

DEFUND SHERIFFS

A TOOLKIT FOR ORGANIZERS



COMMUNITY
RESOURCE HUB
FOR SAFETY & ACCOUNTABILITY

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The Republic hired the sheriff
"to keep the Republic White—to
keep it free from sin."

JAMES BALDWIN



INTRODUCTION

One month before Sandra Bland's death, Lamar Alexander Johnson was pulled over in Baker, Louisiana for driving with tinted windows. Four days later, he was found hanged in his jail cell while in the custody of the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office. His family organized the community to take to the streets to demand answers, but the sheriff blocked their every move. Lamar became one of the thousands of Black Americans who have lost their lives in the hands of sheriffs.

Today, people across the country are protesting against state violence – against murder, brutality and mass incarceration, overwhelmingly perpetrated against Black and brown people. The slogan on the signs may read "Defund the Police," but protesters have built a movement to defund policing – divesting from all systems that seek to control and punish Black and brown people through violence, including jails, police and prisons. It also means investing in systems that provide real and equitable access to safety and justice. The protests have focused at times on federal agents in Portland and state troopers in Nashville, on police departments in Minneapolis and Atlanta, and in communities small and large, they have focused on sheriffs.

This toolkit aims to support that movement. Sheriffs and their deputies are responsible for approximately 1,000 deaths in jail each year. They make more than 2 million arrests and shoot and kill more than 400 people. Sheriff's offices are institutions with a legacy of racism, a track record of violence and limited oversight or accountability. **PART ONE** focuses on how sheriffs fit into the law enforcement landscape and how defunding them is essential to building safer and more just communities. **PART TWO** provides a step-by-step guide for how to defund your local sheriff, including guidance for understanding budgets, identifying leverage points and defining an alternative vision. Because sheriff's offices have enormous autonomy (often enshrined in state constitutions and occasionally, but rarely, checked by a county board), change starts with campaigns in your community. We hope this resource is helpful to anyone trying to start, join or support a defund sheriffs campaign.

LAMAR'S STORY

On May 26, 2015, Lamar Alexander Johnson was driving to pick up his grandmother from a dialysis appointment.

A police officer stopped him for having tinted windows and found an old warrant for writing bad checks. The officer arrested Lamar and brought him to East Baton Rouge Parish Prison, a notoriously brutal jail that had claimed the lives of 14 men in the previous three years. Lamar's mother, Linda, called the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office repeatedly over the following days, with little response.

Four days after his arrest, witnesses say Lamar experienced a change in mental status and the jail responded by putting him in solitary confinement. On May 30th, deputies found Lamar hanging in his cell. At every stage, the Sheriff's Office obfuscated, throwing up hurdles to the family seeing him in the hospital and delaying the coroner's report, which would show synthetic THC in Lamar's bloodstream from his time in the jail. The Sheriff's Office still has not addressed allegations that guards within the jail are complicit in the distribution of that synthetic THC — a substance known to cause psychotic episodes. Nor has the office addressed the lack of adequate mental healthcare that allowed Lamar to go without medical care or supervision during a mental health crisis.



Linda still questions his death and the system that kills so many Black people like Lamar. Channeling her desire for answers and accountability into action, she started meeting with family members of people who had died in the jail. That group became the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison Reform Coalition, a force for changing the justice system in their Louisiana parish. They have shined a spotlight on conditions within the jail and led a fight to cut funding for the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office. Lamar would want her to fight for those changes, Linda says.



