Black participants.²⁷

Beyond immediate fatalities, police killings produce cascading community harms. Research using high-resolution call-for-service data documents substantial, persistent reductions in voluntary crime reporting following publicized police killings of Black civilians, with one study estimating over 20,000 fewer emergency calls in affected neighborhoods within a year.²⁸ These legitimacy erosions have direct safety consequences: declining crime reporting impairs investigations and clearance rates, paradoxically increasing vulnerability while ostensibly enhancing enforcement.²⁹

Mechanisms Generating Civilian Harm

Tactical Escalation

Militarized units routinely employ high-risk dynamic entry tactics, no-knock raids, quick-knock warrants with battering rams,

simultaneous multi-room entries, compressing decision timelines and substantially increasing violent confrontation probabilities.³⁰ Civil rights investigations document these tactics apply primarily to routine search warrants, particularly drug investigations, rather than genuinely exigent emergencies.³¹ Tactical doctrine emphasizes speed, surprise, and overwhelming force and military combat principles over de-escalation or measured response.³²

During dynamic entries, occupants often cannot distinguish police raids from home invasions, particularly during nighttime operations; rational defensive responses to perceived threats create split-second confrontations with elevated fatal violence risks for occupants and officers.³³ Militarized raids also routinely cause severe non-fatal injuries from flash-bang grenades (burns, hearing damage, traumatic brain injuries), less-lethal munitions (skull fractures, eye trauma, blindness), and high-force restraints.³⁴

Critically, these harms are not offset by improved outcomes. Systematic comparisons find aggressive dynamic entries do not yield larger contraband quantities, higher target arrest rates, or enhanced evidence recovery compared to patient, negotiation-based warrant service.³⁵ Primary "accomplishments" appear symbolic demonstrations of state power and racialized spatial control rather than instrumental crime reduction gains.³⁶

Legitimacy Erosion

Militarization profoundly undermines police legitimacy, particularly in communities with discriminatory enforcement histories. Procedural justice research demonstrates legitimacy depends critically on respectful treatment, explanations, voice opportunities, and consistent rule application, principles militarized policing systematically violates.³⁷ Survey experiments provide direct evidence: respondents viewing militarized police imagery report significantly lower law enforcement

confidence, reduced funding support, and diminished patrol acceptance compared to traditional police imagery.³⁸ Effects are strongest among Black participants and heavily policed neighborhood residents, amplifying pre-existing legitimacy deficits where trust is most fragile.³⁹

Qualitative research documents residents perceive heavily armed officers and armored vehicles as signals they are treated as enemy populations rather than rights-bearing citizens, experiencing militarized enforcement as collective punishment generating pervasive fear and resentment.⁴⁰ This legitimacy erosion generates concrete safety consequences: declining trust reduces crime reporting, witness cooperation, and investigation participation, impairing police capacity to solve serious offenses.⁴¹ Longitudinal studies tracking neighborhoods before and after intensive militarized enforcement document declines in crime reporting, reduced community policing participation, and weakened informal social control.⁴²

Targeted Over-Policing

Militarized policing concentrates systematically in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color independent of crime levels. Large-scale analyses combining deployment records with census data document Black and Latino neighborhoods experience significantly higher SWAT raid rates, armored vehicle patrols, and tactical presence than white neighborhoods with comparable violent crime rates.⁴³ These patterns reflect institutionalized War on Drugs priorities targeting open-air drug markets in poor minority communities while comparatively neglecting similar activity in affluent white spaces.⁴⁴

Federal funding structures further incentivize concentrated enforcement. Asset forfeiture regimes allowing agencies to retain seized property create financial incentives targeting poor neighborhoods where seizures are feasible and legal challenges minimal.⁴⁵ Grant programs

tied to drug arrests and warrant clearances reward intensive militarized activity regardless of safety outcomes, embedding perverse incentives prioritizing enforcement volume over community wellbeing.⁴⁶

Spatial concentration produces cumulative harms. Repeated militarized enforcement exposure generates chronic stress and trauma symptoms, particularly among children witnessing raids or uses of force.⁴⁷ Public health research documents associations between intensive policing and elevated depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and cardiovascular conditions risks disproportionately borne by Black and Latino communities.⁴⁸ Beyond individual health, concentrated enforcement contributes to neighborhood stigmatization, economic disinvestment, and institutional weakening.⁴⁹

