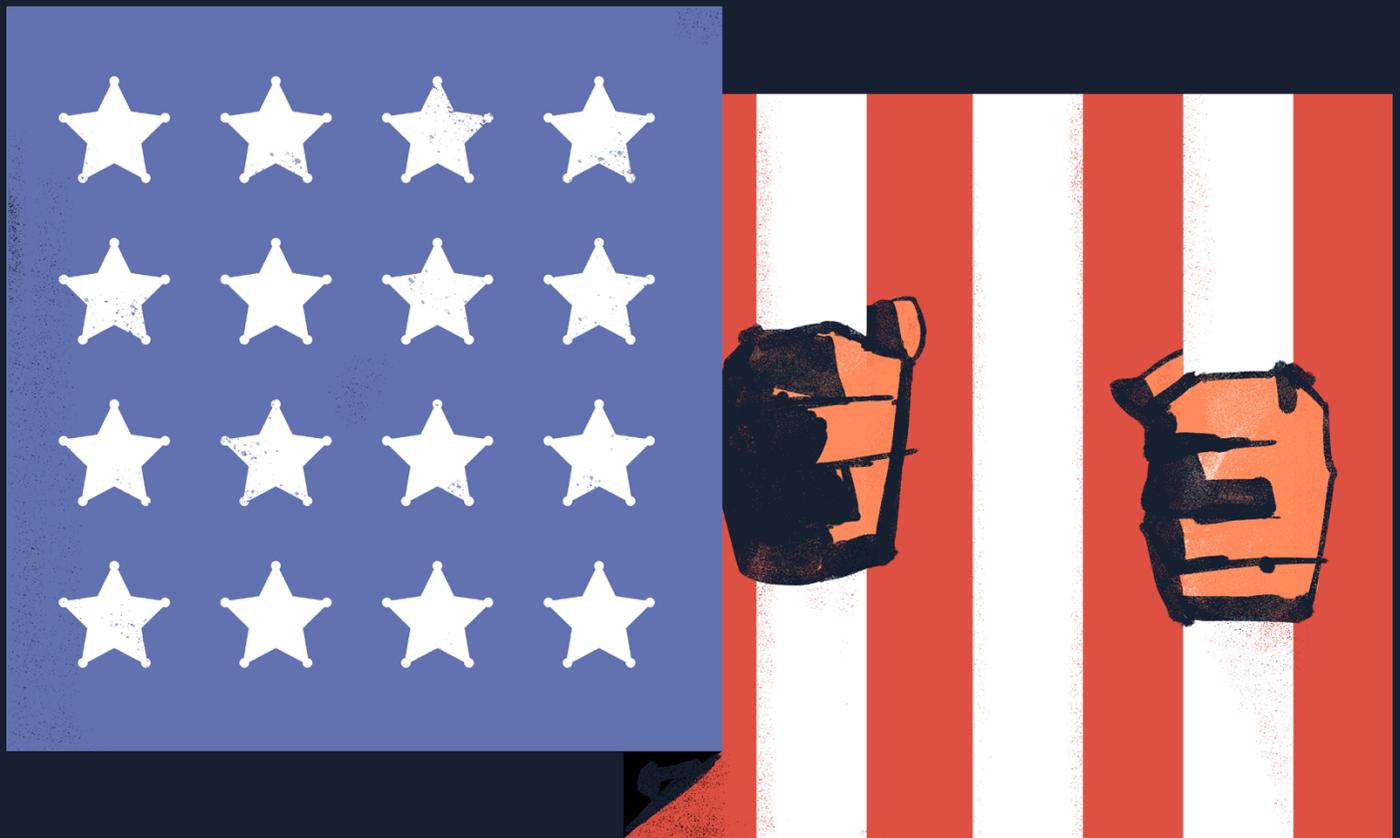


Confronting the Demographics of Power

AMERICA'S SHERIFFS

June 2020



In a Time of Upheaval, Sheriffs Finally Face Scrutiny

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare persistent structural inequities and launched roiling policy debates about health care, workers' rights, and child care. It has also brought new urgency to the need to fundamentally rethink the criminal justice system—especially our system of mass incarceration. **As the pandemic shines a light on jail conditions that threaten the health of incarcerated people and staff alike, an overdue national conversation about sheriffs is finally occurring.**

The nation's 3,000 county sheriffs are elected officials; they run for office in 46 states, often in unopposed elections. The Reflective Democracy Campaign tapped our data to craft a demographic profile of American sheriffs, who manage county jails and a wide range of law enforcement activities, yet operate with less oversight than local police chiefs or commissioners.