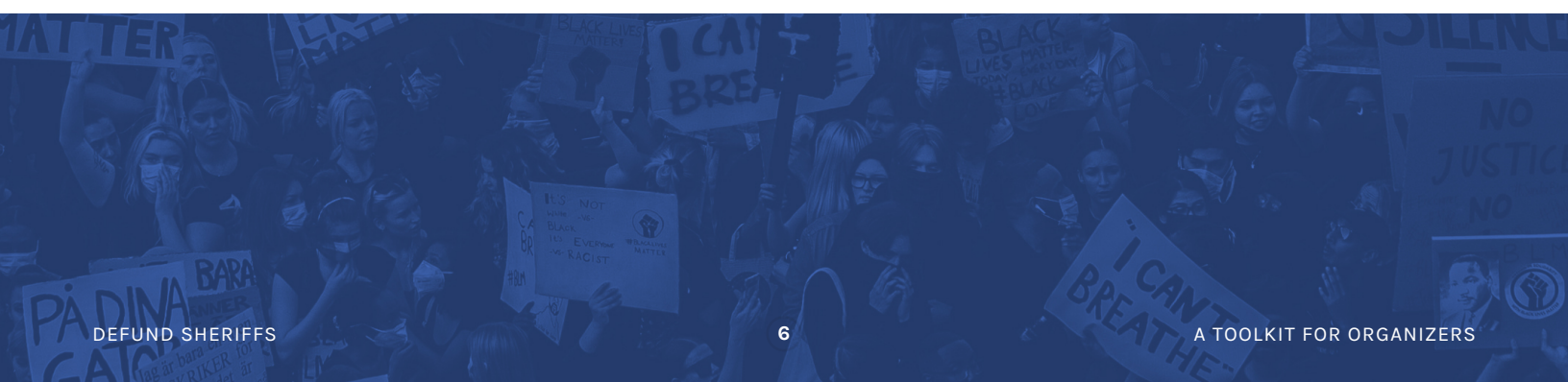
PART 1: POLICING AND JAILING, NOT JUST POLICE

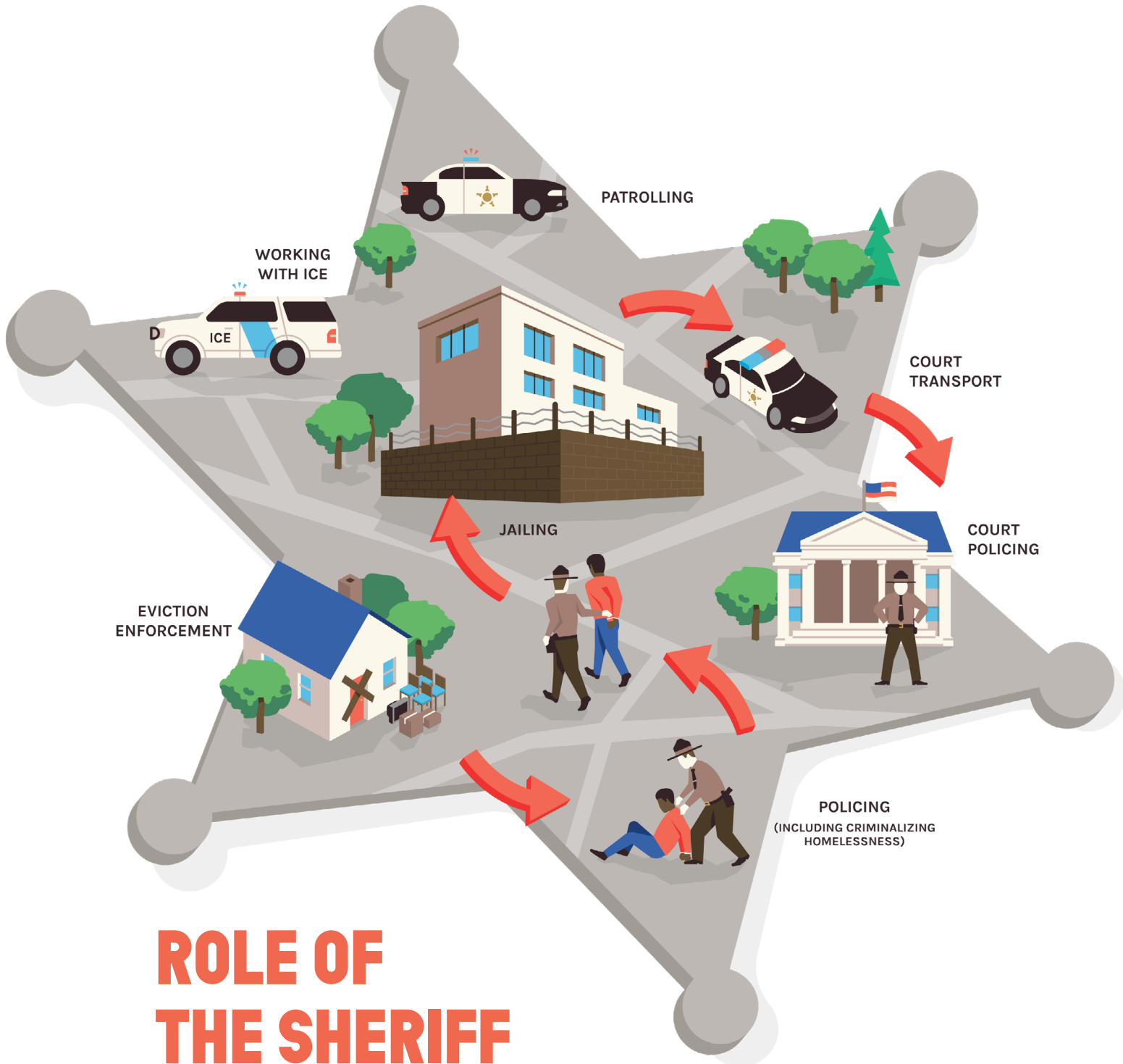
SHERIFF'S OFFICES ARE COUNTY-WIDE LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES WITH THREE KEY ROLES:

POLICING: Like police departments, sheriffs and their deputies patrol the streets and make arrests, particularly in suburban and rural areas. They choose who to arrest and how to arrest, often perpetuating state violence. They often serve as officers within schools, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

JAILING: Whether someone is arrested by a police officer, a sheriff's deputy or a state trooper, they're usually brought to a jail controlled by a sheriff. There are more than 11 million unique admissions to jail each year and roughly 80% of those people are detained in jails controlled by sheriffs. With the lack of sufficient health options, jails have become the default institution for people with mental health issues or substance use disorder. Those same jails are central to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportation machine (often through voluntary decisions by the sheriff).

