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US Sheriffs Collaborate with Anti-Immigrant Hate Groups to Shocking Extent: Report

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A new report shows how anti-immigrant groups are recruiting county sheriffs, who can expand mass deportation boundaries with little oversight.

County sheriffs in the U.S. are increasingly being recruited to the organized anti-immigrant movement and fringe nationalist groups in a bid to implement a dangerous agenda that breaks up families, deports people to their deaths and punishes survivors of domestic violence, a new report released Tuesday has revealed.

Titled "Crossing the Line," the report from the Center for New Community details how county sheriffs have increasingly integrated with the U.S. far right, often becoming leading national voices advocating tough anti-immigrant measures and programs entangling local criminal law enforcement with federal civil immigration enforcement — such as Arizona's "show me your papers" law, SB1070, and the "polimigra" 287(g) program.

"Over the past five years, anti-immigrant groups have taken their vitriol directly to law enforcement officials, particularly sheriffs, who can expand the boundaries of mass deportation with little oversight," CNC Advocacy Director Lindsay Schubiner said in a press call Tuesday.

"Sheriffs who publicly ally with extremist anti-immigrant groups are aligning themselves with forces that target immigrants and communities of color, promote unconstitutional detention practices, and support racial profiling,"

In exchange for affiliating with right-wing anti-immigrant groups and ingratiating themselves within far-right circles, the sheriffs gain access to a national audience through anti-immigrant radio and television shows, funded trips to conferences and meetings hosted by the groups, and federal funding for county sheriff's departments for detaining immigrants.

The report also fleshes out how county sheriffs and local police with no immigration enforcement authority often take matters into their own hands, targeting vulnerable migrant communities for harassment and the discretionary

enforcement of laws within their mandate — such as traffic laws and minor criminal laws — for the purpose of supplementing federal immigration enforcement.

“We've been looking at the increasing radicalization of county sheriffs for a number of years,” Ryan Lenz, a senior investigative reporter at the Southern Poverty Law Center, said. “The idea that sheriffs are ultimate arbiters of the law is part of a long tradition of right wing thought.”

The three main anti-immigrant groups discussed in the report — NumbersUSA, the Federation for American Immigration Reform FAIR, and think-tank offshoot the Center for Immigration Studies — are each based in Washington, D.C., and were founded either directly or indirectly by white nationalist and proponent John Tanton. In 1993, the population control-obsessed Tanton argued that a "European-American majority" was needed “for European-American society and culture to persist” — a posture which posits immigrants as a threat.

“The current leaders of FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA downplay the significance of Tanton’s stewardship, but continue to advocate for extreme measures that marginalize immigrant communities and encourage devastating attrition through enforcement policies,” the report notes. “Such policies have the goal of making life so unstable and dangerous for immigrants that they are forced to leave the country.”

Recruitment efforts by FAIR directed toward law enforcement have a long history, but they didn't reach fruition until 2011 when staffers with the group held meetings with sheriffs across the U.S. The meetings were featured in a promotional video screened by FAIR at a 2011 National Sheriffs' Association meeting, where the group later reported that it “identified sheriffs who expressed concerns about illegal immigration,” and “supplied them with a steady stream of information, established regular conference calls so they could share information and experiences, and invited them to come to Washington to meet with FAIR’s senior staff.”

FAIR eventually formed a group called the National Sheriffs' Immigration Coalition which held its first so-called “border school” in El Paso, Texas, in 2012. While the group extends financial assistance to some sheriffs who want to attend the event, other sheriffs have been caught dipping into county funds to pay for the trip.

“The recruitment detailed in this report is not coincidental, and shows the rise of county supremacy ideology, providing sheriffs with the twisted logic that as officers, they are above the law,” Lenz noted.

North Carolina Sheriffs Terry Johnson and Sam Page — strident voices advocating nativist policies — simply requested and received permission to use funds from the U.S. Justice Department's civil asset forfeiture program, which allows law enforcement to commandeer the money and property of criminal suspects.

The itinerary at the non-accredited “border schools” includes events introducing law enforcement officials to extremist vigilantes such as the Texas Border Volunteers, a migrant-hunting militia that frequently robbed and illegally held captive those they found at the border.

The National Sheriffs' Association has also formally embraced the anti-immigrant movement, and figures from the unofficial union have become activists publishing opinion pieces in newspapers, appearing at FAIR events, and working alongside the extremist group in legal actions meant to militarize the border and restrict temporary relief programs such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals — DACA and Deferred Action for Parents of American — DAPA programs.

The NSA also frequently extends its platform to anti-Muslim extremists like John Guandolo, a former FBI agent who proliferates crackpot theories about Muslims infiltrating the U.S. government and Muslim rights advocates being no more than “suit-wearing jihadis.”

The report also shows the extent to which sheriffs correspond with anti-immigrant groups, which has been hinted at through Freedom of Information Act requests — as well as the lengths to which they'll go to conceal these associations, such as using personal email addresses usually exempt from public disclosure.

The growing influence of anti-immigrant groups isn't restricted to county sheriffs alone. During his presidential election campaign, billionaire reality TV star Donald Trump repeatedly cited “studies” by FAIR and CIS to justify his migrant-scapegoating rhetoric.

Attorney General Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III has also enjoyed close ties to the groups, which were once

considered part of a far-right lunatic fringe prior to their integration into the mainstream U.S. conservative movement. Following Trump's inauguration, the White House even appointed former FAIR head Julie Kirchner — a years-long associate of Tanton — as chief of staff at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Agency.

By illustrating the far-right politicization of law enforcement personnel, the report helps explain the alarming rise in civil rights violations and unconstitutional immigration enforcement attempts directed against Latino and immigrant communities across the U.S., whose anxiety and alienation has increased sharply during the Trump era.

“The ongoing collusion between the National Sheriffs’ Association, individual sheriffs, and the organized anti-immigrant movement is immensely troubling for anyone seeking to improve the U.S. criminal justice system,” the report notes in its conclusion. “Partnering with nativist groups and advocating for a shared agenda of disdain and destruction aimed at immigrant communities stands in direct contradiction to those efforts.”

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