

Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) 101:

How the Department of Homeland Security's counterterrorism grant program supercharges policing in our communities

What is the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI)? (pronounced "you-ah-see")

Founded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) after 9/11, UASI is a federal grant program that gives local and state agencies **\$615 million** per year for "counterterrorism" activities.¹ Police and other agencies use this money to purchase massive amounts of surveillance and policing technology. UASI is the biggest part of DHS's **Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP)**, which has funneled approximately **\$29 billion** in counterterrorism funds to local and state agencies since 2002.²

The Homeland Security Grant Program (including UASI) is managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which became part of DHS shortly after 9/11. FEMA usually manages climate-related and infrastructure emergencies, but by being responsible for administering these grants, FEMA also directly funds surveillance and policing technology contracts across the country.

Check out our report, ***DHS Open for Business***, to learn more about the role of corporations in expanding policing and surveillance in our communities and the DHS funding streams (like the Urban Area Security Initiative, or UASI) that provide millions in contracts for their products.



Law enforcement agencies use UASI funding to buy *DHS-authorized equipment*, including:

- Gunshot detection technology, like **ShotSpotter**, which has led to police murder and false arrests, and increased police presence in our neighborhoods.
- Automatic license plate readers and drones, which police use to track people's movements.
- Predictive policing software, from companies including Palantir³, which reinforces **racially-biased policing** and targets Black and Brown communities.
- Social media surveillance,⁴ which police use to monitor and criminalize protestors and Black, Brown, Muslim, and immigrant communities.
- Militarized police equipment and real-time police surveillance networks, like the **Domain Awareness System** in NYC, a **24/7 live feed of mass surveillance data** for the NYPD.

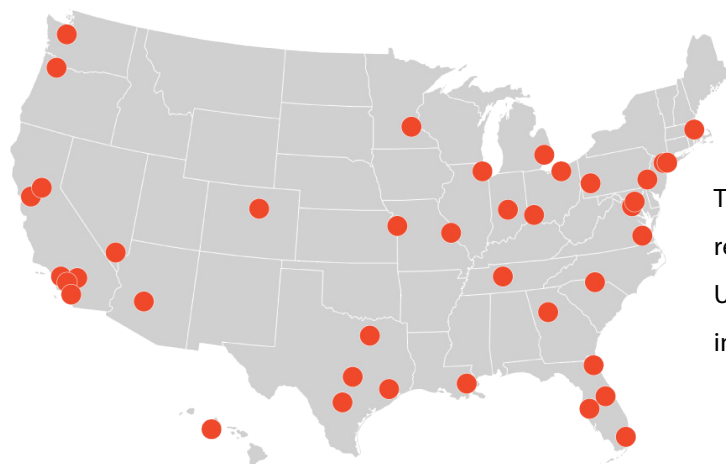
How does UASI fuel policing and surveillance in our communities?

Under DHS requirements, cities cannot receive any UASI funding unless they use a set percentage of the money for “law enforcement terrorism prevention activities” (**35 percent** in 2023, up from 30 percent the previous year). Cities rely on UASI grants, because they also fund emergency preparedness and disaster **equipment**, like city-wide emergency alert systems and funding for hospitals and fire departments. Essentially, in order to access funding for what cities need, they are forced to spend on policing and surveillance technologies.

At the same time, both DHS and corporations promote UASI funds as a way to pay for surveillance and policing technology across the country. For example, **DHS requires that UASI recipients use part of the grant to fund a fusion center project**. Fusion centers are hubs of data collection and sharing between local, state, and federal agencies and private companies. They supercharge **racialized policing, mass surveillance, immigration detention and deportation, and government spying on social movements and activists**, including those protesting for **abortion access**.

Is my community impacted by UASI funding?

You can see DHS's list of the 40 metropolitan areas and their grant amounts for fiscal year 2023 **here** (and in the map).



The 40 metropolitan regions that received UASI funding from DHS in 2023

If you don't live in or near a city, your community may still be affected by UASI, since metropolitan areas can encompass large geographic regions. Your region may also be impacted by other DHS counterterrorism grants under HSGP.

Why does UASI matter?

In addition to tying emergency funding to counterterrorism, through UASI, DHS provides a funding stream for policing that goes largely unchecked. Police departments don't face the same level of local oversight when they get funds and technology through DHS grants. By design, it's harder to track and push back against policing technologies that are used in the name of "counterterrorism." UASI shows us exactly what's wrong with the government's logic that counterterrorism can be an excuse to perpetually expand surveillance and policing.

