

Social media investigations unearth hundreds of police officers in the US involved in fascist or racist groups

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Two separate social media investigations completed within the last month have identified hundreds of police and correctional officers that were or are currently members of right-wing extremist groups on Facebook or who have posted violent, racist or fascist content on the platform. Screenshots compiled in both investigations show officers posting original racist and fascist content on their personal Facebook walls, in private groups such as the Oath Keepers, Confederate Brotherhood or the “NORTH AMERICAN DEFENCE LEAGUE AGAINST ISLAM,” and also on public news posts.

Each research project positively identified active-duty officers in departments throughout the country, leading to over 50 separate investigations. In St. Louis, Missouri, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, over 100 officers have been either put on paid leave, suspended, or relegated to desk duty, pending internal investigations. However, many more departments have chosen to simply ignore the findings.

The *Plain View Project* (PVP) was the culmination of a nearly two year investigation beginning in the fall of 2017, and conducted by Philadelphia based attorneys. During the summer of 2016 the group of attorneys, led by lawyer Emily Baker-White, became aware of dozens of Facebook posts of current Philadelphia police officers that had endorsed violence, racism and bigotry. The PVP obtained the published rosters of police officers employed by eight departments in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Dallas and Denison, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; York, Pennsylvania; and finally, Twin Falls, Idaho.

Using the lists, the PVP team searched Facebook for the officers’ names and when they could positively link an active account to a police officer the name was added to the PVP database. In many cases officers posted pictures of themselves in uniform, discussing arrests or performing other police related duties. Through this process the PVP verified over 3,500 Facebook accounts and compiled more than 5,000 screenshots with images, posts or comments made by officers that “could undermine public trust and confidence in the police.” Through the PVP website, users are able to search by name, rank, jurisdiction, pay-grade, badge number or specific keywords.

A second research project, conducted by *Reveal* journalists Will Careless and Michael Corey, sought to discover how many police officers nationwide were members of right-wing “extremist”

Facebook groups. Using a list of more than 1,200 extremist groups compiled by Megan Squire, a computer science professor at Elon University, the journalists downloaded the private membership lists of the groups before Facebook disabled this feature in 2018. They then proceeded to download the membership lists of self-identified police groups and loaded the approximately one million names into a database which cross-examined the lists to see which profiles appeared in at least one extremist group and one police group.

This resulted in over 14,000 matches or “hits.” The journalists did not comb through every single match, instead just focusing on “a fraction of the list to vet.” Similar to the PVP, law enforcement officers’ identity and employment was verified by reviewing their biographies, photos or matching names to public police records. The journalists identified nearly 400 users they confirmed are either currently employed as police officers, sheriffs or correctional officers or had previously worked in law enforcement.

The totality of each investigation confirms the vast promotion and acceptance of fascist ideology within police departments throughout the country.

The officers identified have worked at all levels of law enforcement, from patrolmen to detectives and even several captains. It is not a localized phenomenon, the cops identified work in rural jurisdictions from West Virginia to Washington and in urban cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago. Officers in the *Reveal* investigation were part of several right-wing anti-government militia groups, including over 150 officers who were or are currently members of the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters. Earlier this week members of the Oath Keepers, in conjunction with the Oregon Republican party, forced the state legislature to shut down following violent threats.

These two groups have been seen at several rallies organized by white supremacist groups, including the 2017 Unite the Right fascist rampage in which 32-year-old Heather Heyer was murdered by neo-Nazi James Fields. Fields, who also injured 35 others when he rammed his vehicle into the crowd of counter-protesters, was sentenced to life in prison on federal hate crime charges on Friday. Fields had pleaded guilty earlier this year to 29 federal hate crime charges to avoid the death penalty. In December 2018, Fields was also convicted on state charges, including first-degree murder, for which a jury recommended that he spend life plus 419 years in

state prison.

