

US justice department signals rollback of even limited police oversight

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Attorney General Jeff Sessions signed a memo Friday ordering an evaluation of the Department of Justice's (DOJ) activities regarding the practices of local law enforcement agencies including compliance reviews and consent decrees.

The move by Sessions to review the DOJ's investigations is aimed at emboldening the police by putting an end to even the pretense of federal review of their actions. The policies implemented under Obama were meant to give a veneer of reform through the hiring of more minority and female officers, minor limitations on the use of heavy military equipment and implementation of racial sensitivity training and other programs. These measures did nothing to actually limit police violence, but were widely denounced anyway by police organizations—and by right-wing politicians like Sessions.

Despite the widespread character of police violence, only a handful of police officers responsible for abuse and killings are ever criminally charged and even fewer are convicted. The Obama DOJ defended police immunity in every case which came before the Supreme Court and declined to bring federal civil rights charges against killer cops, including in the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

Sessions' memo, made public on Monday, outlines a regime which will allow local police departments and individual police officers to harass, brutalize and kill with even greater impunity, without any fear of the fig leaf of federal oversight. The memo calls for "local control and local oversight" to ensure "effective local policing," arguing "it is not the responsibility of the federal government to manage non-federal law enforcement agencies."

Sessions argues that rather than reviewing the brutal practices of local police departments the DOJ should

work to "promote officer safety, officer morale, and public respect for their work."

In a speech last month in Richmond, Virginia before an audience of federal, state and local law enforcement, Sessions argued that popular protests against police violence and the minimal scrutiny applied to police forces in the Obama years hurt officer morale and pushed up crime rates.

"Unfortunately, in recent years law enforcement as a whole has been unfairly maligned and blamed for the unacceptable deeds of a few bad actors. Too many of our officers, deputies, and troopers believed the political leadership of this country abandoned them. Amid this intense public scrutiny and criticism, their morale has gone down, while the number of police officers killed in the line of duty has gone up."

Sessions promised that this would all change under Trump, saying, "We will enforce our laws and put bad men behind bars. We will fight the scourge of drug abuse. And we will support the brave men and women of law enforcement, as they work day and night to protect us."

President Donald Trump has implemented a raft of a xenophobic, anti-immigrant "law and order" measures, hyping a slight increase in the US crime rate (which remains at historic lows) and an uptick in the relatively small number of police officers killed on the job. Trump has the support of the most fascistic elements among law enforcement, which have been encouraged by his policies, including Milwaukee County, Wisconsin Sheriff David Clarke and former Maricopa County, Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Trump signed three executive orders in February for the purpose of bolstering the police. The first order directed Sessions to create a task force which will develop new strategies and legislation aimed at

cracking down on drug traffickers and violent crime as well as “illegal” immigrants, and the second encourages more “intelligence sharing” between law enforcement agencies. The third order follows the example of reactionary “Blue Lives Matter” laws being implemented at the state level, directing the DOJ to bring federal charges against anyone who harms a police officer.

The Trump administration inherited 14 consent decrees and five other reform agreements opened by the DOJ during the Obama years. In response to popular protests over high-profile police killings, beatings and complaints of persistent violations of civil rights, the Obama administration opened 25 investigations into local law enforcement agencies between 2009 and 2016.

The small number of investigations carried out by the Obama administration—there are at least 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States—found widespread and persistent civil rights abuses, including racial bias in traffic stops, unlawful searches and seizures and excessive use of force. Abusive practices were found in police departments in every region of the country from East Haven, Connecticut to Portland, Oregon.

DOJ investigations remain open in Chicago, which has seen a number of high-profile police killings and protests in recent years; and Baltimore, Maryland, where mass protests erupted in 2015 following the murder of Freddie Gray.

Even though the national media’s attention has drifted away from police violence, their reign of terror against the working class and most vulnerable in society continues unabated. According to killedbypolice.net, which aggregates press reports, police have killed 304 people in the first three months of 2017. With an average of 3.3 killings everyday, the police are on track to kill more than 1,200 people, exceeding the 1,155 deaths recorded last year.

According to a separate tabulation by the *Washington Post* of deaths involving firearms only, at least 267 people have been shot and killed by the police so far this year. The largest numbers of police shooting victims are white, while blacks continue to be killed at a disproportionate rate. Forty-one out of the 50 states have recorded at least one police shooting as of April 4.



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