Disparate Impact Across Race and Class

Empirical evidence demonstrates police militarization disproportionately harms Black communities and communities of color. Quantitative analyses consistently find jurisdictions with larger Black populations acquire more military equipment, form SWAT teams at higher rates, deploy them more frequently, and experience elevated police-involved killings, even controlling for crime and socioeconomic characteristics.⁵⁰ Effect magnitudes are substantial: some estimates suggest 10 percentage point Black population increases correspond to proportional SWAT deployment increases.⁵¹

These disparities persist across militarization dimensions, indicating systemic patterns. Research examining MRAP acquisitions finds Black-majority counties significantly more likely to receive armored vehicles than white-majority counties with comparable crime.⁵² No-knock raid analyses document disproportionate execution in Black and Latino neighborhoods for drug

investigations despite similar drug use rates across racial groups.⁵³ Protest policing studies reveal demonstrations led by Black activists and racial justice organizations encounter more militarized responses than predominantly white protests, even controlling for size, location, and property damage.⁵⁴

These racialized patterns reflect historical continuities with slave patrols, post-Reconstruction convict leasing, Jim Crow policing, and civil rights movement suppression.⁵⁵ While overt racial language is purged from contemporary policy, operational practices reveal enduring structural racism: Black neighborhoods are policed as threats requiring military suppression while white neighborhoods receive service-oriented partnership policing.⁵⁶

Socioeconomic inequality compounds racialized patterns. Poor neighborhoods experience disproportionately intensive militarized enforcement controlling for crime and racial composition.⁵⁷ These patterns reflect multiple dynamics: economically marginalized neighborhoods exhibit higher visible street activity making enforcement politically vulnerable; "disorder" and "quality of life" frameworks disproportionately target poverty manifestations; and asset forfeiture creates financial stakes in targeting poor communities.⁵⁸

The most acute harms occur at race, class, and spatial marginality intersections. Residents of low-income, predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods experience layered harms: elevated lethal force risks, higher aggressive raid probabilities, intensive surveillance, and concentrated low-level offense enforcement within contexts of limited political representation, underfunded services, and constrained legal recourse.⁵⁹ These cumulative exposures generate intergenerational consequences, with childhood policing exposure predicting adult criminal justice involvement, economic instability, and health problems.⁶⁰

Militarization and Criminal Justice Contact

While fewer studies directly examine arrest patterns, available evidence indicates militarized policing links to elevated arrest rates, particularly for low-level drug offenses. SWAT deployment log analyses reveal overwhelming operation majorities, frequently exceeding 60% involve search warrant execution rather than emergency responses, with drug investigations constituting primary justifications.⁶¹ Case studies document militarized raids routinely produce collateral arrests of family members, visitors, and neighbors beyond warrant targets.⁶²

These patterns disproportionately affect low-income communities and communities of color where militarized raids concentrate, expanding criminal justice involvement and generating arrest records with severe collateral consequences including pretrial detention, employment disruption, housing instability, and family separation.⁶³ Coercive raid circumstances may generate false confessions and intimidated guilty pleas even from individuals with weak culpability, particularly those lacking robust legal representation.⁶⁴

Militarized policing contributes to poverty criminalization by concentrating aggressive enforcement where survival strategies and public space use are most visible. Activities including informal vending, loitering, and low-level drug possession attract militarized enforcement when occurring in poor, predominantly non-white neighborhoods rather than affluent areas where behavior is buffered by private property.⁶⁵ This differential enforcement reflects spatial inequality: poor neighborhoods lack private recreational spaces, necessitating public space use that creates vulnerability to "disorder" and "quality of life" enforcement criminalizing poverty manifestations.⁶⁶

Research on mass incarceration documents how militarized policing feeds broader carceral

systems. Aggressive drug enforcement generates high-volume arrests populating jails and prisons, with collateral consequences including employment disruption, housing loss, and criminal record creation, imposing severe burdens especially on communities with limited shock-absorption resources.⁶⁷ Over time, repeated criminal justice contact produces cumulative disadvantage: arrest and conviction records diminish employment prospects, housing access, public benefits, and civic participation including voting rights.⁶⁸

Evaluating Claimed Benefits

Officer Safety

A central militarization justification asserts military equipment and tactics enhance officer safety by providing protective capabilities against armed suspects.⁶⁹ However, rigorous empirical evaluations provide little support. The most comprehensive nationwide analysis finds no statistically significant evidence tactical units reduce officer deaths or assaults; some specifications associate SWAT presence with small assault increases.⁷⁰ The study finds no crime reduction or safety improvements associated with SWAT formation.⁷¹