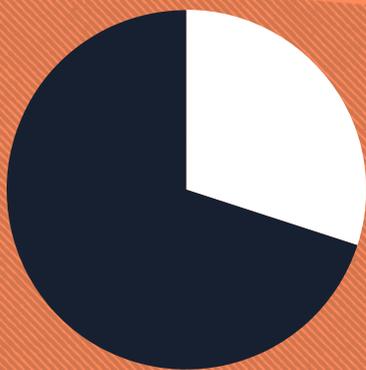
Sheriff demographics are gravely unbalanced: While African Americans are confined to jail at over three times the rate of white Americans, **only five percent of sheriffs are African American.** And even as the

number of women in jail trends higher, **fewer than three percent of sheriffs are women.**

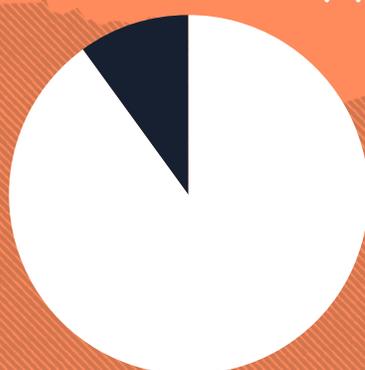
Overwhelmingly white and male, sheriffs intersect with their communities at sensitive and critical moments. Sheriffs commonly oversee residential evictions, domestic violence calls, traffic stops, polling place monitoring, and criminal investigations.

Charged in many counties with enforcing public health regulations, at least 60 sheriffs from New Mexico to Wisconsin are openly refusing to enforce COVID-related restrictions.

Sheriffs in America



White men are 30% of the population



White men are 90% of sheriffs

“ Sheriffs nationwide display both apartheid-level demographics and an extreme lack of accountability. This should deeply concern anyone who believes in justice, equality, and the rule of law. In a country that is half women and nearly half people of color, such a concentration of unchecked police power in the hands of white men calls into question the very legitimacy of the sheriff's role and of the systems sheriffs control.

Brenda Carter

Director
Reflective Democracy Campaign

The Rap Sheet on America's Sheriffs

The flouting of local laws by sheriffs has a long and troubling history. The far-right “Constitutional Sheriffs” movement has for decades encouraged its adherents – elected officials charged with law enforcement – to refuse to enforce gun control measures, federal land regulations, and other laws incompatible with their extremist ideology.

The alarmingly skewed demographics of sheriffs suggest a system hard-wired for abuse, and their track record of mistreating women and people of color confirms it. Sheriffs enforced Reconstruction-era state terror against African Americans in the South, and were notorious for beating and gassing civil rights marchers.

As late as 1953, sheriff’s deputies in North Carolina hung a black man from a tree. Today, up to 1000 inmates perish in sheriffs’ custody each year, and the majority are people of color such as Sandra Bland, found hanging in a jail cell after a traffic stop.

Yet county leaders can find themselves powerless to discipline or remove sheriffs implicated in malfeasance. Governed mainly by state Constitutions, sheriffs can act with unique impunity, subject only to the will of voters whose hands are tied when (as happens nearly 60 percent of the time) incumbents run unopposed.

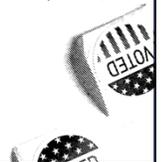
County sheriffs can be a menace to the community or agents of change. Their demographics underscore the pressing need for change, while a growing movement for reform points to solutions that curb their unchecked power.

Abolish, Reform, or Replace

Should sheriffs even exist? Connecticut voters abolished the role in 2000.

In Los Angeles County, whose 24,000-person Sheriff’s Department is the 7th largest law enforcement agency in the nation, **voters overwhelmingly supported new oversight measures to curb abuses by sheriffs.**

Across the nation, sheriffs who better reflect their communities by race and gender are winning elections on the promise of ending violence, corruption, and bias.



When race and gender imbalances combine with lack of oversight, sheriffs can openly engage in vicious abuse with no repercussions and ample rewards.