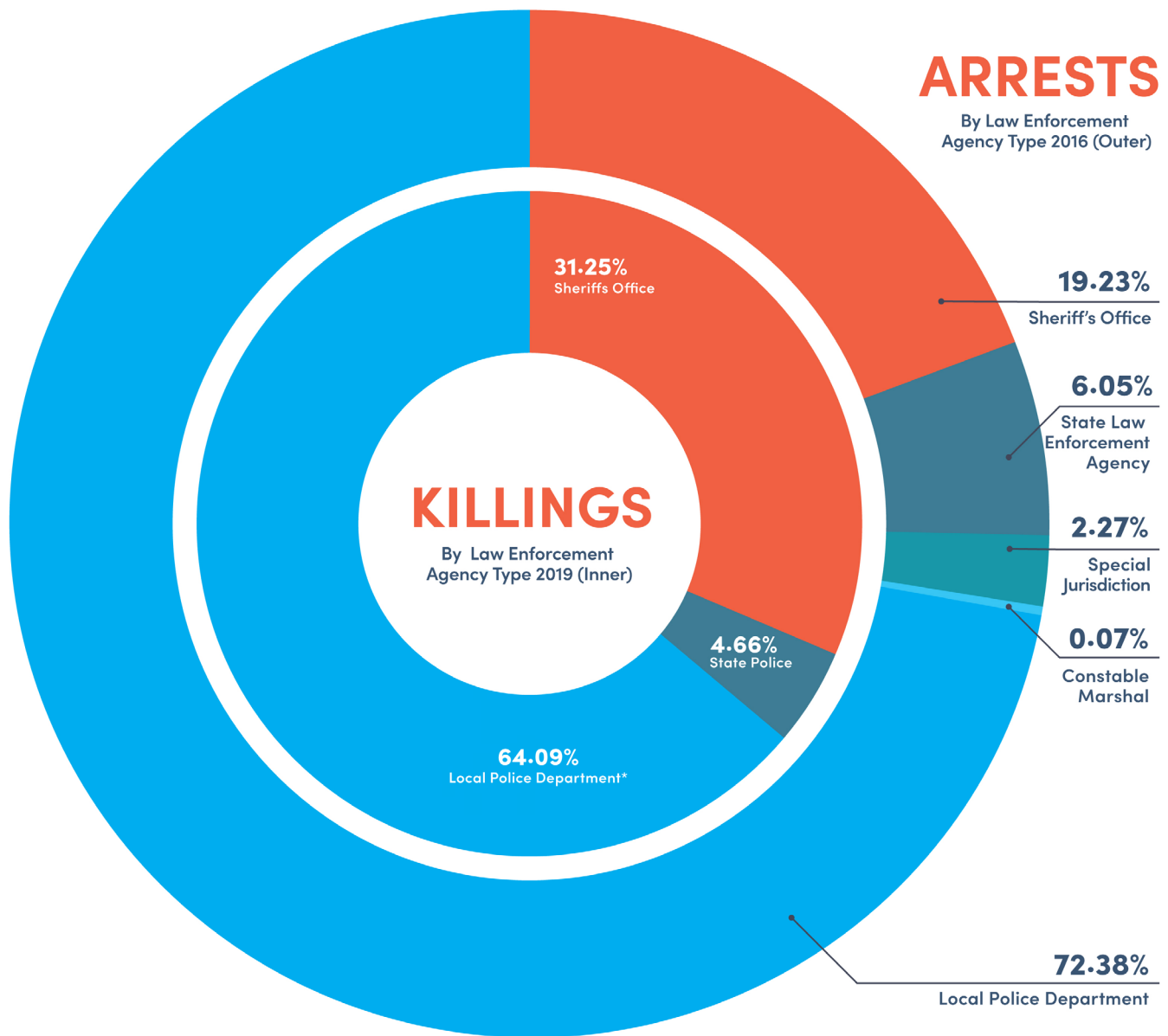
CIVIL ENFORCEMENT: Sheriff's offices enforce evictions and issue permits for concealed weapons and for political protests.





ROLE OF THE SHERIFF

POLICING, NOT JUST POLICE



The death of Lamar Alexander Johnson at the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison illustrates one of the reasons why ending state violence must include a strategy to defund sheriffs, but there are many other reasons. Sheriffs have a long, violent history in the United States. Despite the courageous efforts of Black and brown communities to fight back,

sheriffs remain in the way of progress on everything from housing to healthcare justice. Given the overlapping jurisdiction sheriff's offices have with municipal police departments, it's critical that we include them in any conversations about defunding policing. Otherwise, we risk simply replacing one law enforcement agency with another.

*Killings by university and college police departments omitted. Police deaths include housing authority police departments.

Killings Source: Susan Parker of the University of Michigan calculation from Fatal Encounters data