Recent quasi-experimental research reaches more troubling conclusions. Leveraging exogenous 1033 Program equipment distribution variation, one study estimates militarization produces approximately 64 additional police killings annually alongside roughly 12,400 extra officer assaults and more than 2,600 additional officer injuries, suggesting militarization increases violence risks for civilians and officers.⁷² Proposed mechanisms involve escalation dynamics: heavily armed tactical approaches may provoke defensive responses from suspects perceiving mortal threats, generating violent confrontations less aggressive approaches might avoid.⁷³

Comparative evidence further undermines safety justifications. Police forces in many democracies with significantly lower militarization including most Western European nations experience fewer officer fatalities and assaults per capita than the United States, suggesting militarization is neither necessary nor sufficient for officer safety.⁷⁴

Crime Control

Militarization proponents argue tactical capabilities are necessary to deter violent crime and provide rapid mass casualty threat responses.⁷⁵ Yet large-scale empirical analyses provide no evidence militarization reduces crime or improves jurisdictional safety. The definitive SWAT formation study employing panel data across hundreds of agencies finds no statistically detectable violent crime, property crime, or drug offense reductions associated with tactical unit acquisition.⁷⁶ Additional research examining 1033 transfers similarly finds no crime reduction benefits using various econometric specifications.⁷⁷

Scholars propose multiple explanations for militarization's crime control failure. First, militarized policing may undermine crime control by eroding legitimacy and reducing community cooperation, thereby impairing investigations dependent on witness testimony and information-sharing.⁷⁸ Second, resources devoted to tactical units and military equipment may crowd out evidence-based strategies demonstrating effectiveness including focused deterrence, hot-spot policing with problem-solving, and restorative justice.⁷⁹ Third, militarized drug enforcement deployments generate high-volume arrests but minimal market disruption while imposing massive collateral community harms.⁸⁰

Some alternative models emphasizing de-escalation, procedural justice, and community partnership demonstrate superior crime control without militarization's harms. Experimental

evaluations of procedural justice training and focused deterrence document modest but significant crime reductions alongside improved police-community relations, suggesting legitimacy-building approaches achieve genuine safety gains militarization cannot.⁸¹

Beyond Mortality: Physical Injuries, Trauma, and Health

Militarized policing generates substantial non-fatal physical harm. Public health research documents serious injuries from less-lethal munitions, chemical agents, explosive devices, and physical force tactics.⁸² Flash-bang grenades cause burns, permanent hearing loss, traumatic brain injuries, and deaths when deployed in enclosed spaces or near vulnerable individuals.⁸³ Less-lethal projectiles including rubber bullets and bean-bag rounds routinely cause skull fractures, eye trauma resulting in blindness, internal organ damage, and deaths, particularly when fired at close range or aimed at heads.⁸⁴

Additional injury mechanisms include canine bites, battering ram injuries, chemical agents causing respiratory distress and burns, and high-force restraints producing positional asphyxiation and fractures.⁸⁵ These injuries impose immediate suffering, generate substantial medical costs, and can produce lasting disabilities. Critically, underreporting represents a major quantification barrier: many agencies lack comprehensive use-of-force reporting; civilians injured during militarized encounters may not seek treatment or file reports, particularly undocumented individuals, those with criminal records, or those lacking insurance.⁸⁶

Exposure to militarized policing generates significant psychological trauma and mental health consequences. Public health studies

document associations between police violence exposure and elevated post-traumatic stress, major depression, generalized anxiety, and substance use disorder risks.⁸⁷ These burdens are particularly acute among children and adolescents, for whom violence exposure during developmentally sensitive periods can disrupt neurobiological development and social functioning.⁸⁸

Research distinguishes between direct exposure (individuals subjected to force), vicarious exposure (witnessing violence against others), and community-level exposure (residing in heavily policed neighborhoods), with all three associating with adverse mental health outcomes and cumulative exposures producing dose-response relationships.⁸⁹ Longitudinal studies document associations between intensive policing exposure and diminished school engagement, academic underperformance, and truncated educational aspirations among adolescents.⁹⁰