Additionally, UASI reveals one of the mechanisms that corporations rely on to access federal dollars. Grant programs like UASI channel federal funds to corporations that create, sell, and maintain surveillance and policing tech that targets Muslim, Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. If we can expose and dismantle programs like UASI, we can chip away at the lucrative project of homeland security that harms our communities.

So who ultimately benefits from UASI and other federal counterterrorism grants?

Police, DHS, other law enforcement agencies, and corporations benefit from these grant programs. Some corporations that sell policing and surveillance technology promote UASI to local officials (see **ShotSpotter** and **Motorola's** materials) and have received millions in contracts funded by the program. This diverts federal funds away from actual emergencies and climate disasters, and the infrastructure that our communities need to be safe.

What does UASI look like on the ground? Let's check out Boston, Chicago, LA, and NYC.⁵

Boston

\$16.65 million in UASI funds for FY 2023

- UASI **funds** surveillance technologies in Boston including automatic license plate readers and a real-time surveillance camera network (the Critical Infrastructure Monitoring System). UASI also funds police radio systems and militarized police equipment like vehicle barriers and SWAT equipment.
- Especially concerning, UASI has funded almost a **decade of contracts** for **gunshot detection technology** with ShotSpotter in Cambridge, Chelsea, Somerville, and Boston.
- UASI boosts the budget of Boston's fusion center (the Boston Regional Intelligence Center or BRIC). Boston's **2020 UASI funding request** included \$3.2 million linked to BRIC, for software and data sharing, cybersecurity and intelligence analysts, and analysts specifically focused on "Countering Domestic Violence Extremism."

What's the impact?

UASI-funded fusion centers like BRIC harm communities of color, with racist data and algorithms at their core. According to Muslim Justice League, 97.7% of people in a "gang database" housed within the BRIC fusion center are people of color, and more than 75% of the people in the database are Black men or teens.

Chicago Region

\$66.17 million in UASI funds for FY 2023

- UASI funds surveillance technology including automatic license plate readers and data from **Vigilant Solutions** and militarized police equipment like vehicle barriers.⁶
- In 2016, Chicago signed a \$25 million contract with **Motorola Solutions** for radio communications,⁷ using UASI funds.
- Chicago officials **cited** UASI-funded trainings for enabling them to respond to “civil unrest” and “large-scale protests” after the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020.
- From 2018 to 2021, at least \$9 million of Chicago’s UASI funds went to fusion centers.⁸

What’s the impact?

*Chicago’s UASI-funded fusion centers target Muslims and people of color. Fusion centers are central to racial profiling programs, like the Suspicious Activity Reporting programs (SARs), which solicit community reports of “threatening behavior” and **overwhelmingly target Muslim communities and people of color**. A recent **report** from the Arab American Action Network and the Policing in Chicago Research Group analyzed over 200 SARs complaints from fusion centers in Illinois and found that these complaints disproportionately targeted Muslim and Arab communities and many yielded no evidence of threats of “terrorism.”*

Los Angeles & Long Beach

\$66.17 million in UASI funds for FY 2023

- UASI funds surveillance tech including social media surveillance (a 2020 contract with **Skopenow**), and automatic license plate readers (\$1.27 million for 2016–2020), as well as militarized police equipment like a Tac-Cat armored vehicle.⁹
- From 2016 to 2020, the LAPD budgeted over \$24 million in UASI funds to upgrade its radio systems, which have historically been provided by **Motorola Solutions**.¹⁰
- From 2016 to 2020, the LAPD used \$1.4 million in UASI funds to pay for training and licenses for **Palantir**'s “advanced data fusion platform,”¹¹ which likely references predictive policing software, which unscientifically relies on biased police data to “predict” future crimes and reinforces the policing of Black and Brown neighborhoods.
- The LA County Sheriff's Department budgeted almost **\$24 million** for 2016–22 in UASI funds for **Palantir**'s products for the Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC), LA's fusion center.
- For 2018–19, at least another \$11.8 million of UASI funding was allocated to JRIC, and an additional \$11.3 million for intelligence analyst salaries at the fusion center.¹²

New York City

\$173.95 million in UASI funds for FY 2023

- In New York City, **Microsoft** custom-built the Domain Awareness System (DAS), a 24/7 **live feed of surveillance data** for the New York Police Department (NYPD), built and maintained with almost **\$400 million** in UASI funding. Launched in 2012 as a “counterterrorism” measure, DAS supercharges everyday policing, compiling real-time

surveillance data from across the city, **including** license plate readers, gunshot detection devices from ShotSpotter, CCTV cameras, and predictive policing software.

- UASI funding pays for other surveillance technologies include social media monitoring, with **Dataminr**,¹³ a data broker that has **helped police monitor communities of color and Black Lives Matter protests**, reportedly with blatant **racial profiling** tactics.

