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FAR-RIGHT SHERIFFS

By Ethan Fauré | July 2022

Introduction

In the United States today, over 3,000 sheriffs and their offices play a key role in maintaining and advancing mass incarceration, mass deportation, and White supremacy. In both American frontier fictions—where sheriffs are depicted as countering the “un-American” violence of “outlaws” and indigenous peoples—and in far-right imaginations, sheriffs are singled out as the defenders of real Americans and their liberties from both racial outsiders and the power of a corrupt federal government.

Going back at least to the late 1960s, the Far Right has celebrated sheriffs as holding sovereign power at the county level, answerable only to God and whatever interpretation of the Constitution they find personally satisfying. Most sheriffs, unlike other law enforcement, are elected (a few are appointed) and often overlooked in analysis of the carceral state. As elected law enforcement officials, sheriffs frequently depict themselves as being representative of the wishes and desires of people in the United States, despite the fact that sheriffs, as a group, are over 90% White and male. The position of sheriff is often quite influential in local politics and increasingly sheriffs are upheld by right-wing media to advance national political goals. Sheriffs are also subject to many of the same influences as other politicians, since the position is elected, and they often work directly with right-wing social movements to advocate for and preserve discriminatory and oppressive systems.

Who

These are the sectors of the Right setting the cultural context and/or organizing right-wing sheriffs.

Anti-Immigrant Right

Anti-immigrant organizations like the [Federation for American Immigration Reform](#), the Immigration Reform Law Institute, Center for Immigration Studies, and NumbersUSA were created or nurtured by White nationalist John Tanton.

These organizations are: [influencing federal immigration policy](#) through legislation and media; coordinating with sheriffs sympathetic to their draconian policy ideals by leveraging the sheriffs' position as local elected officials to erroneously suggest popular support for their agenda; actively lobbying other sheriffs; and coordinating with sheriffs' associations to organize national conferences, border tours, and other events with the goal of expanding the system of mass deportation's reach in local communities.

Patriot Movement

Often motivated by anti-government conspiracism, the Patriot Movement comprises various right-wing actors and organizations seeking to undermine democracy and public health. Patriot Movement organizations like the [Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association](#) and

[militias](#) work to popularize the right-wing idea that sheriffs are the supreme law enforcement officer in the United States and uniquely responsible for defending right-wing conceptions of freedom and liberty.

These organizations are bringing sheriffs and sheriffs' associations at state and national levels into broader right-wing organizing across the country. Such activities often amount to neglecting the local communities and jurisdictions sheriffs are typically elected to represent. This includes encouraging sheriffs to reject and/or refuse to enforce policies from all levels of government that do not conform to their right-wing ideology.

What

These are common issue areas for right-wing sheriff organizing.

Immigration Enforcement

Sheriffs play a key role in the proliferation of [287\(g\) agreements](#) and other forms of cooperation with federal immigration enforcement, expanding the deportation machine's reach in local communities. Many individual sheriffs and sheriffs associations work with anti-immigrant groups to actively oppose even modest efforts to make the immigration system more humane.

Public Health

Encouraged by right-wing activism, many sheriffs actively oppose public health and safety measures they deem “government overreach” or “tyranny.” For example: scores of sheriffs have met efforts to restrict access to firearms by declaring their jurisdictions as so-called “2nd Amendment sanctuaries” where federal or state gun regulations will not be enforced. Other sheriffs have been active opponents of mask mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the Idaho Sheriffs’ Association—who in late 2021 approved a [resolution opposing vaccine and mask mandates](#), which they claim are unlawful, stating that Idaho sheriffs “will not enforce any unlawful edicts, actions, or executive orders done under the color of law, without actual laws being duly passed.”

Incarceration

Overseeing jails in their jurisdictions is one of the primary roles of most sheriffs. As elected officials, sheriffs can accept campaign contributions from companies that already have or seek lucrative contracts related to jail operations and other department functions. These companies and their influence contribute to needlessly dangerous jail conditions across the country. Over the last decade, [thousands of reported deaths have occurred in county jails](#)—many of which are preventable if basic medical and mental health services are provided. Like other law enforcement departments, many sheriffs oppose even modest criminal justice reform efforts, maintaining a status quo that often accepts cruelty and death without accountability.

Find Out More

These articles and webinars will help you build your knowledge further.

To Read Right Now

- **Mapping Far-Right and Anti-Immigrant Movement Alignment with County Sheriffs.** Political Research Associates. 2022.
- **7 Steps Toward Safety That Doesn't Depend on a Sheriff.** Communities for Sheriff Accountability.
- **How a Right-Wing Network Mobilized Sheriffs' Departments.** Cloee Cooper. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.
- **The National Sheriffs' Association Strengthens the Deportation Machine.** Ethan Fauré. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.

In Depth

- **Courted by the Right: A Growing Movement of Right-Wing Sheriffs.** Political Research Associates. 2020.
- **Profiles on the Right: Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association.** Political Research Associates. 2013.
- **The National Sheriffs' Association Alignment with Far-Right Groups Undermines Public Safety.** Cloee Cooper. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.
- **A New Tactic is Gaining Momentum on the Right: Declaring Sanctuary for Guns.** Cloee Cooper. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.
- **The Paid Jailer: How Sheriff Campaign Dollars Shape Mass Incarceration.** Common Cause and Communities for Sheriff Accountability. 2021.
- **Defund Sheriffs: A Toolkit for Organizers.** Working Families, Faith in Action Fund and Sheriffs for Trusting Communities. 2021.
- **What Do We Really Know About The National Sheriffs Association?.** Jessica Pishko. *Slate*. 2022

Become an Expert

- **While Courting Sheriffs, FAIR Flaunts Access to Administration.** Ethan Fauré. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.
- **New Mexico's Constitutional Sheriffs Pave the Way for Militias Patrolling the Border.** Cloee Cooper. *Political Research Associates*. 2019.
- **Give Me Liberty or Give Me Covid!: ReOpen Protestors Turn to Constitutional Sheriffs to Defy State Policies.** Cloee Cooper. *Political Research Associates*. 2020.
- **Slaughtering the Constitution: Cascade County Sheriff Embraces Sheriff Supremacy.** Montana Human Rights Action Network. 2022.
- **Under Trump, ICE aggressively recruited sheriffs as partners to question and detain undocumented immigrants.** Debbie Cenziper, Madison Muller, Monique Beals, Rebecca Holland and Andrew Ba Tran. *The Washington Post*. 2021.
- **He Calls Himself the 'American Sheriff.' Whose Law Is He Following?.** Jessica Pishko. *Politico*. 2021.
- **COVID Behind Bars Data Project.** UCLA Law. 2022.
- **Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2022.** Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner. *Prison Policy Initiative*. 2022.