In 1972, **Florida’s Sheriff Willis McCall** was acquitted by an all-white jury of kicking a mentally disabled black prisoner to death. Twenty-three years earlier, while driving two black prisoners awarded a new trial by the Supreme Court, Sheriff McCall pulled over and shot them by the side of the road, killing one of them.



Arizona’s Sheriff Joe Arpaio ran for the US Senate in Arizona in 2018 after 157 prisoners had died in his custody, and his name had become synonymous with racial profiling and inmate torture. He is running for re-election as Sheriff in 2020.



In 2020, **Massachusetts Sheriff Thomas Hodgson** used attack dogs and a grenade containing tear gas and pepper spray against ICE detainees protesting punishment for seeking COVID testing. The attack is under investigation as possible retaliation for a class action lawsuit filed against Hodgson and ICE for overcrowding and inhumane conditions during the pandemic.

Sheriffs Are the Definition of Minority Rule

Our research into the race and gender of sheriffs uncovered a gravely unbalanced system. **Ninety two percent of sheriffs are white. Ninety percent are white men.**

Our data have revealed other examples of white male overrepresentation: At 30 percent of the population, white men are 62 percent of the country’s legislators, and 73 percent of elected prosecutors. But we have found no other elected office so overwhelmingly controlled by white men.

Fifty percent of people in jail are of color, and across the United States the vast majority of people in jail have not been tried. Pretrial detention – imprisoning those who cannot pay bail – accounts for over 60 percent of the jail population. Given the large body of research showing that law enforcement policies and practices affect people of color disproportionately and unfairly, a policing system comprised nearly entirely of white men is a system in need of change.

In many states with large non-white populations, nearly all the sheriffs are white.



California is 63% people of color yet sheriffs there are 91% white.



People of color are the majority in Nevada. Nevada sheriffs are 94% white.



The residents of Arizona and New York both are 45% people of color. The sheriffs in both states are nearly all white.



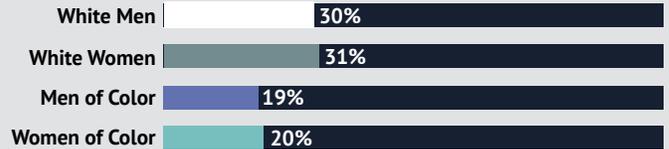
New York is near the bottom of the list in racial diversity among sheriffs.



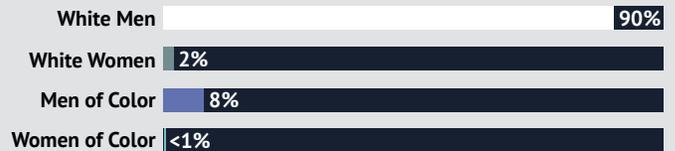
Washington State has virtually no sheriffs of color, while its population is over 30% people of color.



US Census Demographics, 2010



Sheriff Demographics, 2019



| States with 30%+ People of color | % People of color | % People of color sheriffs |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| California | 63% | 9% |
| New Mexico | 62% | 39% |
| Texas | 58% | 16% |
| Nevada | 51% | 6% |
| Maryland | 49% | 21% |
| Georgia | 47% | 13% |
| Florida | 46% | 6% |
| Arizona | 45% | 7% |
| New York | 45% | 4% |
| Mississippi | 43% | 36% |
| Louisiana | 41% | 8% |
| Illinois | 39% | 4% |
| Virginia | 38% | 15% |
| North Carolina | 37% | 21% |
| South Carolina | 36% | 22% |
| Oklahoma | 34% | 5% |
| Alabama | 34% | 16% |
| Washington | 32% | 0% |
| Colorado | 32% | 3% |

Sheriffs Hold Power Over Women and Families, Yet Nearly All Are Men

Less than three percent of sheriffs are women, even as county sheriffs interact with women and families at some of their most vulnerable and terrified moments.

In many jurisdictions, county sheriffs enforce orders of eviction. As pandemic-related unemployment hits women of color with singular impact, they and their families are more likely to face ejection from their homes.

Sheriffs' deputies are often the first responders to domestic violence calls. COVID-19 is isolating women with their abusers, and calls and texts to hotlines are skyrocketing. These furtive cries for help require thoughtful intervention at a time when many women's shelters have closed their doors.