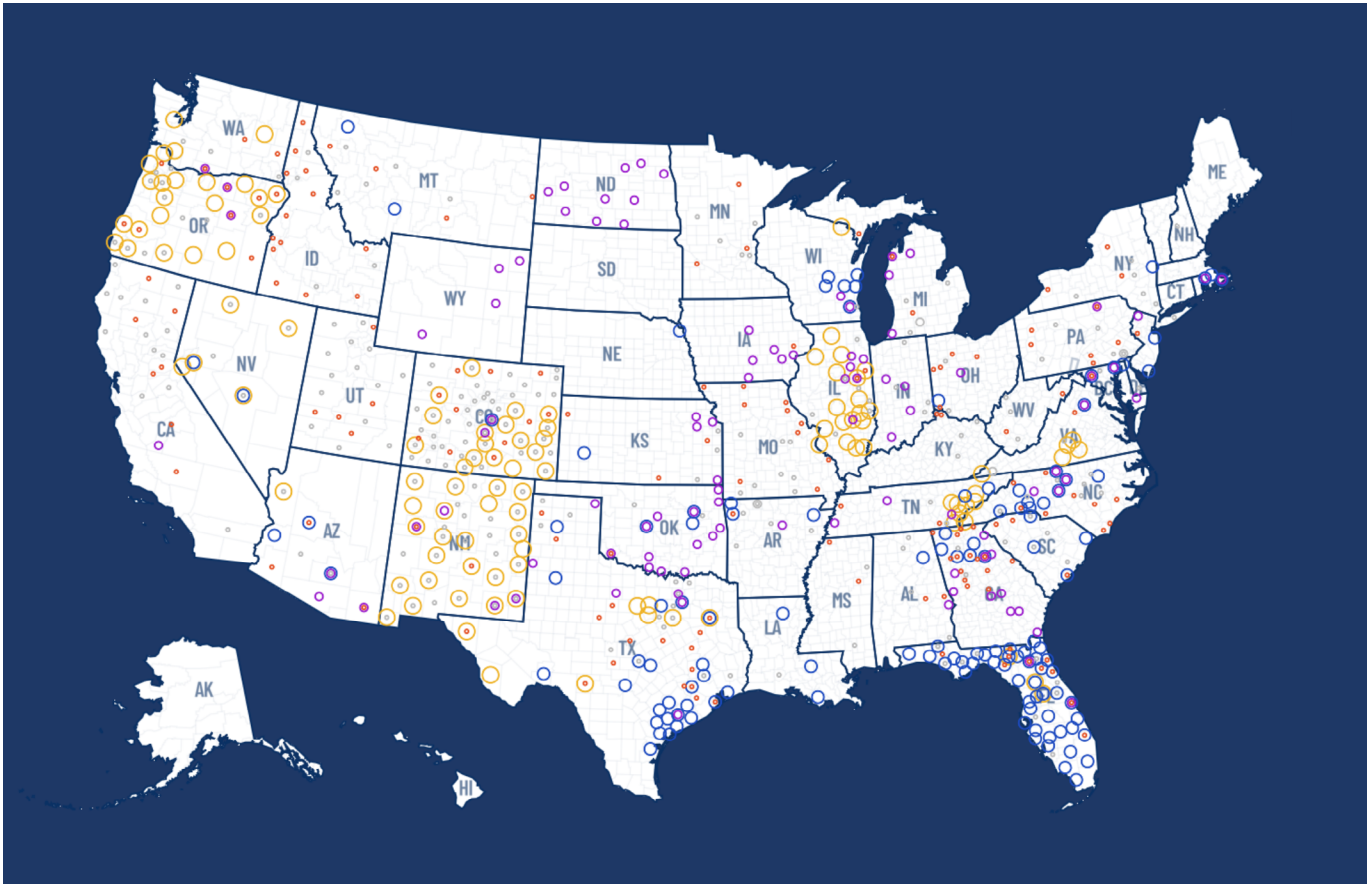
Arrests Source: Aaron Littman of the UCLA Law School calculation from FBI UCR data



CENTRAL TO STATE-SANCTIONED VIOLENCE, PAST AND PRESENT

Sheriffs initially gained power in the South through convict leasing — arresting formerly enslaved people on bogus charges and selling them to local industry and agriculture. Sheriffs and their deputies went on to enable decades of lynchings and prevent Black people from voting through intimidation and enforcement of racist voting laws. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the sheriff's office evolved again, taking a central role in the mass incarceration and over policing of Black and brown communities.

Throughout this history, the sheriff also has existed as a potent symbol of white supremacy. During Freedom Summer, a sheriff's deputy in Mississippi arrested three civil rights workers and then facilitated their murder at the hands of klansmen. On Bloody Sunday, Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark and his posse rode in on horses to beat John Lewis and other protestors. In recent years, sheriffs like Joe Arpaio in Maricopa County, AZ and Terry Johnson in Alamance County, NC have systematically targeted and demonized Latinx residents. And for each of these sheriffs whose violence and racism has made headlines, there have been thousands more who have terrorized their communities without making the news.



An increasing number of sheriffs identify with far-right and anti-immigrant movements.
Map Source: Political Research Associates. [Click for interactive map.](#)

CONSTITUTIONAL SHERIFFS

All elected sheriffs see their legitimacy deriving at least in part from the mandate given by voters, but some sheriffs go further, espousing a particularly dangerous version of the sheriff's power that suggests that they don't need to comply with state or federal laws. While defying state and federal laws is not actually constitutional, these sheriffs have used this pretense to lead the way in refusing to enforce gun control and mask laws. That interpretation, tracked closely by Political Research Associates, is associated with white supremacist movements across the country.



CENTRAL TO THE HISTORY OF THE STRUGGLE

While the history of the sheriff is a history of white supremacist institutions, the history of justice movements is a history of brave resistance by the very people sheriffs have sought to oppress. Formerly enslaved people testified in federal court as part of the cases which tore down convict leasing. In 1908, after Sheriff Joseph Shiff of Hamilton County, TN permitted a lynching from his jail, Black residents surged to defeat him in a reelection attempt.

