

More Police Departments Are Using Drones

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An armed robbery suspect hiding out in a camper in rural Michigan heard state troopers closing in, so he dashed into a field and crouched among 6-foot-tall cornstalks. What he didn't know was that police had eyes on him from above from a drone, [reports the Associated Press](https://phys.org/news/2017-11-drones-crime-fighting-tool-elusive.html). (<https://phys.org/news/2017-11-drones-crime-fighting-tool-elusive.html>) Drones are becoming an essential tool for law enforcement agencies, changing how officers carry out everyday tasks and bringing air surveillance to departments with limited budgets. The remote-controlled flying machines have been deployed to bust up a ring stealing bulldozers and backhoes from construction sites on the East Coast, to patrol beaches for sharks, and to scan neighborhoods for survivors in hurricane zones.

There are obstacles to overcome before drones can change policing like two-way radios did after World War II. The limitations aren't just their small size and battery life; federal regulations restrict how far they can go; and police face questions about how they plan to use the surveillance technology. The number of police, sheriff, fire and emergency agencies with drones doubled in 2016, with nearly 350 departments having them, says the Center for the Study of the Drone at Bard College in New York. Almost half were in places with fewer than 50,000 people, the study found. "For a lot of small, rural departments, it is a big change," said the center's Arthur Holland Michel. Drones allow police to do things that they never did even with helicopters, from working with arson investigators to measuring skid marks at car crashes, significantly cutting the time drivers spend waiting for roads to clear. Their greatest appeal for authorities is cost. A drone with an infrared camera can be had for less than \$20,000, while a police helicopter can cost well over \$1 million.
