

# Extremism in American Law Enforcement: Far Greater Transparency, Accountability Needed

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## Sections

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Extremist Movements in Law Enforcement
- 3 Cases of Extremist Activity in Law Enforcement
- 4 Extremism in Law Enforcement: Trends
- 5 Policy Recommendations

## INTRODUCTION

A wide range of extremist ideologies have gained visibility and notoriety in recent years. And a number of violent extremist groups and leaders – including white

supremacists and anti-government extremists – are [explicit about their desire](#) to recruit current and former law enforcement personnel.

The fact that at least five of those arrested for storming the Capitol building on January 6 were active law enforcement officers raises serious concerns and underscores the fact that some extremists – and their beliefs – have made their way into the ranks of law enforcement and the corrections sector nationwide.

For this report, the ADL Center on Extremism examined the currently available data to compile a list of members of law enforcement who are or were once associated with extremist groups or movements going back to 2010.

A note: This report is focused specifically on extremism, and does not cover the racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, antisemitism and other forms of bigotry and hate that have been exposed with the ranks of law enforcement agencies via expansive reporting by [Reveal/The Center for Investigative Reporting](#) and [Pro Publica](#), among others. Reporting like theirs, which describes a broad environment of systemic racism and bigotry, warrants priority attention as well.

Estimating the total number of extremists in law enforcement is impossible given the current lack of transparency due to privacy regulations, use of private or encrypted digital channels, union contracts and inadequate data reporting.

Instead, in an effort to understand the extremist ideologies within these institutions and how the institutions have responded, ADL's Center on Extremism (COE) developed a list of known cases of extremism in law enforcement from media reports, public records and our own files. While it's important to be cautious about extrapolating from limited data, the trends we identified raise significant concerns.

Our findings indicate that anti-government and white supremacist beliefs are the most commonly held extremist beliefs among law enforcement. Additionally, of the officers exposed as extremists in our research, equal numbers were forced out

of their jobs as were allowed to keep their jobs or reassigned with full pay. In at least two cases, officers terminated for extremism were rehired by another agency, and at least one officer who resigned amidst accusations of extremism was hired by another agency.

## **The Dangers of Extremism in Law Enforcement**

Extremists within the ranks can have a dangerous and outsized impact on policing in our communities. By associating with extremist movements or publicly expressing support for these ideologies, members of law enforcement are behaving in a way that directly contradicts their oaths to serve and protect our communities and undermines community safety. Some of these extremist beliefs, notably white supremacist ideologies, place vulnerable populations, including Black people and other people of color, as well as immigrant populations, at greater risk of harm.

Beyond this erosion of trust, the presence of extremists among law enforcement officers also poses tactical challenges. For one, police officers are often privy to sensitive – and in rare cases classified – information that extremists could use to advance their agenda or even to disrupt an investigation.

Extremists do not exist in a vacuum. If a white supremacist is serving within an agency, that person's decisions and views will inevitably affect their coworkers, eroding trust between officers and compromising safety for all.

## **Methodology**

To learn more about trends in law enforcement and extremism, we examined available data to compile a list of extremists in law enforcement. We assembled this data based on public resources, including media reports and social media. The cases that we included were supported either by photographic evidence or extensive media coverage. We also reviewed research and files from ADL's Center on Extremism. We included corrections officers in this snapshot because, like

active law enforcement, corrections officers wield significant power over marginalized communities.

Our parameters for inclusion in this list were extremely stringent: These examples include members of law enforcement who are associated with or showed support for established extremist movements or groups during the past 10 years. It does not include all those who have spoken or acted in a racist or bigoted manner – though that clearly also is a significant concern for law enforcement agencies and society. It does not count those whose extremist activity only occurred before or after their employment at a law enforcement agency.

As with any such list, the inclusion or exclusion of certain borderline cases may be judgment calls based on the best evidence available, with which others may reasonably disagree. We have made the best determination based on the available evidence.

Using this set of strict criteria for the years 2010-2021, we developed a dataset of 76 instances in which members of law enforcement were identified as a member of – or showed overt support for – an established extremist group or movement. This included 73 unique cases (one incident per person) and three instances where an officer was hired by a different agency after the officer's extremist associations were reported, or 73 individuals overall. Approximately 80% of this group are or were members of local law enforcement agencies.

## **EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

The following are the primary extremist movements that include members of law enforcement. Each presents its own particular threats to agencies, officers and members of the public. The impact of the extremist beliefs of any one officer is exponentially amplified by the factors outlined previously.

