

Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Use in Law Enforcement

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Introduction to Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems

### Small Unmanned Aircraft Systems Use in Law Enforcement

One of the key technologies that has seen a significant rise in its application within law enforcement is unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Similar to various technological breakthroughs that have been welcomed by law enforcement, the use of UAS has been shown to significantly enhance the levels of operational efficiency as used by various agencies. UAS have been recently adopted by most law enforcement units with their potential applications still a question of interest in most agencies. Nonetheless, the adoption of UAS has not been a smooth sail as most early adopters discover that some members of the public view UAS as an attempt by law enforcement to violate private spaces. Though UAS are relevant tools in the law enforcement sphere, there is a need to develop policies to assure the public that law enforcement officers will not misuse the various systems.

#### **Relevance of UAS**

Despite their divisive nature, UAS have become relevant tools in several law enforcement operations. Notably, the use of UAS have been highly relevant in various search and rescue operations. The maneuverability of various UAS in small spaces makes them a highly promising technology for application in various search and rescue operations (Frazier, 2018). Though the technology may not effectively replace traditional approaches to rescue and search operation, they provide an edge as they can effectively supplement the traditional approach.

Also, the UAS have been used to ensure that law enforcement officers are safe in the field. For example, UAS are used to offer officers a better look at suspicious packages and assist in the location of dangerous and hidden suspects. During arrests, the deployment of UAS provides law enforcement officers with an overhead sweep of the scene to facilitate more

informed decision-making (Wallace & Loffi, 2017). Notably, the importance of UAS is highly relevant during an active pursuit. The use of UAS, especially on suspects fleeing on foot, protects the safety of law enforcement officers and minimizes the danger posed by a fleeing suspect to members of the public (Fennery & Perry, 2020). However, the requirement that a law enforcement officer has to maintain their sight of UAS means that they cannot be effectively used in a vehicle pursuit.

Further, law enforcement officers are using unmanned aircraft systems to facilitate accident and crime scene investigations. To this end, the use of a UAS that is equipped with geographical mapping software minimizes the total amount of time spent on crime-scene follow-up investigations (Wallace & Loffi, 2017). The use of UAS in crime scene management increases the investigation's progress and ends up significantly minimizing the incidental traffic that may result from physical crime scene follow-up.

In the same vein, the use of UAS is highly effective in disaster management. Law enforcement and first responders can effectively rely on UAS to survey the level of damage in inaccessible areas. Consequently, the use of UAS not only protects the safety of the first responders but also makes it easy for them to quickly coordinate the management of the affected areas (Wallace & Loffi, 2017). Equally, the use of UAS has made it easier for law enforcement officers to secure various areas during a public event. UAS provides security personnel with an overhead image of public areas so that they can effectively identify potential sources of security concern during a public event (Wallace & Loffi, 2017). A similar type of usage is evident in correctional facilities with prisons using UAS to guard the perimeters of their rehabilitation centers.

### **Challenges associated with UAS Use.**

While it is evident that the use of UAS in law enforcement would result in significant benefits, various challenges stem from its use. First, the regulatory environment used to be a significant challenge to the application of the UAS by law enforcement officers. The early adopter of UAS had to secure rigorous authorization from the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) despite the ease with which hobbyists were allowed to operate UAS. However, the regulatory environment improved with the adopted regulations of August 2016 that allowed the use of UAS to develop at a significant pace.

Second, the community concerns on the use of UAS by the law enforcement officers remain a significant challenge. The members of the public held significant concern that the use of UAS by law enforcement will lead to a breach of privacy given the nature of such technology. That is, UAS can operate and capture images in very tight spaces making it easy for law enforcement officers to spy on the public.

Third, the use of UAS in the infancy stages made it a significant challenge for the law enforcement department. UAS application in the public space did not come with a guidebook that could provide a guideline on the best practices that various departments ought to have adopted (Ljungholm, 2019). Fourth, the legal and constitutional concerns were significant in the early adoption. The law enforcement officers had to make consideration of the constitutional concerns stemming from the adoption of UAS. More specifically, the potential for UAS to violate privacy and the rights guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment was a significant issue. Notably, the use of UAS to monitor political protest is a constitutional consideration that law enforcement had to make as the First Amendment has a provision that protects the citizens engaging in public gatherings.

Fifth, the law enforcement department had to make significant consideration of the liability that is likely to stem from the application of UAS within the public spaces. To this end, the use of UAS may potentially cause unintended injury to property and persons (Barr et al., 2017). Given that injuries are considered constitutional violations, the early adopters had to be wary of the liability stemming from their adoption of UAS.

### **Recommendation**

Given the relevance of UAS use by law enforcement officers, the law enforcement department needs to consider many practices that could improve the use of UAS. Notably, the essential aspect that adopters should consider when seeking to enjoy the various benefits conferred by the UAS is accountability. Before the adoption of UAS, measures of accountability have to be implemented. The department head in charge of the UAS implementation should make it clear to the public about their accountability for the use of UAS as well as the protection of the data collected by the UAS in the process of their usage. Every personnel that is involved with the use of UAS including contractors and volunteers should receive training on accountability depending on their interaction with the UAS program. Notably, a high sense of accountability should be instilled in community policing officers who use the technology in the communities.

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