

Evidence suggests the militarization of police forces leads to more civilian deaths.



Why do some police officers resort to lethal force so quickly? In new research, [Edward Lawson Jr](#) finds that this growing tendency is closely linked to the increasing militarization of American law enforcement. A more militarized worldview, he writes, leads to police departments acquiring more military equipment and pushes officers towards the use of lethal force instead of other, potentially non-lethal, options.

On June 19, 2018, a rookie police officer in suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, stopped a silver Chevy Cruz that matched the description of a vehicle involved in an earlier crime. While the driver exited the car and got on the ground, 17-year-old [Antwan Rose](#) and another passenger ran. The officer fired three shots at Rose, striking him with all three. He died in hospital.

The basic storyline of this incident is all too familiar now: a police officer (or several) confronts a civilian with suspicion of some wrongdoing. The civilian fails to comply, actively resists, or simply moves too quickly, and is killed. In the case of the 2016 shooting death of [Philando Castile](#) in Minnesota, a police officer—again during a traffic stop, this time for a broken brake light—drew his weapon and fired six times as Castile reached for his driver's license. Similar to Antwan Rose, on March 18th in California, [Stephon Clark](#) fled police on foot, but eventually surrendered. A police officer shot him after mistaking his phone—which was in his hand, raised above his head—for a gun.

Why do some police officers resort to lethal force so quickly? Why do police kill, even in situations where their lives—or the lives of others—do not seem to be in danger? The militarization of American law enforcement has become the topic of much discussion—among scholars, in the media, and in the general public—over the last several years, and has become the target of those who desire reforms to reduce the number of civilian deaths. However, most of the scholarship on militarization is limited, either focusing on [certain specific behaviors](#) that result from militarization, on the existence of police [Special Response Teams](#) (also known as Special Weapons and Tactics or SWAT teams) as a way to capture the spread of militarization, or on county-level, but geographically narrow and theoretically limited, use of federal programs that allow police departments to [acquire surplus military equipment](#).

In [new research](#), I argue that militarization is a psychological process that affects individual officers as well as departments. This process involves the adoption of a more militaristic world view, where militarism is the emphasis on the use of force as an acceptable—or even desirable—option to address problems. Militarization may affect the behavior of individual officers in one, or both, or two ways.

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Edward Lawson Jr of the University of South Carolina writes that evidence suggests the militarization of police forces leads to more civilian deaths.

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“Protest in response to the Philando Castile shooting” by Fibonacci Blue is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Imagine that, when a police officer encounters a civilian or suspect, every possible action that officer may take is on a continuum from least to most violent. Of course, not every possible action is legally or morally acceptable, so on that continuum there is a window of options the officer believes to be acceptable choices for initiating the encounter. From that window the officer picks an initial action. If the civilian complies, the process ends. If the civilian resists, the officer escalates, moving more to the violent end of the continuum with each action until reaching a resolution. Militarization either moves the window of acceptable options toward the most violent side, moves the officer’s initial choice of action within that window toward the more violent side, or both. The result is that officers reach lethal force more quickly.

Militarized police departments see themselves not as public servants upholding the law, but as an army fighting a war against a dangerous and invisible enemy and occupying territory that is hostile to them. To carry out these actions, the leaders of those departments desire military equipment—vehicles, weapons, body armor, and so forth—because it provides better protection from the enemy and promotes both more efficient use of force and more fear among the public. And, when departments are more militarized, their officers should kill more people.

My statistical analysis supports this argument, controlling for other possible drivers of police killings such as the racial composition of the area, the total population, the level of poverty, and the rate of violent crime, using cross-national data that includes law enforcement agencies from over 40 states quarterly from the last quarter of 2014 to the last quarter of 2016. I find that, as a police department’s militarization increases, so does the number of civilians killed.

Figure 1 displays the expected number of police killings at varying levels of militarization, which I measure using police department acquisitions through the federal ‘1033’ program. This is a program that allows law enforcement agencies to obtain surplus military equipment from the federal government, paying only the cost of transport. Think of it as a backwards Amazon Prime: the item is free, but they pay for shipping. I obtained data on the number of civilians killed by police for this period from [Fatal Encounters](#), a project collecting information about victims of police violence since 2000.

Figure 1– Predicted Deaths by Militarization

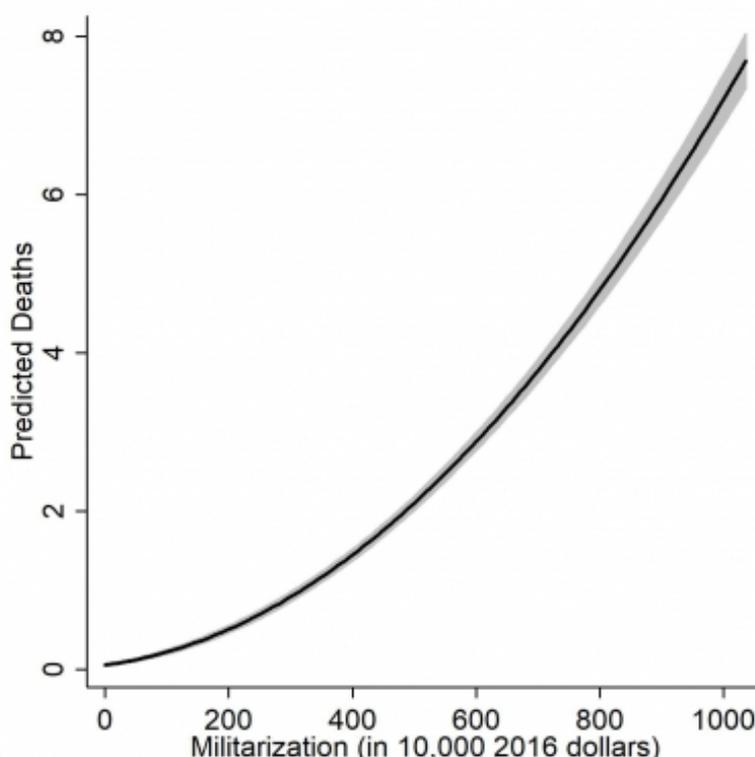


Figure 1 shows a clear association between this measure of militarization and the number of civilians killed by police. Though more work needs to be done to determine the causes of militarization and how, specifically, militarization manifests in police officers and departments, my research shows that as police departments become more militarized, their officers kill more civilians.

- This article is based on the paper, '[Police Militarization and the Use of Lethal Force](#)' in *Political Research Quarterly*.

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Edward Lawson Jr is a PhD candidate in the University of South Carolina Department of Political Science. His research interests are in public administration, American politics, politics of race, and policing. His dissertation is on the causes and consequences of police militarization.