### **Anti-government Extremists**

Approximately 40 percent of identified cases involved an officer associating with anti-government ideology or groups, including [militia](#) groups and [sovereign citizens](#), and the subsets of [Three Percenters](#) and [Oath Keepers](#). Within this group, approximately half of the officers were affiliated with or expressed support for the Three Percenters.

In several cases, the officers displaying support for the Three Percenters claimed that they believed the movement's logo—a Roman numeral three, often surrounded by 13 stars—was a benign patriotic symbol. Regardless of why they used the symbol, the prevalence of Three Percenters among the ranks of law enforcement may be due to the movement's relatively loose requirements for participation. Unlike militias, which traditionally put an emphasis on paramilitary training – leaving less of a role for people who found this physically, geographically, or otherwise difficult – Three Percenters only require potential members to consider themselves Three Percenters. This focus on self-identification means the concept can spread relatively easily among the general public and law enforcement agencies alike.

More than a quarter of the anti-government extremist law enforcement officers in our research openly affiliated with or expressed support for the Oath Keepers. This is a significant number, in line with the Oath Keepers' explicitly stated mission of recruiting current members of law enforcement. There are also additional, unverified reports of Oath Keepers who are active law enforcement officers.

Nearly half of the cases involving Three Percenters and Oath Keepers were reported since January 1, 2020. If one pulls back even further, 81 percent of the incidents in our research involving militia movement supporters were reported since 2015. This relatively recent uptick is likely at least partly due to the pervasiveness of social media and the increased scrutiny of law enforcement, which led to a marked increase in the number of public identifications of law enforcement wearing or otherwise promoting extremist symbols.

## Law Enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan

Thirty-three percent of the identified cases in our data involved individuals associated with [white supremacist ideologies](#), including members of Ku Klux Klan groups, neo-Nazis and the [alt-right](#). Of those with white supremacist ideologies, individuals associated with, or members of various Klan groups make up the largest subset.

Although Klan groups have been declining in the last few decades, there is a long track record of Klan supporters in law enforcement, and this number is likely a reflection and remnant of that sordid history.

Much of the policing in the 18th century American South took the form of so-called “slave patrols,” made up of white men who searched for escaped slaves and terrorized Black people. There is a [strong historical link](#) between this early form of law enforcement and the eventual creation of the Ku Klux Klan.

In the early 20th century, the second Ku Klux Klan surged in popularity to the point where it had millions of members and became a potent political force. During this period, especially in the early 1920s, many law enforcement officers became involved with Klan activities. In California, for example, Sheriff Burton Becker of Alameda County was a Klan member, as was Anaheim Police Chief Beret Moody and many of his officers (until the city cleaned house in 1925 and removed them). Los Angeles Police Chief Louis Oaks was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

The second Ku Klux Klan faded away by the 1940s, only to re-emerge once again after World War II as part of a violent reaction to the Civil Rights movement in the South. Again, a number of police officers in southern states were active members or sympathizers, and some even attended Klan meetings in their police uniforms.

The consequences of officers protecting and serving the interests of the Ku Klux Klan rather than their communities were often both deadly and tragic.

One violent extremist plot stands out: In 2015, two corrections officers and one former fellow officer, who were members of the Traditionalist American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, conspired (unsuccessfully) to murder a Black prison inmate.

### **Additional Movements and Ideologies**

The remaining extremist-associated law enforcement officers in our findings were [QAnon](#) supporters, [Proud Boys](#), Black nationalists and [January 6th insurrectionists](#). The QAnon cases were all reported after 2018, which makes sense, given that the conspiracy theory only emerged in 2017.

Five active law enforcement officers from four states ([New Jersey](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Texas](#) and [Virginia](#)) have been arrested and charged since January for their participation in the [January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol](#). The officers face criminal charges including knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

### *Aftermath of Discovery*

Of the officers identified in the dataset, 42 percent were removed from their position either through firing, early or forced retirement, or voluntary or forced resignations. Several were hired by another department after being dismissed from their original department for their extremist links.

Of the remaining officers, at least 40 percent were allowed to remain on active duty, including officers that were employed during their investigation or were placed on paid leave before reinstatement. In several of these cases, the final status of officers remains unknown due to lack of public information.

## **CASES OF EXTREMIST ACTIVITY IN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Extremist activity in law enforcement can manifest in many ways, including wearing a patch, logo or tattoo, participating in extremist events and/or showing support on social media.