75 percent of sheriffs voluntarily collaborate with ICE to hold undocumented people in custody for deportation. With COVID spreading unchecked among incarcerated people, immigrant families risk losing their loved ones forever.

“The public may be aware of extremist sheriffs like Joe Arpaio, notorious for racial profiling and inmate torture.

But as the family separation crisis drags on with no end in sight, the many sheriffs who voluntarily detain undocumented people on behalf of ICE must answer for the pain they are inflicting on families and communities.

Richard Morales
LA RED/Faith In Action



In 36 states, fewer than 5% of sheriffs are women. 16 states have 0% women sheriffs.



During A Pandemic, A Night In Jail May Mean Death

While a small cluster of reform-minded sheriffs has taken steps to reduce jail populations both before the pandemic and in response to it, the absence of official oversight means many sheriffs are free to keep their jails full, all but guaranteeing their facilities will become epicenters of infection.

Should public drunkenness, parole violation, or poverty lead to death? Medical care in jails is often outsourced to private for-profit operators, who face hundreds of lawsuits annually for neglect, malpractice, and wrongful death.

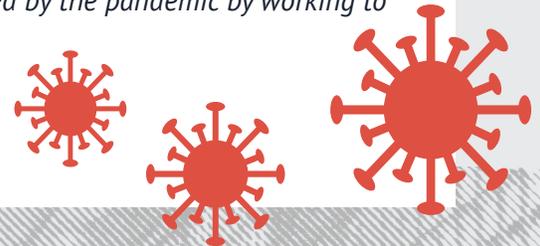
Even before the pandemic, the movement to reduce jail populations and limit pretrial detention resonated mostly in urban areas, where the use of jails is on the decline, and where sheriffs are more likely to reflect the population they hold in jail.



“ COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire in jails across the country, causing devastation in its wake. As a former public defender, I have seen the conditions that allow the virus to flourish: shared spaces and surfaces, unsanitary facilities, subpar medical care, and no meaningful ability to socially distance. All of this is exacerbated by the constant flow of people within jails, including officers and staff. Experts have made clear that reducing the number of people incarcerated is critical for preventing transmission of the virus.

While many sheriffs have the authority to reduce new bookings and grant early release, this is not happening nearly enough. In addition to taking immediate measures to protect the people who are incarcerated – like providing PPE and hygiene products, ensuring responsive medical care, enabling social distancing that doesn't involve punitive isolation, and facilitating free phone and video visits with loved ones and lawyers – sheriffs could be taking far greater steps to actually minimize the devastation caused by the pandemic by working to decarcerate the facilities they oversee.

Premal Dharja
Founder & Director
Defender Impact Initiative



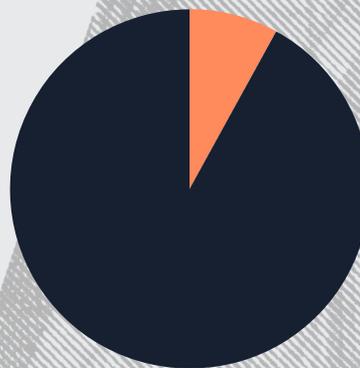
Jails in America

On an annual basis, there are nearly 11 million admissions to county jails.

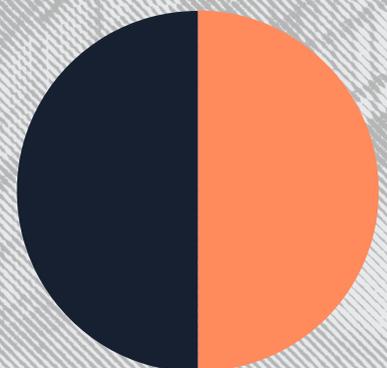
The daily headcount in jail is estimated at over 700,000 people.

Over 60% are awaiting trial.

50% of jailed people are people of color.



