

Urban Shield 2017: Report Card



Stop Urban Shield Coalition
September 2017

Summary

As an annual SWAT training and weapons expo organized by the Alameda County Sheriff's Office (ACSO) and hosted in the Bay Area, Urban Shield has come under national scrutiny for its role in militarizing police forces, perpetuating racism and xenophobia, and squandering millions of dollars that could be spent on effective emergency response and community preparedness programs.

Members of the Stop Urban Shield Coalition sat on a time limited taskforce that was convened by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors (AC BOS) in January 2017 to assess the impacts of Urban Shield. The taskforce members were invited to observe Urban Shield 2017. As the Stop Urban Shield Coalition is primarily concerned with the impacts of Urban Shield on communities, members who observed Urban Shield 2017 provided their assessment and compiled this report.

This report card assesses five main areas of concern and ranks each with a grade based on how the areas were observed in Urban Shield 2017. The ranks are based on letter grades, with "A" denoting the most favorable and "F" the least favorable. The report card also assesses how Urban Shield has implemented a set of 12 Principles and Guidelines that were mandated by the AC BOS.

The findings are that Urban Shield dramatically fails in addressing three of the five concern areas: Militarization; Racism, Xenophobia, and Culture; and Surveillance. Additionally, Urban Shield is extremely poor in the remaining two areas of Financial Interests and De-escalation.

Observers also found that the ACSO seemingly willfully ignored the 12 Principles and Guidelines, as the Urban Shield weapons expo and training scenarios were in violation of the majority of the guidelines.

All images in this report card were taken by observers at Urban Shield 2017.



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Police Militarization

Grade: **F**

The foremost concern with Urban Shield has been that the scenarios, trainings, weaponry, and tactics used contribute to the increasing trend of police militarization. Despite claims from the ACSO that the event is geared toward training police officers and personnel for a range of situations, observations documented by Stop Urban Shield members show that both the weapons expo and exercises are entirely dominated by a militarized approach.



Observations from the Weapons Expo:

- Gun and surveillance booths dominated the vendor show. The weaponry was intimidating and reinforces a harmful model for emergency preparedness.
- Equipment was promoted with phrases like: “Military-grade” is “better,” and with sales points that technology was developed at Fort Meade, Livermore, Los Alamos, etc.
- Sniper rifle raffle rewarded participants with military-style weaponry
- There was a “Special” on Glock guns for Urban Shield

Observations from the Training Scenarios:

- During a debrief of a scenario, one of the military personnel repeatedly stated that “our worlds are starting to collide” – military and police. Military participants regularly referenced experiences they had in Iraq and Afghanistan, telling police officers to be prepared for those kinds of situations, including dealing with Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and guerrilla warfare.
- SWAT teams ambushed first on terrorist role players, who were patrolling a rural area.
- A Colombian colonel serving as an evaluator stated his preference to wanting police to have the same approach and capabilities as the military.



- One participant told observers that the types of trainings Urban Shield provides for SWAT are necessary because the "politically watered down trainings" they receive elsewhere are not sufficient.
- Military fatigues and army camouflage were ubiquitous throughout the trainings.
- Many participants – vendors, role players, evaluators, SWAT team members – are current or ex-military.
- The video at the start framed militarization as deep service, honor, protection and work that takes place shoulder to shoulder in their shared fight against evil.
- An FBI personnel serving as a trainer/evaluator repeatedly told SWAT officers that police "are the only ones who can stop this," and "you are the only ones who can help," referring to emergency situations, despite real-life incidents demonstrating that community members often are the quickest and decisive first responders.
- Urban Shield solicited volunteers to play passive victims who are "wounded, frightened bystanders, or disoriented people." In reality, bystanders typically become the most effective first responders,¹ but scenarios instead reinforced police as actors and everyone else as "disoriented."
- In at least one scenario (airplane bomb), SWAT treated victims (passengers) as potential hostiles, cuffing them before bringing them off the plane "just in case." The cuffing was done only by the Berkeley Police Department, but scenario organizer thought this was fine, so long as they ultimately "neutralized" the shooter(s), as how SWAT teams carry out their work is up to protocol & practice of individual police units.
- Role of EMTs was minimal. In most of the scenarios observed, EMTs were absent. In one scenario (nightclub) they were "integrated" (i.e. brought in after SWAT team had entered first). SWAT team directed them where they wanted them to go.
- Real-life incidents on which scenarios were supposedly based were mostly in other countries (17 out of 29). It does not seem contextual to the US, and certainly not to daily life & needs in our communities.

¹ Why Ordinary Citizens Are Acting As First Responders in Houston. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/ordinary-citizens-are-first-responders/538233/>



Racism, Xenophobia, and the Culture of Urban Shield

Grade: **F**

Both the Urban Shield trainings and weapons expo have come under intense criticism for the display and use of racist stereotyping and propaganda materials. Although a t-shirt vendor selling items with the offensive phrase “Black Rifles Matter” was barred from the expo after public outcry, observers noted that much of the expo and trainings were rooted in a deeply polarizing and fear-based mentality. The program and trainings are necessarily structured around a “nexus to terrorism” mandated by the federal government, which contribute to an anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiment.



