

New investigations reveal major police departments across the US riddled with Oath Keeper fascists

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Last week a joint investigation between National Public Radio and WNYC/*Gothamist* revealed that policemen in several departments in major US cities, including Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, are members of the fascist Oath Keeper militia group. Members of this far-right group, in addition to the fascist Proud Boys, spearheaded the storming of the Capitol on January 6 in an attempt to overthrow the election of Joe Biden and install the defeated Donald Trump as president-dictator.

The joint investigation by NPR/WNYC is based on the hack of the far-right web hosting service Epik in September. The anonymous hackers leaked the purported membership rolls of the Oath Keepers, containing nearly 40,000 names and other personal identifying information, to the transparency group Distributed Denial of Secrets (DDoS), which has since shared the files with numerous news agencies.

Reporters with NPR and WNYC discovered that at least 15 active-duty police officers were on the Oath Keeper membership rolls, including more than a dozen officers in the Chicago Police Department, along with cops in the New York Police Department, Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

According to NPR/WNYC, of the thirteen active Chicago police so far identified, five were in “training and support,” roles which include training other cops on using firearms. The results of this “training” were borne out in a six-year investigation by the *Chicago Tribune* which concluded in 2016. The investigation found that over that time span Chicago police, “every five days, on average ... fired a gun at someone,” killing 92 people and injuring 170 others.

Police kill more than 1,000 people each year, and the victims are overwhelmingly working class and poor. In

Chicago this past year, this was tragically exemplified with the police murders of 28-year-old Turrell Brown and 13-year-old Adam Toledo. The lethality and brutality of US police were further established in a recent *Lancet* study, which found that US police had killed nearly 31,000 people between 1980 and 2019.

In a separate investigation last month, *Rolling Stone*, using the same data set from DDoS, “identified nearly 40 [Oath Keeper] membership[s] linked to public-sector work emails,” which included “a supervisor with the federal Department of Homeland Security, and a county-level homeland security director in Tennessee,” along with several police officers.

One of the cops identified in the *Rolling Stone* article was an officer with the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania police department, who would later be identified by *USA Today* as Lt. Philip Mercurio. The same *USA Today* report found 65 people, like Mercurio, who identified themselves as law enforcement trainers while signing up to join the Oath Keepers.

In his request to join the fascist paramilitary group—at least 20 of whom are facing charges for their role in Trump's attempted coup—Mercurio highlighted his experience as firearms instructor, writing that he would “spread the word to my students.”

Speaking to *PublicSource*, Cara Cruz, a spokesperson of the city's Department of Public Safety, confirmed that Mercurio, who has been a Pittsburgh police officer since 1988, has been reassigned to an “administrative assignment” while the Office of Municipal Investigations conducts an “investigation.”

Defending the fascist cop, Robert Swartzwelder, president of the Pittsburgh police union, told *PublicSource* he didn't know what Mercurio was “being accused of.” When told by a *USA Today* reporter that

Mercurio had been revealed to have joined the Oath Keepers, Swartzwelder made the obviously false claim, “I don’t know who they are.”

The highest-ranking cop identified in the *Rolling Stone* investigation of the Oath Keeper logs was Robin Cole, the former Sheriff of Pine County, Minnesota, located north of Minneapolis. The magazine reported that Cole joined the militia group in 2013, while he was sheriff, and at “about the same time he sent an open letter to constituents pledging not to enforce any new federal or state gun restrictions, decrying them as an erosion of freedom and a ‘moral sin.’”

The open letter Cole signed, along with at least 89 other sheriffs, was in fact a petition organized by the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, (CSPOA). The CSPOA was founded by former Arizona sheriff and founding board member of the Oath Keepers, Richard Mack, in 2011. A recent report by the Anti-Defamation League identified “dozens of sheriffs who have joined CSPOA,” along with “a handful of police officers and a few state and local elected officials.”

Sheriffs supporting the CSPOA include former Wisconsin sheriff and Proud Boys supporter David Clarke Jr. and Sheriff Dar Leaf of Barry County, Michigan. Last year Sheriff Leaf appeared on stage at a fascist rally with members of the Wolverine Watchmen who would later be arrested for their role in the plot to kidnap and murder Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

The ADL report notes that even police who have not formally joined the CSPOA often refer to themselves as “constitutional sheriffs” while espousing many of the same beliefs advanced by Mack and Stewart Rhodes, the Oath Keepers founder. The CSPOA advances a bizarre political theory that sheriffs and their deputized “militias,” or “posses,” are above the law, free to disobey any rule or regulation they deem unconstitutional.

Under conditions of the ongoing pandemic, which has officially claimed nearly 800,000 lives in the US and over five times that globally, the US ruling class, through the Republican Party, is mobilizing these fascistic elements in opposition to any public health measures that interfere with profit accumulation. They will be used to intimidate increasingly militant workers and youth into accepting mass death at job sites and schools, along with deteriorating working conditions, lower wages and unending police brutality.

In October, *Pro Publica*, working off the DDoS data, identified at least 48 present or former state and local government officials, all Republicans, who had joined the

Oath Keepers, including 10 currently sitting state lawmakers. *Pro Publica* also identified “two former state representatives; one current state assembly candidate; a state legislative aide; a city council assistant; county commissioners in Indiana, Arizona and North Carolina; two town aldermen; sheriffs or constables in Montana, Texas and Kentucky; state investigators in Texas and Louisiana; and a New Jersey town’s public works director.”

In all, *Pro Publica* found “more than 400 people who signed up for membership or newsletters using government, military or political campaign email address, including candidates for Congress and sheriff.” The authors were able to link three people uncovered in the leaks who had also been arrested at the Capitol, all of whom have pleaded not guilty.

One current lawmaker identified in the list is Arizona state representative Mark Finchem, who had previously been identified as an Oath Keeper and who was photographed on the Capitol grounds on January 6. While propagating Trump’s “stolen election” lies, Finchem has claimed that he never entered the Capitol or engaged in violent activity. Another Arizona state representative previously identified as an Oath Keeper and uncovered in the leaks is retired Air Force lieutenant colonel Wendy Rogers.

Last week Rogers, along with Trump-endorsed gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, held an “election integrity” rally in Phoenix, during which both called the 2020 presidential election stolen. Speaking to the far-right *Gateway Pundit*, Rogers called for “perp walks” and “arrests” in relation to the election audit. Rogers called on “my constituents” to “do affidavits, and then you need to present them to the sheriff, the sheriff which has broad authority, so that the sheriff can conduct an investigation.”



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