People of color are 8% of sheriffs



People of color are 50% of jailed people

Voters – And Competitive Elections – Are Key To Change

Many sheriffs are not accountable to local government, and some have stayed in office even after they've broken the law. Yet the majority of sheriffs run unopposed, and these unopposed candidates are nearly all white and male. This dynamic protects the dangerously skewed demographics of power: In 60 percent of races, voters have no choice about who to vote for. **Yet change is possible. In competitive elections for sheriff, our data show that diverse candidates who reflect all their constituents are winning.**



Reform measures aimed at checking the power of sheriffs are finding favor with voters. **In early 2020, voters in LA County passed a measure bolstering civilian oversight over the Sheriff's Department.** The landslide victory for public accountability occurred in the wake of scandals over deputy-involved shootings and allegations of misconduct.



In 2018, voters in North Carolina's seven largest counties elected African American sheriffs, including 91% white Buncombe County, where Quentin Miller won on a platform of reform after the beating of a black jaywalker by police.



In April 2020, voters in Ohio's Hamilton County handed an overwhelming primary victory to Charmaine McGuffey, a lesbian candidate for sheriff. The incumbent sheriff she beat was her former boss, who had fired her as the Sheriff's Office first female commander.



Sheriff Garry McFadden of North Carolina ran and won on reducing his county's role in helping ICE with deportations.

As festering problems of inequality become life-or-death emergencies in the pandemic, voters and advocates are poised to reshape the contours of health care, the economy, and the criminal system. The national silence about the extreme demographics, beliefs, and powers of county sheriffs has normalized their most outrageous behavior, including blatant refusal to enforce laws they don't like.

Courageous activists have been fighting a lonely battle to end the reign of the unchecked sheriff.

Now is the time to join them.



For as long as sheriffs have stood central to our system of mass punishment, brave organizers have sought to change their role by stopping lynchings, defeating new jails, and ending collaboration with ICE that breaks apart immigrant families. Historically, these have been organizers of color - formerly enslaved people - who also risked their lives to bring down the notorious system of convict leasing. From Harry T. Moore, who 70 years ago fought the racist violence of Florida's Sheriff McCall, to the activists of Bazta Arpaio in Arizona today, this is a unique moment to make their radical vision happen at last.

Max Rose

Director

Sheriffs for Trusting Communities



About the Reflective Democracy Campaign

Confronting the Demographics of Power

The [Reflective Democracy Campaign's](#) groundbreaking research and analysis help shape the national conversation about race, gender, and politics, shining a light on both the stark imbalances distorting our democracy and the current wave of victories by candidates who reflect the American people. Sparking activism against the structural barriers that keep people of color and women from the halls of power, our data, reports, infographic toolkit, and other resources are freely available at [WhoLeads.U.s](#).

Along side our research, we support leaders and organizations committed to changing the face of power. Our organizing grants focus on building political power in local communities to realize the potential of leaders who reflect their communities, while our research grants yield break-through findings about the systemic barriers that maintain the status quo— and innovative strategies for dismantling them.

The Campaign was founded by the [Women Donors Network](#) in 2014 to pursue a democracy where all of us are reflected. Now we're at the forefront of the growing movement to elect leaders who truly reflect the American people.

To learn more about the Campaign and to access our data, reports, infographics, and other resources go to [WhoLeads.U.s](#).

Methodology

The number of jurisdictions that have elected sheriffs varies by state, but across all 50 states the mean number of elected sheriffs is 60 per state; Texas has the greatest number of sheriffs with 251, while Alaska, Connecticut, Washington D.C., Hawaii, and Rhode Island have zero elected sheriffs. Across the nation, we looked at 3,036 elected sheriffs; to gather this information, our researchers reviewed voter files and other publicly accessible data. We were able to match race and gender to 99% of the elected sheriffs in our dataset.

To identify unopposed and opposed races, we searched our 2018 candidate database; if a sheriff's office had only one candidate listed, that race was designated as unopposed. The remaining elections were designated as opposed. Note that we counted the number of opposed

seats rather than the number of opposed candidates; if three candidates vied for the same seat, they were counted as one sheriff seat. In total, 731 sheriff seats were identified as unopposed out of 1,236 unique sheriff seats up for election in 2018.

Please note that for this report presentation, percentage values are rounded up and may not add up to 100%.

This analysis is built on top of the Ballot Information Project and Governance Project datasets maintained by the Center for Technology and Civic Life (CTCL). Race and gender data for candidates and elected officials has been aggregated since 2014 by CTCL in partnership with the Reflective Democracy Campaign.

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