Half a century later, as John Lewis and other civil rights movement leaders fought to regain the right to vote, they used the violence of sheriffs like Jim Clark to expose the brutality of Jim Crow and win the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Five years after that law's passage, newly enfranchised Black voters elected John Hulett (who had helped lead the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's voter registration drive during the 1965 Freedom Summer) as Sheriff of Lowndes County, Alabama.

In 2015, Sandra Bland's death sparked new focus on state violence against Black women with calls to "Say Her Name," and in 2016, after more than a decade of organizing, a coalition called Bazta Arpaio dealt a blow to anti-immigrant hardliners by defeating Joe Arpaio in his bid for reelection. With the Black Lives Matter movement ascendant and protests breaking out after killings by law enforcement in communities across the country, organizers are writing the next chapter in this history of resistance.

OVERLAPPING JURISDICTIONS

That history also teaches us that mass incarceration and slavery tend to emerge in new forms when justice movements target only one element of the system. Sheriffs, if left unchecked, threaten to undermine efforts to stop state-sanctioned violence. This is because sheriffs have overlapping jurisdiction and access to nearly unchecked resources.

When the municipal government of Camden, NJ struggled with a budget crisis in 2012, it chose to abolish its police department, which had a long history of abuse and neglect. Rather than scaling back policing in this predominantly Black city, the government simply shifted policing to the county level, which didn't solve issues of abuse.

In 2020, communities are testing a similar approach again. Sheriffs in Norfolk, VA and Boone, MO are lobbying to take control of all local policing. In Glynn County, GA, there was an attempt to disband the police department responsible for the botched investigation into the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. Rather than weighing alternatives to policing, voters were asked to decide whether to move the policing responsibilities to the sheriff's office before the referendum was ruled unconstitutional. But history has shown that shifting policing from one institution to another will not solve the over-policing of Black and brown communities. The only way to avoid the harm of policing and jailing is to limit contact between all law enforcement and our communities.

OBSTACLE TO COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

In the last year, sheriffs have used their formal and political power to block criminal justice reform in Missouri, pass anti-sanctuary legislation in Florida and enforce millions of evictions across the country. Sheriffs increasingly have become an integral part of the federal government's mass deportation machine, as Immigration and Customs Enforcement relies on sheriffs' voluntary cooperation to break apart immigrant families. The Vera Institute of Justice is tracking increases in mass incarceration driven by a rural jail boom, where sheriffs have built new jails, in part with incentives from the federal government. Sheriffs conduct evictions

and then often decide how to police the houseless population. Sheriffs pose a barrier to education justice advocates concerned about school resource officers fueling the school-to-prison pipeline and to housing justice and public health advocates who want to see their communities invest in care rather than in jail cells.

More than 150 years after the rise of the convict leasing system, the sheriff still plays a central role in many of the systems that oppress Black and brown communities. Our collective liberation will require divesting from the institution.



PART 2: HOW TO DEFUND YOUR SHERIFF

DEFUNDING YOUR SHERIFF WILL REQUIRE FIRST UNDERSTANDING ITS ROLE, ANALYZING ITS POWER AND THEN BUILDING AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FOR JUSTICE AND SAFETY.

Every campaign will be different. You can start by checking if anyone in your community is already driving this type of campaign and by learning the history of police and sheriff abolition. The following steps cover some of the common elements and will help you root your campaign in the reality of your community.



UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF YOUR SHERIFF

Forty-eight out of 50 states have sheriff systems (all but Connecticut and Alaska) and 47 of those states (Rhode Island as the exception), elect their sheriffs. (Some cities, such as New York City and Cleveland, have appointed sheriffs.)

As described in Part One, most sheriffs patrol, manage jails and lead civil enforcement, but some serve only one of those functions and sheriffs' roles differ even within a state. The key is to find out your sheriff's responsibilities

Questions might include →



DOES MY SHERIFF PATROL MY COMMUNITY? WHAT PATTERNS EMERGE FROM THEIR POLICING?

In many (but not all) communities, sheriffs and their deputies patrol the streets either supplementary to or in place of a municipal police department. While on patrol, most offices stop and search Black and Latinx motorists at disproportionate rates.



DOES MY SHERIFF RUN THE JAIL? ARE THEY BUILDING A NEW JAIL OR MAKING EFFORTS TO DECREASE JAIL POPULATION? ARE PEOPLE DYING INSIDE THE JAIL?

Sheriffs run most jails and dictate the safety and conditions within. In addition, sheriffs play a critical role in deciding who and how many people go to jail, through the power to choose whether to arrest people and through two additional powers of discretion:

- Whether to book people who come into the jail from other jurisdictions.
- Whether to release people from the jail to prevent overcrowding and disease.

A sheriff's discretion varies by state—the map on page 17 outlines how your sheriff might be able to use their discretion to decrease incarceration.



DOES MY SHERIFF COLLABORATE WITH ICE?

In all but a few states, sheriffs have wide discretion over whether and how to collaborate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Sheriffs can choose whether to share information with ICE, whether to hold people on behalf of ICE, and whether to participate in programs like 287g and the [Warrant Service Officers](#) programs, which allow deputies to act as ICE agents. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center describes [seven voluntary decisions](#) that sheriffs makes in our immigration system. Check out where your sheriff stands [at their map](#).



