

KELLY GORDON: You may recognize them by the sound, or maybe you've seen them flying above. Drones are an increasingly common sight in the sky and a common tool of Minnesota Police. According to state data, there's been a steady rise in the use of drones by law enforcement agencies, without a warrant, between 2020 and 2025.

Nikki Davidson is a Duluth-based independent data journalist who looked into this, and she's here to tell me more about what she found. Hey, Nikki.

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Hi. Happy to be here.

KELLY GORDON: Yeah. So tell us what the big picture was that you saw around the data when it comes to drone use and Minnesota Police.

NIKKI DAVIDSON: It's really interesting because the tracking of this started in 2020, when police were first asking if they could use drones without a warrant for certain things like emergencies and just to look for threat assessment. Since then, the use of drones has just really skyrocketed. So the increase in warrantless police drone flights, that is 675%-- so, yeah, a huge increase.

And the really interesting thing is one of the trends that I saw-- so there are police officers that are training that makes perfect sense. These are still fairly new tools. Police officers have to get comfortable using them. And then, of course, they're using them for emergencies. But the third most common use is what really got me wanting to know more, which was reasonable suspicion.

KELLY GORDON: OK. And this is not just in metro areas. This is all over the state that police departments in small places and in big places all are starting to use this technology, right?

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yeah. You think about county sheriff offices, especially in some of the more rural areas, they have especially been using drones because they're really useful when looking for missing people, when they're also responding to emergency situations, natural disasters, all of that kind of thing. So it's definitely not just an inner city thing, it's something that can be really helpful because they're often paired with tech that allows them to use thermal imaging to look for people and certain things, even in those really wooded areas where it's hard to just see things with the human eye.

KELLY GORDON: OK. So I know last month, the Minneapolis City Council rejected a contract with a drone company, Skydio, which would have allowed Minneapolis Police to pilot the use of drones as first responders. Can you talk about how drones are currently being used by law enforcement as first responders?

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yeah. So there is this new trend that has really taken over. It started on the West Coast. I used to live in California, so I was able to see this firsthand where these drone as first responder programs were starting to take off. And in some areas that have had programs going for more than five years, they've been using them, basically, as 911 dispatch tools, where a 911 call will come in, and then they'll have a drone sent out to get eyes on the scene.

It's really interesting because, unlike a squad car, a drone is able to take off, doesn't have to worry about traffic, doesn't have to worry about getting lost, because this is all technology and GPS related. So it gets there. It can tell officers what to expect when they get to the scene, which is valuable for many reasons. It's also being used as a tool by some agencies to collect evidence in that way as well. And the drones are often paired with technology that allows officers to communicate with people on the scene through a megaphone.

KELLY Oh, interesting.

GORDON:

NIKKI Yeah.

DAVIDSON:

KELLY OK, so that seems like it's kind of valuable. But you're saying that what you might be seeing is that there's a rise
GORDON: in police departments wanting to use drones for what you said-- was it reasonable suspicion?

NIKKI Yes. So that is one of the exceptions that the legislator allowed in certain circumstances for police officers and all
DAVIDSON: law enforcement to use just because not every case they're going to be able to get a judge's permission. That takes a lot of time. So there's going to be certain things that don't fit under that.

And one of those things is this reasonable suspicion clause, which allows them to respond and check out a situation. I did talk to the Duluth Police Department, because that's where I live, a little bit more about what exactly that means. And for them, they said this isn't just a hunch, but it's when they get information from 911 callers, officers on the scene, or other witnesses that would suggest that there is a reason for them to respond to an incident there.

KELLY OK, so that was what the Duluth police said. Is this open to interpretation by other departments? Do you know if
GORDON: they're thinking about how they would want to use this technology?

NIKKI Yeah. The way that the law was written, there's not a lot of details about what the exceptions are and what are
DAVIDSON: the no-nos. So I would say that there is room for interpretation based on the way that the law has currently been written. It's going to be up to the agencies themselves, if they have policies, that they make available to the public that kind of explains exactly how they're interpreting that piece of this legislation.

In Duluth, they do have a drone as first responder data set, where they make it available to transparency portal. So you can go in there and look and see the details about every time that they use the drone for their law enforcement activity. And I did do that as part of my reporting. And it is interesting because some of these calls for reasonable suspicion of criminal activity are things like disturbance, theft of an e-bike, shoplifting. So it seems like there is a varying level of severity with some of these crimes.

KELLY Right. But I'm sure there are concerns the groups have when we talk about drones being used without a warrant.
GORDON: What would those be?

NIKKI Yeah, I think a lot of people are obviously skeptical of being watched if they haven't committed a crime,
DAVIDSON: especially because drones are a little bit different. Where we think of a police officer, they can patrol the public area and see anything that they notice from the street. Where drones, even if they're launched in a public space, they're so powerful because they have amazing tools that allow them to zoom in really closely and also use that thermodynamic imaging to see things that you wouldn't necessarily be able to see with the human eye.

Last year, there was some really interesting research released by the federal government, too, about just different capabilities that people are experimenting with as far as allowing drones to, essentially, see through walls. So, like I said, it seems like there's a lot of benefit for certain standoff situations, obviously. But I think that a lot of other people that are wondering, where does my privacy come into play here? It's fair that they might have concerns.

KELLY GORDON: Right. I know California, as you mentioned, is ahead of us when it comes to using this technology. Do they have different sorts of regulations? Have they already sussed out some of these conflicts?

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yeah. Like I said, it's really specific by the agencies. But some of the agencies have practiced extreme transparency. They have portals that explain exactly when every drone has been deployed, what kind of call it's been deployed for, how long it was in the air, mapping out exactly where it was.

Some of the agencies that I've spoken to as part of my previous reporting as a tech reporter also have really strict standards about the camera has to be facing down when it's responding to a call. That way, it's not visualizing things that are not related to a call that they're going on. And it also has to do the same when it's going back. And there's also limits for how long the video can be stored in their system. So it'll be really interesting to see how Minnesota adapts as this becomes more and more common.

KELLY GORDON: Drones are expensive too, the high quality ones that they want to use. So have you seen an increase in spending when it comes to that? And then, also, I'm assuming that they're going to have to train people to use them.

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yes. And that training, like I said before, it's so important to because not only are they expensive, but, again, there's a safety issue with some of the higher quality ones that are a little heftier. We don't want those falling out of the sky.

Looking at the data from 2020, the spike in spending was in 2024. In 2025, it was actually a little bit less than the previous year. But before that, it had been on its way up. In 2025, law enforcement agencies across the state spent a total of \$1.3 million on their drone programs. So a lot of money is going into this.

KELLY GORDON: But they must say that there is enough benefit to this. So you've mentioned, like we've talked about the first responders, are there some other ways that they feel like they can use this technology that you have seen that we haven't already talked about?

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yeah. When I was talking with agencies in California, one of the ways that they were really excited about was responding to domestic disturbances. They really liked the fact that they were able to respond to those calls with no lights or sirens. So it was a great de-escalation tactic. But it also just allowed them to find a way to talk to people that were involved in the scene that also kept officers in a situation that they're able to protect themselves and, obviously, protect the people that they're responding to the call for.

KELLY GORDON: Wow. That's amazing. Thanks so much for sharing your reporting with us, Nikki.

NIKKI DAVIDSON: Yeah, thanks. I'm so happy to be able to share this with you.

KELLY
GORDON:

Nikki Davidson is an independent data journalist based in Duluth.