Observations from the Fair and Training Scenarios:

- A far-right, extremist militia organization known as the Oath Keepers participated in the Urban Shield fair, and was seen stationed under an official Alameda County Sheriff’s Office tent. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes the Oath Keepers as “one of the largest radical antigovernment groups in the U.S. today. While it claims only to be defending the Constitution, the entire organization is based on a set of baseless conspiracy theories about the federal government working to destroy the liberties of Americans.”²
- The “us versus them” and “good guys versus bad guys” terminology was pervasive throughout
- A military evaluator recently back from Afghanistan stated “you’re seeing here what we see there, it’s coming up over the border,” implying that immigrants crossing into the U.S. are akin to a military threat.
- All “victims” in aircraft scenario are white
- Image of mentally ill in hospital scenario was heavily stereotyped

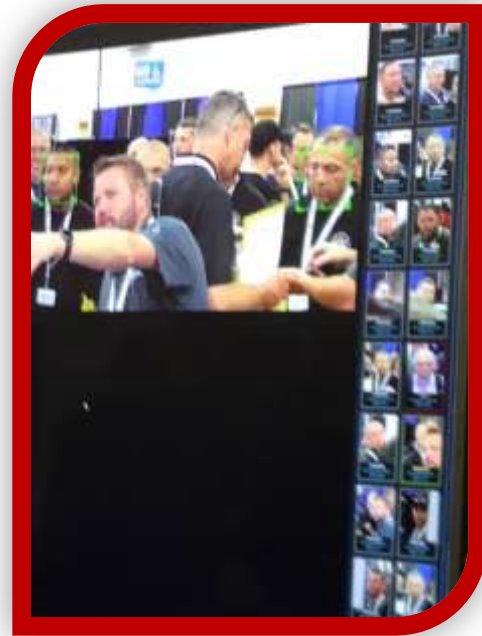
² Southern Poverty Law Center’s profile of the Oath Keepers. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/oath-keepers>



Surveillance

Grade: **F**

A feature of Urban Shield has been the use and showcasing of highly intrusive surveillance technology. In January of 2017, the AC BOS passed a set of 11 Principles and Guidelines that aimed to mitigate the negative impacts of Urban Shield, with one guideline barring “surveillance training.” Despite this policy, Urban Shield continues to include both the use of surveillance technology, as well as surveillance training.



Observations from the Weapons Expo:

- Dressed in military camouflage, California Highway Patrol accompanied a salesperson to test a motion detector that is placed on the outside of a building wall. It shows in red dots where the “targets” are inside of the building.
- Gemalto, a multinational security company, showcased facial recognition technology that will be piloted at Santa Rita Jail this year.

Observations from the Training Scenarios:

- Urban Shield featured a surveillance drone seminar that was explicitly a training. Police use of drones (i.e. for drug raids, not for search and rescue) was central to this seminar, which ended with a song: “Every step you take, every move you make, I’ll be watching you.”
- A Verizon “surveillance trailer” was used in three observed scenarios.
- Thin floor camera on stick could be slid underneath door to see what’s happening in a room, before SWAT enters.
- The Community Emergency Response Team training involved a cell phone app by which neighborhood responders reported events that fed into a platform run by the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center (NCRIC), a local fusion center that has come under criticism for compiling massive databases of information gathered through surveillance and discriminatory reporting practices. Information compiled by NCRIC is shared with federal law enforcement agencies.



Financial Interests

Grade: **D**

The weapons expo overwhelmingly features military equipment and weaponry, exposing the shallowness of claims purporting Urban Shield to be concerned with disaster preparedness. Despite the AC BOS barring the sale or transfer of firearms at the expo, the ACSO raffled off a sniper rifle, making the \$20 tickets available to anyone in attendance.



Observations from the Weapons Expo:

- At Axon booth: Observer: “You paid a lot for this booth.” AXON: “ACSO is a big customer” Observer: “And you want to keep it that way.” AXON: “That’s all stuff that goes on behind the scenes.”
- The main purpose of the vendor show is to market products for sale. The majority of the vendors observers spoke with were seeking to get their products into use during the scenarios, and follow up with police departments after the expo to make sales.
- Caterpillar had a tractor at vendor show, which was “technology in search of a purpose,” according to the vendor representative.
- The trainings included Execushield, a group of mercenaries who provide armed security to corporate leaders in places like Mexico, Peru, and the Philippines.



De-escalation

Grade: **D**

With increased attention to police involved shootings across the U.S., many have condemned the “shoot first, ask questions later” approach of law enforcement that has led to serious injury and death. For instance, a study of all killings by police officers in 2015 found that at least one in three involved the death of someone who showed signs of mental health issues.³ The American Public Health Association published a statement in November 2016 categorizing “law enforcement as a public health hazard,”⁴ and recommended approaches to a range of situations that utilize de-escalation while decreasing police contact. However, observers found that the trainings of Urban Shield, overwhelmingly and nearly exclusively, encourage police officers to “shoot first, ask questions later.”