WHAT DOES MY SHERIFF DO TO FACILITATE EVICTIONS?

Sheriffs serve eviction notices, enforce eviction orders (including physical removal of tenants and their belongings) and oversee foreclosure auctions once people are evicted from their homes. While sheriffs do not play a role in whether courts order evictions, sheriffs do have some leeway and on rare occasions have placed moratoriums on evictions in the interest of public safety.



DOES MY SHERIFF PROVIDE ADDITIONAL POLICING TO PLACES LIKE SCHOOLS AND COURTS?

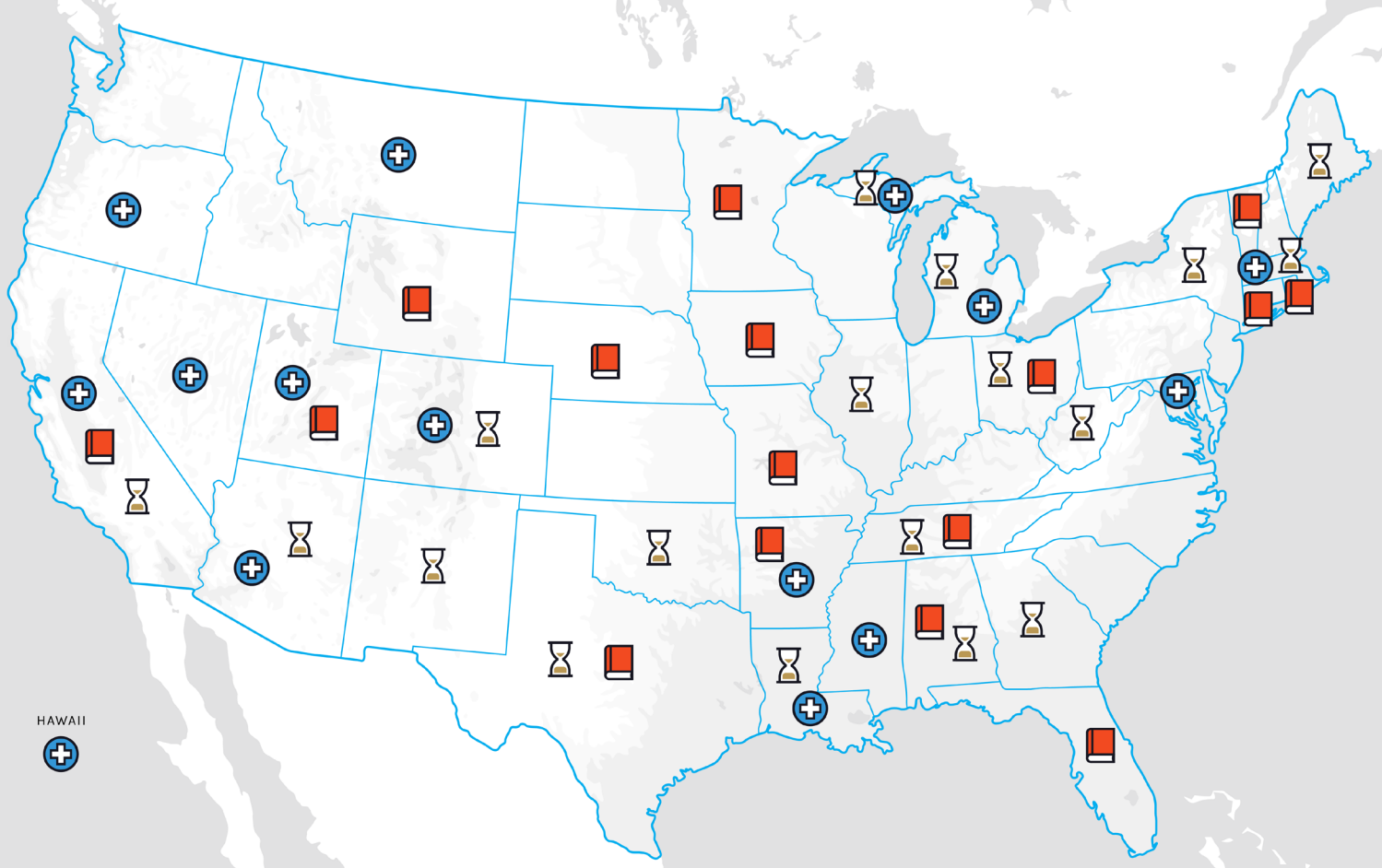
School resource officers may come from the sheriff's office and/or a local police department. This type of partnership is often brokered with the local public school system and can be a key link in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Sheriff's offices often handle courthouse security and transport people to and from the jail.

Some of this information may be easily accessible on the website of your local sheriff's office or municipal government. Other information may require a research meeting with your elected official or a public records request.