Population-level analyses find high-profile police killings associate with community-wide mental health deterioration. Studies examining emergency department visits and prescription patterns find spikes in anxiety-related visits and antidepressant prescriptions following widely publicized police killings, with effects concentrated in proximate areas and among Black populations.⁹¹ Health consequences extend to cardiovascular health and reproductive health, with research documenting associations between police harassment and elevated cortisol, blood pressure, and inflammation markers linking discrimination to cardiovascular disease.⁹² Studies find associations between police violence exposure and adverse birth outcomes including preterm birth and low birthweight, concentrated among Black birthing people.⁹³

Policy and Programmatic Drivers

Federal policy represents the primary institutional militarization driver, with the 1033

Program serving as the most consequential mechanism. Established in 1997, the program authorizes surplus military equipment transfers to local agencies at minimal cost, having distributed over \$7.4 billion to more than 8,000 agencies with limited oversight and no systematic impact evaluation.⁹⁴ The program operates through decentralized requests approved with minimal scrutiny regarding operational necessity or potential harms.⁹⁵ Empirical research directly linking 1033 transfers to increased civilian deaths provides compelling reform evidence.⁹⁶

Beyond 1033, Department of Justice initiatives including COPS grants and Byrne grants have funded tactical equipment and SWAT development, while Homeland Security grants provide billions for surveillance, tactical gear, and armored vehicles.⁹⁷ These fragmented streams create cumulative militarization pressures with agencies layering multiple programs to maximize equipment acquisition regardless of demonstrated need.⁹⁸

The federal War on Drugs represents a second critical driver, providing ideological justification and institutional infrastructure for militarized policing over four decades.⁹⁹ Beginning in the 1970s and escalating in the 1980s, federal drug policy prioritized aggressive enforcement targeting street-level markets in poor Black neighborhoods while comparatively neglecting affluent white community activity.¹⁰⁰ Legislative frameworks including the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts established mandatory minimums and 100:1 crack-powder sentencing disparities institutionalizing racialized enforcement.¹⁰¹

Federal funding reinforced these priorities. Byrne grants and HIDTA programs incentivized specialized drug enforcement units and tactical teams with performance metrics emphasizing arrest volume and asset seizures rather than drug market disruption or public health.¹⁰² Asset forfeiture regimes allowing agencies to retain seized property proceeds created direct financial

incentives for aggressive drug enforcement, particularly in communities where seizures were feasible and legal challenges minimal.¹⁰³

Post-9/11 counterterrorism generated additional militarization pressures as security frameworks penetrated local policing.¹⁰⁴ Homeland Security funding streams provided billions for surveillance, armored vehicles, and specialized equipment justified through counterterrorism preparedness, often with minimal terrorism threat connection.¹⁰⁵ Importantly, counterterrorism infrastructure has been repurposed for domestic dissent suppression, with militarized responses becoming routine features of protest management, particularly for racial justice and economic inequality demonstrations.¹⁰⁶

Policy Recommendations

Restrict Federal Equipment Transfers

Given consistent evidence linking military equipment transfers to increased civilian deaths without corresponding safety benefits, federal policy should substantially restrict weaponized equipment transfers to civilian police.¹⁰⁷ Congress should prohibit assault rifles, armored vehicles, explosives, and grenade launcher transfers with narrow exceptions for specialized units addressing extraordinary threats subject to rigorous justification and oversight.¹⁰⁸ Remaining permissible transfers should require comprehensive needs assessments, operational justifications, demonstrated community consultation, and mandatory deployment reporting in standardized, publicly accessible formats.¹⁰⁹ Independent oversight mechanisms should audit equipment use and recommend program suspension for agencies demonstrating harm patterns.¹¹⁰

Restrict Militarized Tactics

State legislatures and municipal governments should prohibit or severely limit militarized tactic deployment absent genuinely exigent circumstances.¹¹¹ Reforms should prohibit no-knock raids except in extraordinarily narrow circumstances involving imminent life threats where announcing presence would cause immediate death or harm, requiring judicial authorization based on specific verified intelligence and documented alternative exhaustion.¹¹² Dynamic entry raids for low-level offenses, particularly drug possession and small-scale distribution should be presumptively prohibited, with tactical deployments authorized only for violent crimes or verified armed dangerous suspects presenting immediate risks.¹¹³ Training reforms should emphasize de-escalation, proportionality, and bystander protection.¹¹⁴

