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Description

U.S. police departments are adding unmanned drones, familiar tools overseas, to their arsenals, raising eyebrows among privacy advocates.

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"Drones Roam Skies of US Cities." Charles Hadlock, correspondent. NBC Nightly News. NBCUniversal
Drones Roam Skies of US Cities

LESTER HOLT, anchor:
Drones have become a familiar tool in US missions overseas. We've heard a lot about those remotely controlled eyes in the sky over the Middle East. Now some police departments here at home are adding drones to their arsenals and that's raising eyebrows among privacy advocates. We get our report tonight from NBC's Charles Hadlock.

CHARLES HADLOCK, reporting:
We've seen them in action in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Unmanned American drones are the high-tech fixtures of modern military warfare. And now their surveillance technology is about to be used in a whole new way at home. Miami-Dade police are among the first to test this new breed of aircraft.

Sergeant ANDREW COHEN (Miami-Dade Police Department): That thing like went up like a rocket.

HADLOCK: A UAV, an unmanned aerial vehicle with some of the same technology as military drones, but much smaller and lighter.

Sgt. COHEN: It has no weapons, it's not capable of any offensive or defensive. It's just a camera. Basically, it's a flying camera.

HADLOCK: Companies that make the UAVs claim they can be used in a manhunt as in this demonstration or in a standoff or hostage situation.

MICHAEL BUSCHER (Vanguard Defense Industries CEO): It gives them that ability to deploy something quickly in less than five minutes as opposed to a full-sized aircraft.

HADLOCK: And to know what to expect.

Sgt. COHEN: This gives us real-time data for the people on the ground to make decisions.

HADLOCK: In Montgomery County, Texas, the sheriff's department used federal homeland security money to buy a $300,000 helicopter drone, small enough to fit on a table.

RANDY McDANIEL (Montgomery County Sheriff's Office): It's so simple in its design and the objectives of it, you just wonder why anyone would choose not to have.
HADLOCK: Police helicopters have been flying around major cities for years, but critics say the prospect of unmanned drones with cameras peering into backyards and following people may be going too far.

TERRI BURKE: I think that they're an opportunity for fishing expeditions.

HADLOCK: Terri Burke with the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas says police drones may have a legitimate law enforcement purpose, but she fears they'll be too easy to misuse.

BURKE: In an era when we have warrantless searches and all this privacy intrusion, these drones are just an excuse to trample on the Constitution.

HADLOCK: Right now, only a handful of cities have plans to use unmanned drones, but manufacturers expect business to take off later this year when the FAA issues guidelines on when, how, and where these eyes in the sky can fly. Charles Hadlock, NBC News, Fort Worth.