**The following are examples of recent documented extremist activity or associations in law enforcement:**

- **On April 26, 2021**, a former Wilkinson County (Georgia) Sheriff's Office Deputy [pleaded guilty](#) to one count possession of an unregistered firearm. The officer, also a former Marine, was fired in November 2020 as part of an investigation into a violent extremist group. The officer shared violent and racially motivated statements in communication with others, including the use of racial and anti-LGBTQ slurs, references to the Holocaust, and [alleged comments](#) about using his position to restrict communities from voting. The officer faces a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment and additional years of supervised release.
- **On January 6, 2021**, supporters of former President Trump and [extremists representing multiple right-wing ideologies](#) attacked the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. The insurrection has been described as an act of domestic terrorism. Five active law enforcement officers from four states ([New Jersey](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Texas](#), and [Virginia](#)) have been arrested and charged since January for their participation, facing criminal charges including knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol ground.
- **On June 6, 2020**, a Chicago Police officer allegedly wore a mask featuring a Three Percenter logo while policing a racial justice protest in downtown Chicago. In response, the Chicago Police Department announced that it had launched an investigation into the incident, but at this time there is no additional information regarding the status of this inquiry. According to reporting, the officer in question has been the subject of at least 24

allegations of misconduct during his career; however, only one of these allegations was “sustained,” meaning he was found responsible.

- **On June 2, 2020**, an Orange County (California) Sheriff’s Deputy was allegedly spotted wearing one patch that featured the **Three Percenter** logo and the phrase “Oath Keeper” while policing a racial justice protest in Costa Mesa, California. The Orange County Sheriff’s Department conducted an internal investigation into the incident and determined that there was no evidence to suggest that the officer held extremist views. The deputy was allowed to keep his job, and the Orange County Sheriff announced that his staff would receive educational training on extremist groups and the threat they pose.
- **In May 2020**, two officers with the La Salle (Illinois) Police Department allegedly attended a Reopen Illinois rally wearing yellow vests with the letter “Q” and common **Qanon** phrase “**WWGIWGA**.” One of the officers posted the images to their personal social media, and both officers attended the rally while off duty. One of the officers stated to the media that he researches Q drops and posts his findings on his personal social media. The officers did not face any repercussions.
- **In May 2020**, a Pacific Grove (California) police officer’s personal vehicle was allegedly photographed with a Three Percenter decal. The officer was cleared in the investigation regarding the decal, but he was fired in November 2020 after he shared posts on Parler that disparaged the Black Lives Matter movement and expressed support for Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse.
- **In 2017**, the interim chief of the Colbert (Oklahoma) Police Department **resigned** after his alleged past involvement with skinhead groups came to light. He was reportedly linked to two websites that sold skinhead paraphernalia and was featured in two skinhead documentaries

from the early 2000s. In one of the documentaries, he claimed to be a member of [Blood and Honour](#) and [Combat-18](#). In 2018, he was [hired](#) as a reserve officer for the Achille (Oklahoma) Police Department. According to the department, he is no longer employed there.

- [In April 2015](#), two Florida Department of Corrections officers and one former fellow officer with ties to the Ku Klux Klan were [arrested](#) for plotting (unsuccessfully) to kill a Black inmate after his release. One of the officers had a physical altercation with the former inmate, motivating the officers to conspire to murder the man. At the time of their arrests, two of the guards were actively employed with the Florida DOC; the third had been fired in 2013 for failing to meet training requirements. [In 2017](#), two of the guards were sentenced to 12 years in prison after being found guilty of conspiracy to commit first-degree murder. The other guard pleaded guilty to the same charge and was sentenced to four years in prison.
- [In August 2014](#), videos surfaced of a St. Louis (Missouri) County Police officer allegedly giving a speech to the St. Louis branch of the [Oath Keepers](#) in which the officer described President Obama as an “illegal immigrant,” insulted Muslims and gay people, and said, “I’m into diversity – I kill everybody.” The officer was “relieved of duty” in August 2014 but retired with full benefits.

## **EXTREMISM IN LAW ENFORCEMENT: TRENDS**

Members of law enforcement who have ties to extremism may signal or express their extremist ideologies and alliances in a variety of ways. This presents several opportunities for policy changes.

Officers promote extremist associations on their personal or private group social media accounts, personal items, homes, or other items or activities that are not on

the job or related to their professional lives. Some also support extremist ideologies while off duty (attending extremist rallies, for example).