Invest in Community-Centered Alternatives

Policymakers should substantially redirect resources from militarized hardware toward evidence-based, community-centered safety strategies addressing violence root causes.¹¹⁵ Priority investments include community violence intervention programs employing credible messengers providing conflict mediation and wraparound services demonstrating significant violence reductions;¹¹⁶ crisis response teams composed of mental health professionals responding to mental health and substance use situations;¹¹⁷ problem-oriented policing employing systematic problem analysis and collaborative tailored responses;¹¹⁸ youth programming providing educational support, mentorship, and trauma-informed services;¹¹⁹ and restorative justice programs facilitating dialogue emphasizing accountability and repair.¹²⁰

Establish Robust Accountability

Effective accountability requires comprehensive reforms: mandate comprehensive use-of-force data collection and public reporting with standardized definitions and independent verification;¹²¹ establish civilian oversight bodies with subpoena authority, disciplinary power, and independent investigative capacity;¹²² reform qualified immunity through legislation facilitating civil rights litigation;¹²³ implement early warning systems identifying officers with problematic use-of-force patterns;¹²⁴ eliminate performance metrics emphasizing arrest volume, replacing them with indicators prioritizing community satisfaction and harm minimization;¹²⁵ and require external independent investigations of all deaths and serious injuries.¹²⁶

Conclusion

The accumulated empirical evidence converges on a clear conclusion: police militarization in the United States is associated with increased civilian harm including deaths, serious injuries, expanded criminal justice contact, and community-wide trauma without corresponding crime reduction or officer safety benefits. Large-scale quantitative analyses linking federal equipment transfers and tactical deployments to elevated lethal force, increased police killings, and heightened violence risks directly contradict institutional justifications.¹²⁷

Militarization's harms concentrate systematically in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, where militarized units deploy disproportionately even controlling for crime rates.¹²⁸ This racialized and class-based concentration reveals militarization as a structural inequality mechanism rather than neutral security response. Through tactical escalation generating violent confrontations, legitimacy erosion undermining community cooperation, concentrated enforcement channeling residents into mass incarceration, and cumulative trauma impeding health and

development, militarization produces and reproduces disadvantage in precisely those communities already most marginalized.¹²⁹

The empirical record provides no support for arguments that militarization represents a necessary security-liberty tradeoff. Studies consistently find militarization delivers neither enhanced crime control nor protected liberties; instead, it generates increased violence, diminished constitutional protections, eroded community trust, and impaired public safety effectiveness.¹³⁰ Alternative approaches emphasizing procedural justice, community partnership, de-escalation, and investment in structural supports demonstrate potential for achieving superior safety outcomes without militarization's profound harms.¹³¹

Policy implications follow directly: federal equipment transfer programs should substantially restrict weaponized equipment transfers; militarized tactics should be sharply limited to genuinely exigent circumstances; resources should redirect toward evidence-based community-centered alternatives including violence interruption, crisis response teams, and youth development; and robust accountability mechanisms including comprehensive data collection, civilian oversight, and reformed legal doctrines are essential.¹³²

Critically, these reforms must be understood as components of broader transformations addressing structural inequalities making punitive militarized responses appear normal or inevitable. Sustainable public safety depends on healthy, economically secure communities with strong institutions, effective informal social control, and genuine partnerships with accountable, rights-respecting law enforcement.¹³³ The choice facing policymakers is not between security and liberty but between militarized paradigms delivering neither and evidence-based alternatives achieving both. The empirical record is sufficiently clear:

demilitarization coupled with investment in community-centered strategies and structural supports represents a more effective, equitable, and rights-respecting path to public safety than current militarized approaches.¹³⁴

¹ Peter B. Kraska, "Militarization and Policing—Its Relevance to 21st Century Police," *Policing* 1, no. 4 (2007): 501–513.

² Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).

³ Peter B. Kraska and Victor E. Kappeler, "Militarizing American Police: The Rise and Normalization of Paramilitary Units," *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1–18

⁴ Defense Logistics Agency, "Law Enforcement Support Office (LESO) Program," accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.dla.mil/Disposition-Services/Offers/Law-Enforcement/Public-Information/>

⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home: The Excessive Militarization of American Policing* (New York: ACLU Foundation, 2014).

⁶ Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁷ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety or Reduce Crime but May Harm Police Reputation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 37 (2018): 9181–9186

⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

⁹ Sirry M. Alang et al., "Police Brutality and Black Health: Setting the Agenda for Public Health Scholars," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 5 (2017): 662–665.

¹⁰ Peter B. Kraska, "Militarization and Policing—Its Relevance to 21st Century Police."