HOW TO DO A PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST

- 1** The [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#) (NFOIC) has sample templates for each state that includes the relevant public records law. These might be offices you'd like to send this request to that are not federal agencies (federal agencies often have separate online portals for requesting relevant information).
 - County Commissioners
 - Sheriff's Office (*typically a Public Information Officer is the person who can assist you*)
 - County Budget Office
- 2** Prepare the request with your specific information. A note from the NFOIC on this: Describe the records or information sought with enough detail for the public agency to respond. Be as specific as your knowledge of the available records will allow, but it is more important to describe the information that you are seeking.
- 3** Reach out to coalition partners for sample requests and/or if you'd like someone to review your request before submission.
- 4** Some agencies will accept emailed requests but some may require that you submit a physical copy to their office. Occasionally, offices may have their own online portals to submit requests.
- 5** Expect either limited information from the office and/or refusal to provide some information based on a variety of rationales, like personnel matters, sensitive information, etc.
- 6** Consider whether your campaign will need legal support in the event that the agency you're attempting to obtain information from is not responsive.







Sheriffs will say that they have no power to decide who is in jail. The Covid crisis, during which jail populations decreased by more than 10 percent, demonstrated otherwise. Aaron Littman's research has found an array of discretionary powers of the sheriff, which differ by state. Adapted from the research of Aaron Littman at UCLA School of Law. Cassandra Cole compiled and synthesized. "Aaron Littman, *Jails, Sheriffs, and Carceral Policymaking*, 74 *Vanderbilt Law Review* (forthcoming 2021)."

POWER OF THE SHERIFF IN MASS INCARCERATION

Understanding the roles and responsibilities of your sheriff will help you understand their impact on your community, how to argue for their defunding and who your allies might be. This knowledge also will help you understand their spending and revenue sources.

KEY

-  In every state sheriff's deputies have discretion to cite and release at arrest.
-  Jailers have some discretion to cite and release at booking.
-  Sheriffs have some power to release people from a facility due to illness or overcrowding.
-  Sheriffs have some power to reduce sentences or allow them to be served in the community.

UNDERSTAND THE SOURCES OF YOUR SHERIFF'S BUDGET AND HOW TO CUT THEM

The resources in sheriff's offices usually provide additional incentive to build new jails and maintain the status quo. However, while state constitutions often require some level of funding of sheriff's offices, organizers can find many leverage points.

The key sources for sheriffs' budgets include:

COUNTY PROPERTY TAXES AND OTHER LOCAL REVENUE SOURCES

These comprise the vast majority of sheriffs' budgets. Every year, sheriffs typically work with the county manager to prepare a budget proposal for approval by the local county government. Like most law enforcement agencies, sheriff's offices almost always request an increase and the county almost always approves the request. This budget usually comes from a locality's general revenue fund, which in turn comes directly from property taxes. Most county boards have the power to reject or reduce a sheriff's request for additional funding or to request additional documentation for decision making purposes. In other places, voters have direct decision-making about ongoing or one-time spending, such as building a new jail.

NEIGHBORING COUNTIES

When jails run out of space to hold people, those jails will often pay another sheriff to jail the people they do not have space for, providing an additional revenue stream for the sheriff they contract with.

STATES

Many states house people in local jails after conviction and then pay local sheriffs for each person. That potential revenue incentivizes sheriffs to lobby for harsher sentencing for misdemeanor crimes. Sheriffs also receive state grants for providing court security, policing schools and improving treatment of substance use disorders.

FEDERAL AGENCIES

Federal funding programs, including Byrne JAG and grants from the Department of Justice, Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, encourage the building of new jails and the further militarization of sheriff's offices. The Vera Institute for Justice has chronicled that these federal revenue sources have contributed to a jail boom, providing incentives to build bigger jails.

PRIVATE CORPORATIONS AND PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED

Sheriffs often split the revenue with private contractors for essential services within the jail. That revenue comes directly from the people incarcerated, for making phone calls, or buying food from the commissary. Jails also award the contracts to private corporations, and then money earned from the services go back to the sheriffs.

FINES, FEES AND FORFEITURE

Sheriffs receive funds directly from individuals inside and outside of a jail. For example, law enforcement sometimes obtains property through a process of civil asset forfeiture, in which belongings are seized before someone is even convicted of a crime. They charge people inside the jail for commissary and phone bills and, in some cases, sheriffs charge people a daily rate for their "stay," which become mandatory fines even if the individual is not found guilty of any crime or is later released.

The quality of publicly available information on a sheriff's budget differs by place and often excludes key line items such as contractors and detailed expenses. Online, the budget often

lives within a strategic plan on the sheriffs' website or within budget documents on the county's website. Many counties include lists of companies that contract with the local sheriff's office within their procurement departments.