- **2021, California:** A sergeant and two deputies of the Solano County Sheriff's Office were [reported](#) to have promoted Three Percenter logos and imagery. One deputy allegedly shared social media posts referencing Three Percenter iconography and at one point changed their profile picture to a Three Percenter logo. The other deputy made a decorative wood carving featuring a Three Percenter logo and promoted the carving on social media, including the hashtags #3percenter, #libertyordeath, and #blackgunsmatter. The sergeant was the recipient of this wood carving and has allegedly personally sold items featuring Three Percenter logos in the past. The Solano County Sheriff [dismissed](#) these reports and said he did not plan on investigating any further. The sergeant was recently elected to the Vacaville City Council and denies any ties to these ideologies.
- **2020, Illinois:** Two off duty officers with the La Salle Police Department allegedly attended a Reopen Illinois rally wearing yellow vests with the letter "Q" and common Qanon phrase "[WWGIWGA](#)." The images were posted to personal social media profiles, and one of the officers stated to the media that he researches Q drops and posts his findings on his personal social media. The officers did not face any repercussions.
- **2020, Minnesota:** An officer at the St. Paul Police Department [allegedly](#) had a sticker associated with the Three Percenters anti-government extremist movement on the window of his private vehicle. The department reported it was reviewing agency policies.
- **2020, Ohio:** A deputy for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office was reportedly placed under internal investigation after using a Three Percenter flag as the cover photo of their personal Facebook page. After the investigation, the deputy was fired.
- **2020, Connecticut:** An officer with the Bellevue Police Department [reportedly](#) posted conspiracy content to their personal Twitter

and Facebook accounts, including an image of themselves in uniform with the QAnon caption “WWG1WGA.” The officer was initially placed on administrative leave, but later reinstated to full duty.

- **2018, Louisiana:** A deputy with the Plaquemines Parish Sheriff’s Office [reportedly](#) listed himself as a “Proud Boy” on his personal Facebook profile and was the admin of a [Proud Boy](#) Facebook group. He was fired from the department.
- **2016, Indiana:** A recruit for the Lafayette Police Department [allegedly](#) posted on [Iron March](#), a white supremacist web forum. He was later fired.

Some officers display extremist symbols in the form of visible tattoos, or on their uniforms, department vehicles, or other items/spaces associated with their employment.

- **2020, Illinois:** An officer with the Chicago Police Department [reportedly](#) wore a mask with a Three Percenter logo while on duty at a protest. The CPD would not provide additional information about the case.
- **2018, Colorado:** An officer for the Denver Police Department was [reported](#) to have a Three Percenter logo tattooed on his hand. The officer says he was unaware the tattoo was affiliated with the militia movement. The officer was asked to conceal the tattoo while on duty and has received no further discipline from the department.

Some officers in this case study were dues-paying members, or held leadership positions within extremist groups; most, however, showed their support through social media posts or the display of extremist symbols.

- **2019, Connecticut:** An officer with the East Hampton Police Department was [reportedly](#) a dues-paying member of the Proud Boys. The officer retired after his membership was reported and has since quit the Proud Boys.
- **2019, Georgia:** A correctional officer for the Haralson County Sheriff’s Office was exposed as the [alleged](#) leader of a group of Norse pagans affiliated with the [Asatru Folk Assembly](#). He later resigned from his position, telling

local media, “It was that or be fired.” The officer was also a member of the Army National Guard, which opened an investigation into him; it is unknown whether he faced any repercussions.

- **2016, Montana:** A Ravalli County sheriff’s deputy was [reportedly](#) found to have ties to the Oath Keepers, serving as a member of the group’s Board of Directors and as the Oath Keepers’ information officer in Indiana. It is unknown whether the deputy faced any repercussions for his affiliation; a 2021 [Daily Beast](#) article notes he has since left the department.

Many cases in our dataset were exposed because of symbol expression or online support rather than using their power as law enforcement to commit acts of violence against communities. The exception in our data:

- **2015, Florida:** Three Florida Department of Corrections Reception and Medical Center prison guards with ties to the Ku Klux Klan were [arrested](#) for plotting (unsuccessfully) to kill a Black inmate after his release.

Some officers attempt to explain collecting extremist items or iconography, like a Nazi flag, by pointing to a piece’s historical significance. Officers also argue that anti-government patches or logos are military – not extremist – symbols.