¹¹ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

¹² Peter B. Kraska and Victor E. Kappeler, "Militarizing American Police."

¹³ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*

¹⁴ Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice, "From Warriors to Guardians: Recommitting American Police Culture to Democratic Ideals," *New Perspectives in Policing Bulletin* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2015).

¹⁵ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence: The Case of the 1033 Program," *Research & Politics* 4, no. 2 (2017): 1–7.

¹⁶ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

¹⁷ National Police Research Platform, "Officer Surveys on Organizational Culture and Tactical Training" (2012–2020).

¹⁸ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015).

¹⁹ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

²⁰ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence."

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kenneth Lowande and Casey Delehanty, "Police Militarization and the Use of Lethal Force," working paper, University of Michigan, 2018

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Matthew Desmond, Andrew V. Papachristos, and David S. Kirk, "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting in the Black Community," *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (2016): 857–876

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Rohini J. Haar et al., "Death, Injury and Disability from Kinetic Impact Projectiles in Crowd-Control Settings: A Systematic Review," *BMJ Open* 7, no. 12 (2017): e018154.

³⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*

³⁶ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

³⁷ Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*.

³⁸ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Victor M. Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Tom R. Tyler and Jeffrey Fagan, "Legitimacy and Cooperation: Why Do People Help the Police Fight Crime in Their Communities?," *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 6, no. 1 (2008): 231–275

⁴² Matthew Desmond et al., "Police Violence and Citizen Crime Reporting."

⁴³ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁴⁴ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.

⁴⁵ Dick M. Carpenter II et al., *Policing for Profit: The Abuse of Civil Asset Forfeiture*, 2nd ed. (Arlington, VA: Institute for Justice, 2015).

⁴⁶ John L. Worrall, "Addicted to the Drug War: The Role of Civil Asset Forfeiture as a Budgetary Necessity in Contemporary Law Enforcement," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 29, no. 3 (2001): 171–187.

⁴⁷ Jacob Bor et al., "Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects on the Mental Health of Black Americans: A Population-Based, Quasi-Experimental Study," *The Lancet* 392, no. 10144 (2018): 302–310.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Sirry M. Alang et al., "Police Brutality and Black Health."

⁴⁹ Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁵⁰ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence"; Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁵¹ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁵² Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence."

⁵³ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Earl et al., "Protest Under Fire? Explaining the Policing of Protest," *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 4 (2003): 581–606.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵⁶ Rod K. Brunson and Jody Miller, "Young Black Men and Urban Policing in the United States," *British Journal of Criminology* 46, no. 4 (2006): 613–640.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁵⁸ Forrest Stuart, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Dick M. Carpenter II et al., *Policing for Profit*.

⁵⁹ Dorothy Roberts, "The Social and Moral Cost of Mass Incarceration in African American Communities," *Stanford Law Review* 56, no. 5 (2004): 1271–1305.

⁶⁰ Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, "Life-Course Desisters? Trajectories of Crime Among Delinquent Boys Followed to Age 70," *Criminology* 41, no. 3 (2003): 555–592.

⁶¹ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Alexandra Natapoff, *Punishment Without Crime: How Our Massive Misdemeanor System Traps the Innocent and Makes America More Unequal* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

⁶⁵ Forrest Stuart, *Down, Out, and Under Arrest*.

⁶⁶ Bernard E. Harcourt, *Illusion of Order: The False Promise of Broken Windows Policing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁶⁷ Bruce Western, *Punishment and Inequality in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; Jeff Manza and Christopher Uggen, *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶⁹ International Association of Chiefs of Police, "Statement on Military Equipment and Law Enforcement," accessed February 19, 2026,

<https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/military-equipment>.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Kenneth Lowande and Casey Delehanty, "Police Militarization and the Use of Lethal Force."

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Franklin E. Zimring, "Continuity and Change in the American Crime Decline," in *Understanding Crime Trends: Workshop Report*, ed. Arthur S. Goldberger and Richard Rosenfeld (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2008), 153–172.

⁷⁵ International Association of Chiefs of Police, "Statement on Military Equipment."

⁷⁶ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

⁷⁷ Edward Lawson Jr., "Police Militarization and the Use of Lethal Force," *Political Research Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2019): 177–189.

⁷⁸ Tom R. Tyler and Jeffrey Fagan, "Legitimacy and Cooperation."

⁷⁹ Anthony A. Braga et al., "The Effects of Hot Spots Policing on Crime: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Justice Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2014): 633–663.

