

Testimony of Wiley Price
“Oversight of Federal Programs for Equipping State
and Local Law Enforcement Agencies”
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
September 9, 2014

Good morning. My name is Wiley Price, I'm the staff photojournalist at the St. Louis American newspaper in St. Louis, Mo. I'd like to thank Sen. McCaskill for inviting me to share my recent experiences in Ferguson, Mo. at this Senate hearing. The shooting death of Michael Brown, an unarmed teen aged by a Ferguson, Mo. police officer on Sat. Aug. 9, 2014 may very well become a turning point in moving us forward in changing the way policing is conducted in this country, especially in neighborhoods of people of color. First, mandatory body cameras for officers patrolling our streets to ensure accountability for the way citizens are addressed during routine stops. This policy would allow us to examine the methods police use during these stops. There are special challenges to policing in urban areas where there are strong feelings often negative about the conduct and role of the police. The uprisings in Ferguson are an example of inept and insensitive police behavior at the highest decision making level. It raises the question of how much force is appropriate to control a group of angry protesters armed initially with rocks, bottles, and later Molotov cocktails. What police used to defend themselves at the early stage of the confrontation was a high level of military weaponry not often seen on city streets in the United States. What we saw were large military style weapons including armoured vehicles normally seen on the national news during conflicts in Middle East war zones. Most Americans would not be so shocked if this were a response to an overt terrorist attack on an American city, but not during a spontaneous protest over the shooting of a young African American male by a white police officer while walking in the street in the middle of the day. Most believe that if we can spend this kind of money on weapons why not use those same resources to better train them for community policing and train them on how to best resolve conflict. If heavy military weapons are to be deployed they should be in the hands of trained officers subject to competent high level police command. This show of military might in Ferguson by the police only escalated the understandably strong feelings felt by the very people police are sworn to serve and protect. The days of unrest were followed by growing protest from people who already felt disrespected, and frustrated by local law enforcement on a daily basis.