Observations from the Training Scenarios:

- Of 36 SWAT scenarios, only four supposedly rewarded de-escalation according to the Sheriff’s Office. De-escalation tactics were difficult to recognize in those scenarios.
- An evaluator stated that “it’s an automatic shoot” if a suspect approaches an officer.

³ *Distraught People, Deadly Results*. The Washington Post, 2015.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/investigative/2015/06/30/distraught-people-deadly-results/?utm_term=.dca4fa6eb449

⁴ <https://apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2016/12/09/law-enforcement-violence-as-a-public-health-issue>

- One U.S. based scenario was at Children's Hospital, based on a 2010 incident where a man ran into the hospital with a gun. In real life it was dealt with using non-lethal force.⁵ However the SWAT team was not given non-lethal force to use or any opportunities for de-escalation during the scenario. The only implied course of action was “shoot to neutralize” or “shoot to kill.”
- It was clear that none of the scenarios were designed to practice or train for de-escalation.
- A baton vendor was marketing the batons as peacekeeping tools that limit legal liability for police. They had dangerous attachments, including blades.
- The competition score sheet does not reward survival of all parties in ANY scenario.
- “Suspect” role players in observed scenarios were ordered to obey whatever command they received, thus not testing de-escalation skills.
- No time in Urban Shield format to carry out de-escalation, with just 15-20 minutes of actual role play in each scenario. De-escalation is often a much longer process.
- No meaningful discussion or critical engagement in post-scenario debriefs, e.g. “what might you have done differently to result in no deaths.” Rather, most debriefs were versions of “good job!”

⁵ <http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Gunman-Grabs-ER-Worker-at-Oakland-Childrens-Hospital-99621479.html>



The 12 Principles and Guidelines

As a result of the increased controversy facing Alameda County for hosting Urban Shield, the Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a set of twelve guidelines for Urban Shield to follow. Although the Stop Urban Shield Coalition believes that the harms and negative impact of Urban Shield cannot be mitigated through implementation of these guidelines, observers noted that the **Sheriff's Office is in non-compliance** with the majority of the guidelines.

Expand community involvement and awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The far-right extremist militia, the Oath Keepers, were stationed in the Urban Shield Fair with the Sheriff's Office.
Urban Shield will be free from racist stereo-typing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The "terrorists" in at least one scenario were wearing scarves traditionally worn by people across many Arab and Muslim countries. Strategic Operations was present at Urban Shield, despite the fact they were denied a contract with Urban Shield by the AC BOS because of their mannequins that promoted racist, stereotyping images of Arabs, Muslims, and people of color as "terrorists" and "criminals."
Work to expand training the medical profession for critical incidents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In observed scenarios, observers noted that training for medical personnel was minimal, limited, and subject to the complete command and direction of SWAT and law enforcement.
Urban Shield will not include surveillance training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A surveillance drone training took place. Weapons expo booths featured surveillance equipment that was used in several SWAT exercise scenarios.
Continue to examine new technology and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Urban Shield will not include crowd control training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No observed crowd control training this year
Continue to evaluate existing equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Urban Shield will exclude any and all vendors who display derogatory or racist messages in any form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All participants of the weapons expo were given a "Blue Lives Matter" pin Strategic Operations was present at Urban Shield, despite the fact they were denied a contract with Urban Shield by the AC BOS because of their mannequins that promoted racist, stereotyping images of Arabs, Muslims, and people of color as "terrorists" and "criminals."
Urban Shield will exclude the sale or transfer of any assault weapons and firearms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ACSO raffled off a rifle at the weapons expo Weapons vendors continued to pursue sales of their products
Will exclude vendors displaying non-law enforcement related tactical uniforms and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No "non-law enforcement" uniforms and equipment. However, observers noted that the nature of the weapons expo made it clear that promoting military-grade weaponry and equipment was the primary goal, rather than promoting disaster response and preparedness.
Urban Shield will strive to maintain the finest first responder training possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Exclude participation from countries with documented human rights abuses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This year included participation of observers and evaluators from Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and Colombia—all countries with documented human rights abuses by their police/military.



Inside Urban Shield 2017





Conclusion

The following conclusions were made by observers:

- Urban Shield is fundamentally about “defeating the enemy.” This is primarily due to the federally mandated requirement that trainings and exercises of the program have a “nexus to terrorism.”
- Urban Shield is structurally unable to address concerns of police militarization, racism, and xenophobia, and is heavily steeped in a warfare culture.
- Though the most blatant and egregious displays of racist propaganda have been removed (e.g. “Black Rifles Matter”), Urban Shield still utilizes racist and Islamophobic stereotypes.
- Community preparedness and disaster response that is not based on a militarized threat were virtually none existent.
- The Alameda County Sheriff’s Office has failed to comply with Principles and Guidelines that were unanimously passed by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors; it is acting in bad faith.
- Lastly, observers concluded that while minor elements of Urban Shield can be modified to address concerns, it is impossible to reform Urban Shield to become beneficial for the communities of Alameda County.