If you had \$615 million dollars to spend on our cities and communities, what would you do with it?

How are communities pushing back against UASI?

- **Muslim Justice League**, a grassroots organization in Boston, has been **campaigning** to abolish the Boston Regional Intelligence Center (BRIC), the main UASI-funded fusion center in Boston.
- **Stop LAPD Spying**, a Los Angeles-based organization working towards abolishing police surveillance, has **campaigned** against the UASI-funded Joint Regional Intelligence Center (JRIC) in Los Angeles.
- **Stop Urban Shield** (a broad **coalition** of community organizations led by AROC: Arab Resource & Organizing Center, BAYAN USA, Critical Resistance Oakland, and Xicana Moratorium Coalition) demanded that Oakland reject UASI funding. In 2019, the coalition **succeeded** in forcing Oakland to **decline** hosting Urban Shield, a surveillance and weapons exposition that was funded by UASI.

What can I do?

Organize locally

- Call on your city & state officials to reject UASI and Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) funding and instead invest in public services like education, housing, and healthcare.
- Join local organizing to divest funding from fusion centers and surveillance systems.

Demand Federal Action

- Call on Congress to cut the HSGP's funding by 50 percent and separate emergency response and immigration services from the DHS budget
- Call on federal agencies to limit corporate data collection & sharing.

Call Out Corporations

- Join organizing to demand that corporations end their contracts with police & DHS, withdraw from law enforcement associations, and stop profiting off mass data collection and surveillance.

Endnotes

1. UASI funding has been \$615 million every year since 2020, increasing from \$580 million annually beginning in 2016. “Homeland Security Grant Program,” Federal Emergency Management Authority, last accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/homeland-security>
2. For FY 2002–2016, our analysis uses data from a 2016 CRS Report: Shawn Reese, “Department of Homeland Security Preparedness Grants: A Summary & Issues,” CRS (2016): 16, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161028_R44669_371198ad15aa9a4c4775413d98ff668c607a4b70.pdf. For FY 2017–2022, our analysis uses data from the FEMA information page on HSGP. “Homeland Security Grant Program,” FEMA.
3. In Los Angeles, UASI funding was used to pay for Palantir “advanced data fusion platform” licenses for the LAPD. “FY16–20 LAPD UASI Funding,” obtained through records requests, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1bvvrYDdUOQm2V7llcMEpOpmwuhSHZ8g7?usp=sharing>.
4. In Los Angeles, 2020 UASI funding was used to pay for a software license with Skopenow, a social media data mining and surveillance company. “FY16–20 LAPD UASI Funding.” In New York City, UASI funding was used to pay for Dataminr social media monitoring contracts. “NYC OEM UASI Vendor List,” obtained by records request, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1VITks8VSYF2oGWjThZ5V_TrhSeL35kY_/edit?usp=sharing&oid=104848290978475337247&rtpof=true&sd=true.
5. This data comes from records requests that we submitted in early 2022, alongside partners like Muslim Justice League and American Friends Service Committee, to officials in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and Boston. We supplemented the documents we did receive with an analysis of industry materials, local budgeting and city council records, and federal reports. The total grant amounts for each city come from the FY 2023 FEMA Preparedness Grant Program Allocations: https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_grants_ib-490_fy23-award-announcement-preparedness-grants.pdf.
6. “Cook County UASI Vendor Quotes,” obtained by records request, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1PrU_pCKDV5xh9FyZi5R7issLKsUQf6PK?usp=sharing.
7. This contract was signed by Chicago first and then Cook County used the model contract to incorporate itself into the order for Motorola Solutions’ technology. “Professional Services Agreement: Contract No. 1650–15538,” Cook County, June 8, 2016, <https://opendocs.cookcountyil.gov/procurement/contracts/1650-15538.pdf>, 23.
8. “Chicago Budget Spreadsheet,” obtained through records requests, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1GKNrjxRWPpzk97_PUhlI-V9R1ZyIkYNC?usp=sharing.
9. “FY16–20 LAPD UASI Funding.”
10. Historically, UASI funding has been used to pay for upgrades to LAPD’s access to Motorola Solutions’ radio systems as well. “Public Safety Committee Report,” L.A. City, last accessed Oct. 25, 2022, https://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2014/14-1749_rpt_ps_2-3-15.PDF; “FY16–20 LAPD UASI Funding.”
11. “FY16–20 LAPD UASI Funding.”
12. “LA FY2018 & FY2019 Projects,” obtained through records request, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IFHfIQnH58paShoFDIlg7m8eZwLgLGZe-/view?usp=sharing>
13. “NYC OEM UASI Vendor List”