In addition to anti-government right-wing militias, hundreds of officers belonged to openly Islamophobic groups or frequently posted content denigrating Muslims in general. Several officers were former veterans, who brought their experiences, tactics and state-sanctioned racism to their departments. Others, such as Sgt. Michael Vincent of the Philadelphia Police Dept., badge number 8706, shared memes comparing the refugee crisis caused by imperialist wars and interventions to a fox raiding a chicken coop, extolling his friends and followers to “Stop the invasion of Islam to the free world!”

While both investigations focused primarily on police officers, prison guards and corrections officers were also identified. Geoffrey Crosby, a prison guard at the barbaric Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana, belongs to 56 different extremist groups, 45 of which are Confederate in nature, such as “Confederate Resistance,” or “REBELS RULES, the south will rise again .!!” Crosby also claimed membership in anti-Muslim groups such as “Stop Radical Islam in America.” Crosby, who was reached by phone by *Reveal*, declined to be interviewed but instead advised reporters not to “call me at work again.” The Louisiana Department of Corrections emailed the independent investigative news outlet to state an investigation into Crosby is open and ongoing.

Sheldon Best, a Wisconsin corrections officer at Jackson Correctional Institution in Black River Falls, Wisconsin, is still a member of a group named “Crusades Against Degeneracy,” which frequently posts racist, Islamophobic, homophobic and anti-Semitic content. In an interview with *Reveal*, Best admitted that “some people” could view his membership in the hate group as problematic however he stated that he did not hold any prejudiced views. On a 2017 National Public Radio article posted in the group regarding demographic changes within US census results, Best opined that whites will remain the majority of adults in the United States due to “minority on minority homicide.” The Wisconsin Department of Corrections has not responded to *Reveal’s* inquiries regarding any pending investigation into Best.

Another group which claimed membership from police officers around the country, including officer John Valdez of the Los Angeles Police Department, is the anti-communist “Anti-SJW Pinochet’s Helicopter Pilot Academy.” Members of the group shared helicopter memes depicting the extrajudicial murder of 75 people during the 1973 US backed coup in a positive light and frequently posted violent threats against Democrats, socialists and communists.

The whipping up and promotion of these attitudes within the state police is a stark warning to the working class. The far-right militia movements have been actively infiltrating police departments and prison guard units, and have been allowed to fester and recruit whether the local leadership is white, black, gay or straight, in the Democratic coastal states and the Republican interior. Both parties in the ruling class have overseen the mammoth expansion of repressive federal agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) while also allowing the transfer of military equipment to departments around the country, which have

been used against all members of the working class regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation.

Baker-White has said she began PVP with the aim of spurring nationwide reforms in policing. “I hope that police departments make changes to increase accountability, but also to try to shift culture,” she told the *Washington Post*.

Her call for reforms is misguided at best. The reactionary role of the police stems not from the personal political opinions or racism of individual cops, but the other way around. Their backwardness is the product of their function as defenders of the capitalist status quo of exploitation and record social inequality.

The police are recruited and trained for this purpose. In many cases their experience in the military, and in the Middle East in particular, has encouraged the views they post on Facebook. The adult lives of the current generation of police have been spent while the US has been engaged in a continuous war from the first Persian Gulf War, through to the current preparations for war against Iran, Russia and China.

Undoubtedly the incessant tweets of the fascistic President Donald Trump have also produced a climate in which many of the cops see no particular reason why they should not express themselves in language not much different from that used by the White House.

Far more than Trump is behind this, however. The Democrats’ alternative is calls for the censorship of the internet, targeting left-wing and socialist websites under the guise of combating “Russian meddling.” In response to the unmistakable signs of growing class struggle—strikes involving teachers, auto workers, flight attendants and many others—the ruling class is turning more and more to authoritarian forms of rule, including the unleashing of the police, armed with the weapons of war, against the working class.

This is an international process, as shown by Germany, where the ruling coalition has adopted much of the agenda of the ultra-right Alternative for Germany (AfD); in France, where President Macron has praised the World War II-era Nazi collaborator Philippe Pétain while unleashing the police against “yellow vest” protesters; and in the emergence of neo-fascist and dictatorial regimes on every continent.



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