



## How are Police Using Drones?

Across the country, police departments are using myriad means and resources at their disposal to stock up on drones. According to the most recent tally on the [Atlas of Surveillance](#) (a project of EFF and the University of Nevada), at least 1,172 police departments nationwide are using drones. And over time, we can expect more law enforcement agencies to deploy them. A flood of [COVID relief money](#), [civil asset forfeiture money](#), [federal grants](#), or [military surplus transfers](#) enable more departments to acquire these flying spies.

But how are police departments using them?

A new [law](#) in Minnesota mandates the yearly release of information related to police use of drones, and gives us a partial window into how law enforcement use them on a daily basis. The [2021 report](#) released by the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension documents use of drones in the state during the year 2020.

According to the report, 93 law enforcement agencies from across the state deployed drones 1,171 times in 2020—with an accumulative price tag of almost \$1 million. The report shows that the vast majority of the drone deployments are not used for the [public safety disasters](#) that so many departments use to justify drone use. Rather, almost half (506) were just for the purpose of “training officers.” Other uses included information collection based on reasonable suspicion of unspecified crimes (185), requests from other government agencies unrelated to law enforcement (41), road crash investigation (39), and preparation for and monitoring of public events (6 and

12, respectively). There were zero deployments to counter the risk of terrorism. Police deployed drones 352 times in the aftermath of an “emergency” and 27 times for “disaster” response.

This data isn’t terribly surprising. After all, we’ve spent years seeing police drones being deployed in more and more mundane policing situations and in punitive ways.

After the New York City Police Department accused one racial justice activist, Derrick Ingram, of injuring an officer’s ears by speaking too loudly through his megaphone at a protest, [police flew drones by his apartment window](#)—a clear act of intimidation. The government also [flew surveillance drones over multiple protests](#) against police racism and violence during the summer of 2020. When police fly drones over a crowd of protestors, they chill free speech and political expression through fear of reprisal and retribution from police. Police could easily apply face surveillance technology to footage collected by a surveillance drone that passed over a crowd, creating a preliminary list of everyone that attended that day’s protest.

[As we argued back in May 2020](#), drones don’t disappear once the initial justification for purchasing them no longer seems applicable. Police will invent ways to use their invasive toys—which means that drone deployment finds its way into situations where they are not needed, including everyday policing and the surveillance of First Amendment-protected activities. In the case of Minnesota’s drone deployment, police can try to hide behind their use of drones as a glorified training tool, but the potential for their invasive use will always hang over the heads (literally) of state residents.

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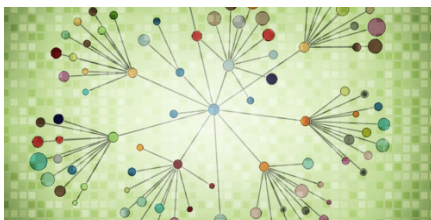
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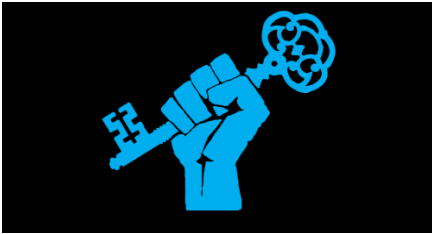


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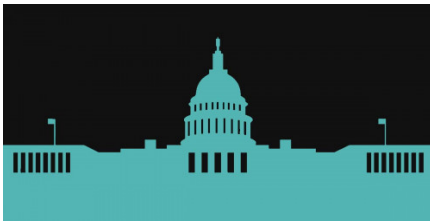
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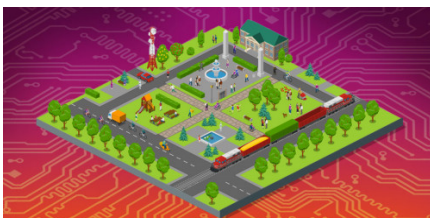
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*This post is part of a series on Mastodon and the fediverse. We also have a post on [privacy and security on Mastodon](#), and [why the fediverse will be great—if we don't screw it up](#), and more are on the way. You can [follow EFF on Mastodon](#)...*

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