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Cops find themselves in arms race with criminals


- Story Highlights
- Cops train to match firepower of crooks toting automatic weapons
- About a third of Palm Beach County deputies carry semiautomatic weapons
- Deputies see automatic weapons in street "on a daily basis," sergeant says
- Police, gun control groups blame trend on 2004 end of assault weapons ban

By Susan Candiotti
CNN

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida (CNN) -- The war on the streets is escalating. As gangs and other criminals pack more firepower, police departments say they find themselves in an arms race.

The officers say they need to level the playing field to survive. And so, on a bright October day about a dozen Palm Beach County sheriff's deputies brought out their big guns at the local firing range.

Rifles crackled. Shell casings flew. Bullets sailed at 3,200 feet per second through paper targets set up a football field's length away.

The sharpshooters weren't training for a SWAT team. These were the deputies who patrol the streets and roads from the glittery Gold Coast to the swamps of the Everglades.  [Watch cops practice firing the big guns »](#)

The fatal shooting in September of a Miami-Dade police officer by a man using an assault weapon put all South Florida police departments on edge. Two other officers were wounded by the gunfire.

"It's not nice we have to arm ourselves like the soldiers in Iraq," said Sgt. Laurie Pfeil, who supervises a sheriff's road patrol in Palm Beach County and is now certified to carry a semiautomatic AR-15 rifle on the job. It's the civilian version of the military's M-16 used by U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

"We are like soldiers. It is a war," says Sgt Pfeil.

Across the country, at least 62 police officers have been gunned down this year -- a record pace, said Robert Tessaro, the associate director for law enforcement relations for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

As a result, the Brady organization supports police officers arming themselves with high-powered weapons "to protect themselves and their communities," he said.

"We're having more than one officer shot and killed a week. It's just outrageous that officers are being targeted," he said. "It's something I think all Americans should be outraged about."

Although the gun lobby disagrees, Tessaro lays the blame squarely on lawmakers who allowed the assault weapons ban to expire in 2004.

Cops are being trained on semiautomatic weapons, which fire a single shot at a time and are more accurate. Some semiautomatic weapons can fire with pinpoint accuracy from as far as 100 yards away. The magazines used by law enforcement typically carry 20 or 30 rounds, adding to the ability to better respond under fire.

Designed to shoot from the hip, fully automatic assault rifles such as the [AK-47](#) can spray at a rate of up to 600 rounds a minute.

There's no doubt that urban street warfare, aided by a proliferation of cheap automatic weapons, has come even to Palm Beach County, once high society's vacation mecca and a retirement destination for northern snowbirds.

Assault weapons have been used to kill eight people and wound 25 here over the last two years. Authorities estimate there are about 160 gangs who boast around 7000 members.

"They don't have .38s anymore. They have AK-47s. ...They have automatic weapons now," said Sgt. Pfeil.

So the Palm Beach Sheriff's office, like many others across the county, is training and arming everyone on the force with semiautomatic assault weapons. Many officers say it's about time.

"It's different now. It's shootings on a weekly basis. Ten years ago, that just didn't happen," said Pfeil. "They don't get out and run from us anymore. They stop, and they're shooting at us."

Miami's police department also is in the process of arming every officer with an assault rifle.

"It's a little bit embarrassing that we're engaged in this, but what is the alternative?" said Miami police Chief John Timoney. He said gangs, in particular, are getting their hands on high-powered weapons with apparent ease.

"The streets of South Florida are being flooded by AK-47s and assault weapons from old Soviet bloc countries. It's driven the price down, making the availability greater," said Chief Timoney.

The Miami police department evidence room has seized AK-47s, AR-15s and an assortment of other automatic and semiautomatic weapons piled on shelves from floor to ceiling.

Chief Timoney says he started noticing an increase since the federal assault weapon ban lapsed in 2004. Since then, he says homicides in the city of Miami involving assault weapons have been up -- 18 percent last year and 20 percent this year.

The Miami Police Department said 15 of its 79 homicides last year involved assault weapons, up from the year before. So far this year, 12 of 60 killings have involved the high-powered arms.

Tessaro said he recently attended a conference for the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Among the crime scene tape, squad cars, and other law enforcement gear offered for sale was the latest in high-powered assault weapons.

But it takes time and money to arm everyone. In the case of Palm Beach Sheriff's office, about one-third of its deputies carry assault weapons. It could take a year to get everyone equipped.

Some officers aren't waiting.

Palm Beach Sheriff's deputy Carl Martin bought his own AR-15 and passed the required training.

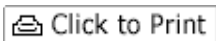
When his department offered him one of their weapons, he gave it up to someone else who was on the waiting list. "Because there's not enough to go around," he explained.

CNN's Patrick Oppmann, Rich Phillips and Ann O'Neill contributed to this story.

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