Tuscaloosa, Alabama police using university students as drug informants

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Police officers in Tuscaloosa, Alabama are increasingly using University of Alabama students as drug informants.

The practice, which is becoming more common throughout the United States, represents an immense legal and ethical grey area in which American students' futures, and in some instances, lives have been sacrificed by police departments looking for easy drug arrests.

In February 2013, using information gathered from student informants, the West Alabama Narcotics Task Force arrested 61 University of Alabama students in a pre-dawn drug raid. The majority of the arrests were for relatively insignificant amounts of marijuana or for paraphernalia.

Many of the students found themselves charged with trafficking, and among these, several were charged with the felony of selling within a three-mile radius of a school.

While most of those arrested were not convicted of any crime the repercussions have been significant. Court fines and attorneys' fees numbered in the tens of thousands of dollars for each student. All were forced to attend drug education programs, and all were sanctioned to varying degrees by the university. Many of the students left school or transferred to other colleges.

Relationships among University of Alabama students became strained by the persistent suspicions that arose in the aftermath of the raid.

The commander of the task force declined to comment on the raid, referring reporters to Tuscaloosa Police Department spokeswoman Lt. Teena Richardson. "If it wasn't University of Alabama students there wouldn't have been any controversy. In a drug investigation you go where the investigation takes you and that's as much as I can tell you about that," Richardson stated.

Tuscaloosa's chief of police likewise defended the raid, stating that he was proud of the "bold and aggressive" leadership in the task force. The University of Alabama has repeatedly declined to make any statement to the press concerning either the 2013 raid or the use of student informants, except to reiterate that the university's administration intends to cooperate with law enforcement and will continue to sanction any students found guilty of drug use or drug trafficking.

A University of Alabama student recently related his experience as a drug informant to news site AL.com. Identifying himself only as "Ryan," he reported how the West Alabama Narcotics Task Force searched his apartment on a warrant for drug trafficking when he was 19. He could avoid arrest, they told him, by cooperating with their demands to snare four or five drug suppliers for them. Thoroughly intimidated, he acquiesced.

Over the next few months, the student was wiretapped and sent into cars and apartments to purchase approximately a gram of marijuana at a time as the police listened in. He says that rejection and suspicion from his peers has persisted since the 2013 raid, and he regrets cooperating with the task force.

Those who refuse to inform face significant penalties. Referring to himself only as "Scott," another student interviewed by Al.com recounts how police came to his house after a student informer bought a small amount of pot from him. The police told him that they had heard that he could buy pounds of marijuana.

Though he repeatedly stated that he could only buy an ounce or two, at the most, police doggedly insisted that they knew he could acquire more. They offered him a chance to avoid incarceration by working as an informant. He refused and was promptly arrested.

Although the charges brought against Scott were expunged from his record, he was forced to pay over $10,000 in fines and to attend drug education programs. His ability to find work was harmed. He says that the program is actually more dangerous to students than the drug use itself, and says officers are "deputizing" young,

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untrained, and vulnerable people. He likens informing to having a “target on your back.”

The use of college students as informers has gained traction throughout the United States in the past decade, even as it has attracted vociferous criticism. Student informers in Florida and North Dakota have been murdered. Legal experts claim that the practice deprives students of their Constitutional rights to counsel and due process. Added to that is the fact that entrapment is rife; police, using students as their bait, create criminals to arrest.

In Tuscaloosa, the practice has continued unabated. In April of 2015, 24 people in Tuscaloosa were arrested for possessing or selling marijuana, and for selling within three miles of a school. The number of drug-related charges has increased in the Tuscaloosa area each year since 2008, which the task force proudly attributes to its focus on university students. Of the informant program, Lieutenant Teena Richardson of the Tuscaloosa Police Department has stated, “We don’t discuss how our informant program works.”

These arrests have been incredibly lucrative for the police. In 2014, the task force seized over $800,000 worth of cash from drug arrests. $300,000 of this was funneled back into the task force’s coffers. In addition, federal grant money increases in proportion to arrests.

Many Alabamians have expressed concern over the way arrest-hungry police departments are treating young adults who do not fully understand their legal rights. Along with the anxiety many University of Alabama college students now feel amongst their peers, this points to one of the most tragic consequences of the malignant growth of the American police state—the creation of hostility and suspicion between citizens to the detriment of their unity. It also points to the fact that the war on drugs is, in reality, a war upon the working class.

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