⁸⁰ Jonathan P. Caulkins and Peter Reuter, "How Drug Enforcement Affects Drug Prices," *Crime and Justice* 39, no. 1 (2010): 213–271.

⁸¹ Lorraine Mazerolle et al., "Legitimacy in Policing: A Systematic Review," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 12, no. 1 (2016): 1–147.

⁸² Rohini J. Haar et al., "Death, Injury and Disability from Kinetic Impact Projectiles."

⁸³ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

⁸⁴ Rohini J. Haar et al., "Death, Injury and Disability from Kinetic Impact Projectiles."

⁸⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Jacob Bor et al., "Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects."

⁸⁸ Nia Heard-Garris et al., "Transmitting Trauma: A Systematic Review of Vicarious Racism and Child Health," *Social Science & Medicine* 199 (2018): 230–240.

⁸⁹ Jacob Bor et al., "Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects."

⁹⁰ Nia Heard-Garris et al., "Transmitting Trauma."

⁹¹ Jacob Bor et al., "Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects."

⁹² David Williams and Selina Mohammed, "Discrimination and Racial Disparities in Health: Evidence and Needed Research," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 32, no. 1 (2009): 20–47.

⁹³ Joscha Legewie and Merlin Schaeffer, "Contested Boundaries: Explaining Where Ethnoracial Diversity Provokes Neighborhood Conflict," *American Journal of Sociology* 122, no. 1 (2016): 125–161.

⁹⁴ Defense Logistics Agency, "LESO Program."

⁹⁵ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

⁹⁶ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence."

⁹⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, "COPS Grant Programs," accessed February 19, 2026, <https://cops.usdoj.gov/grants>; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Grant Programs," accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.dhs.gov/grant-programs>.

⁹⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

⁹⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.; Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime, and Punishment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

¹⁰² John L. Worrall, "Addicted to the Drug War."

¹⁰³ Dick M. Carpenter II et al., *Policing for Profit*.

¹⁰⁴ David A. Harris, "The War on Terror, Local Police, and Immigration Enforcement: A Curious Tale of Police Power in Post-9/11 America," *Rutgers Law Journal* 38, no. 1 (2006): 1–59.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Urban Areas Security Initiative," accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.dhs.gov/urban-areas-security-initiative>

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Earl et al., "Protest Under Fire?"

¹⁰⁷ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence."

¹⁰⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

¹⁰⁹ National Research Council, *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing: The Evidence*, ed. Wesley Skogan and Kathleen Frydl (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2004).

¹¹⁰ Samuel Walker, "The New Paradigm of Police Accountability: The U.S. Justice Department 'Pattern or Practice' Suits in Context," *Saint Louis University Public Law Review* 22, no. 1 (2003): 3–52.

¹¹¹ American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Sue Rahr and Stephen K. Rice, "From Warriors to Guardians."

¹¹⁵ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report*.

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Butts et al., "Cure Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence," *Annual Review of Public Health* 36 (2015): 39–53.

¹¹⁷ Judgment and Decision Making Section, University of Colorado, "Crisis Intervention Teams: Systematic Review," accessed February 19, 2026.

¹¹⁸ Anthony A. Braga et al., "The Effects of Hot Spots Policing on Crime."

¹¹⁹ Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

¹²⁰ Heather Strang et al., "Restorative Justice Conferencing (RJC) Using Face-to-Face Meetings of Offenders and Victims: Effects on Offender Recidivism and Victim Satisfaction. A Systematic Review," *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 9, no. 1 (2013): 1–59

¹²¹ National Research Council, *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing*

¹²² Samuel Walker, "The New Paradigm of Police Accountability."

¹²³ Joanna C. Schwartz, "How Qualified Immunity Fails," *Yale Law Journal* 127, no. 1 (2017): 2–81.

¹²⁴ Samuel Walker, "The New Paradigm of Police Accountability."

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety"; Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence."

¹²⁸ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

¹²⁹ Casey Delehanty et al., "Militarization and Police Violence"; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹³⁰ Jonathan Mummolo, "Militarization Fails to Enhance Police Safety."

¹³¹ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report*; Lorraine Mazerolle et al., "Legitimacy in Policing."

¹³² American Civil Liberties Union, *War Comes Home*; President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report*.

¹³³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Sirry M. Alang et al., "Police Brutality and Black Health."

¹³⁴ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report*.