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Causes and Consequences of Police Militarization

Dissertation Abstract

After the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, and many other incidents of police violence that followed, the militarization of policing and the use of violence by police became the subjects of contentious debate among the public, policymakers, and scholars. Research on these subjects necessary to inform the debate has been lacking. This work examines the causes and effects of police militarization in the United States. Specifically, I argue that militarization is a response to perceived threat from minority racial groups, but the relationship between racial demographics and militarization is curvilinear. Militarized begin to see themselves as soldiers fighting on the front line of a war rather than public servants, which causes goal divergence between the public and police. Although the public expects police to only use lethal force in extreme circumstances, militarized police use lethal force against civilians more quickly, resulting in more civilian deaths. Police departments should respond to more frequent civilian deaths by implementing policy solutions, such as body-worn cameras, that theoretically allow for easier monitoring of police behavior and overcome the principal-agent problem.