- **2019, Michigan:** An officer with the Muskegon Police Department was fired after prospective homebuyers alleged he had prominently displayed [Confederate flags](#) and a framed KKK application in his home. He appealed his firing and was allowed to [retire](#) with full benefits in 2020.
- **2010, Oregon:** A police captain with the Portland Police Bureau was [reported](#) to have built public shrines in Portland dedicated to German soldiers, spray painted neo-Nazi graffiti, and worn Nazi uniforms, all in the 1990s. His “Honor Tree” memorialized five Nazi soldiers, but the captain claimed it was motivated by “history,” and he did not have access to research to know the association with the Schutzstaffel (SS), the Nazi party’s police and military force. The captain was suspended in 2010 without pay for 80 hours but was never fired. The captain retired with full benefits in 2020.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Preventing extremism within the law enforcement ranks leads to a safer society. It is critical for state and local agencies to address this issue, to ensure the safety, security and respect of the community they serve. It is also critical to address extremism in relation to the importance of trust between agencies and communities and within the agencies and members themselves. The need for more data and for transparency are critical.

Below are a series of recommendations of actions policymakers and law enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local levels can take now to address these concerns. Implementation of these recommendations should be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the U.S. Constitution and applicable laws:

### **Federal/National:**

**Background Checks:** Ensure background checks are conducted among those applying for positions in law enforcement, including positions with federal agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Patrol, and Homeland Security Investigations. Consider periodic background checks even after individuals have been hired. Conduct ongoing screening similar to the [PERSEREC](#) (the U.S. Department of Defense's Personnel and Security Research Center) model of checking social media, blogs and other information sources.

**Security Clearances:** To ensure extremists do not have security clearances, the federal government should broaden questions on the security clearance form to cover individual extremists who do not associate or adhere to any groups. The government should also work to improve the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) databases with additional information from appropriately authorized domestic

violent extremist-related investigations and ensure that databases are consistently updated.

**Reporting Channels:** The Department of Justice or Department of Homeland Security should create a mechanism for communities or other law enforcement agencies to confidentially raise concerns about suspected extremists among law enforcement.

**Educational Resources:** The Department of Justice or Department of Homeland Security should provide educational resources on violent extremism to those tasked with vetting potential candidates for official positions and to supervisors and members of police oversight boards so they understand how to recognize extremist adherence, ideologies, or activities or affiliations.

**Discipline:** Law enforcement officers whose employment is terminated when they are found to hold extremist views should, to the maximum extent permitted by law, be permanently unable to gain subsequent employment in a law enforcement capacity. Congress should create a nationwide database that law enforcement agencies can access to determine whether association with violent extremism was the cause for an officer's termination, so that a new agency does not unknowingly hire them.

**Grants:** Congress should specify that training and professional development to identify extremism in a law enforcement setting is among the activities that local and state agencies can and should carry out with federal grant funding. Funding could support mandatory training on extremism for those tasked with conducting background checks on potential recruits. Congress should require that agencies applying for federal grants submit verification of a violent extremism vetting process within their agency, and of their identification of terminated officers who have associated with or endorsed violent extremism to a nationwide database, in order to be eligible to receive grant assistance.

## **State and Local:**

**Background Checks:** Agencies should conduct background checks on potential violent extremist connections for individuals applying for law enforcement positions. These background checks should be periodically repeated on current members to ensure extremist activity has not become a concern.

**Oath of Office & Code of Conduct:** Agency code of conduct should stress the inherent dangers of violent extremism and address the importance of disavowing violent extremist activity and violent extremist ideology. Agencies should consider periodic re-swearing of the oath of office and include a potential educational component focusing on the importance of the oath and why violent extremism is harmful to the law enforcement profession.

**Educational Resources:** Law enforcement agencies should consider requiring educational training and professional development on extremism for all law enforcement officials. Some law enforcement officers may not recognize the signs that a fellow law enforcement officer may harbor violent extremist beliefs, particularly where indicators of extremism – tattoos and other symbols, coded phrasing, etc. – can be subtle.

**Reporting Mechanisms:** Agencies should consider putting mechanisms in place to allow for both law enforcement members and the community to confidentially report concerns of extremist activity within ranks to a commanding officer or investigative division within their agency, or to community-based organizations that support and defend citizens' civil rights.

**Discipline and Transparency:** Agencies should be transparent with results of any potential disciplinary matters involving officials that relate to findings that show violent extremist activity. Giving the public information about how an extremist-related disciplinary matter was handled will give communities an understanding that their law enforcement agency is taking these matters seriously and

addressing them in a timely and forthcoming matter, recognizing a shared goal of preventing extremism within the ranks.

**Budgetary and Funding:** State and local governments should create a pathway for law enforcement agencies to receive funding or grants for the specific purpose of increasing resources with respect to extremism, including background checks, as well as educational training opportunities for those tasked with vetting potential candidates.