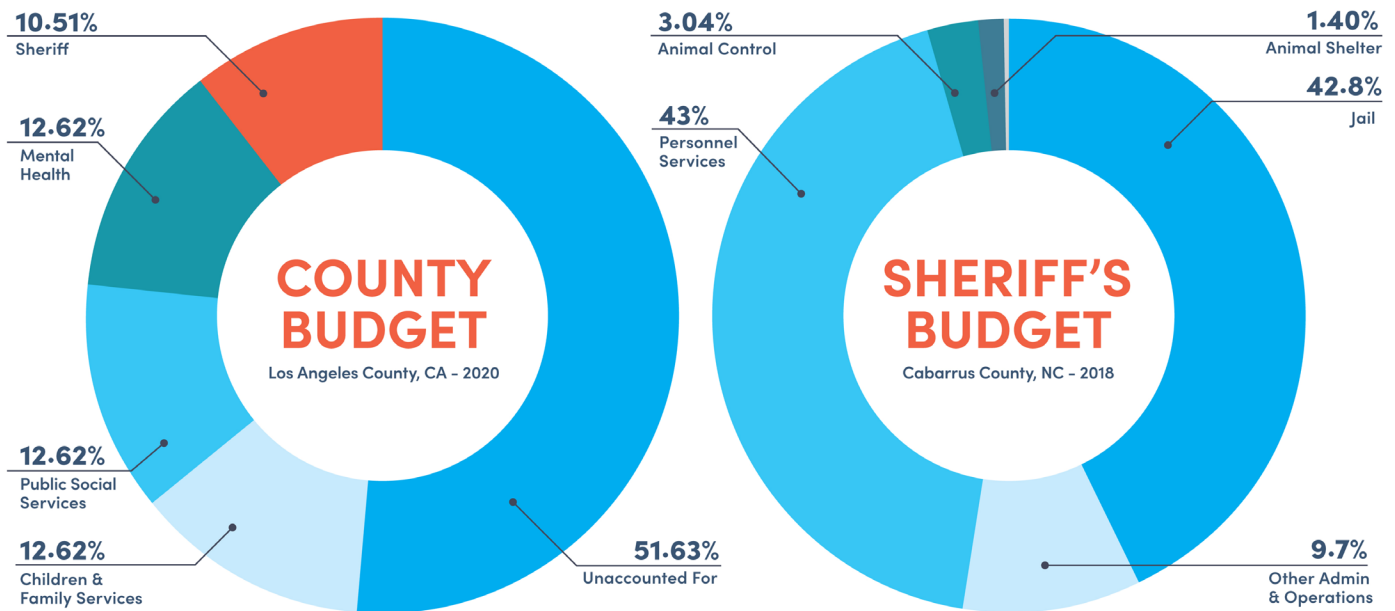
Federal (such as the Department of Justice) and state (such as a Crime Commission) agencies (such as the Department of Justice or a Crime Commission) might have funding sources on their websites as well.

THE MECHANISMS FOR DEFUNDING ARE SPECIFIC TO/CORRESPOND TO EACH OF THESE FUNDING SOURCES:

- A sheriff can request less money or cancel a contract.
- County commissioners may cut line items
- Voters can support ballot initiatives that cut funding or oppose ballot initiatives that increase funding.
- Corporations can eliminate contracts.
- The state and federal government can end grant programs.

Once you've figured out where your sheriff gets funding, you can identify which of these strategies make the most sense to reduce their budget.





UNDERSTAND HOW YOUR SHERIFF'S BUDGET IS SPENT

The opposition will always argue that any cuts to sheriffs' budgets put the public in danger, so understanding how your sheriff spends money is important. This will help you to know what can be cut, show misalignment between funding and values, rebut fearmongering and construct alternative systems.

QUESTIONS TO ASK INCLUDE:

- How much is the sheriff's office spending on things the community might be upset about (e.g. military equipment)? How has that changed over time?
- How does the sheriff's office's spending compare to its outcomes?
- Who are the major private contractors to the jail? Has the sheriff taken campaign contributions from people with a financial interest in the jail?

CASE STUDY: LOS ANGELES

In Los Angeles, starting with Dignity and Power Now (DPN), there has been a decade-long fight to hold the sheriff accountable. DPN convened the Coalition to End Sheriff Violence, which advocated for the establishment of a civilian review board LA County Sheriff Civilian Oversight Commission (COC). When the Coalition found that the COC did not have sufficient power, community advocates with the leadership of DPN founder Patrisse Cullors formed Reform LA Jails which proposed Measure R, a ballot measure that tasked the COC with developing a plan and conducting a feasibility study to reduce the jail population and re-invest jail system cost into alternatives to incarceration and community-based systems of care. Additionally, Reform LA Jails' Measure R provided the COC with the necessary teeth to fortify their oversight role through the power of subpoena. The new sheriff, Alex Villanueva, has continued to defy the new power of subpoena, and community advocates led by the budget justice work of the JusticeLA Coalition have gone directly after his funding sources. JusticeLA successfully defeated a proposed mental health facility, which would have put resources into the sheriff's office that should go into community care. JusticeLA successfully pushed for the closure of the LA County Men's Central Jail. The community efforts around defunding the sheriff continue to evolve throughout LA County. Reform LA Jails has begun building with community leaders to cancel the contracts between the sheriff's office and several towns, where Sheriff Villanueva's department is the primary policing power. The LA County Board of Supervisors and the Civilian Oversight Commission with the urging of community advocates have begun exploring options available to remove Sheriff Villanueva from his position. At the same time that community advocates and their allies continue in the fight to defund the jail and limit the expansive reach of law enforcement, they have begun to imagine a different system, led by community. Most recently having secured the victory of Measure J in November 2020, requiring 10% of unrestricted county funds (~\$1B) be spent on housing, mental health treatment and additional community reinvestment.



CASE STUDY: EAST BATON ROUGE

The East Baton Rouge Parish Prison Reform Coalition (EBRPPRC) centers the vision of families whose loved ones have passed away in the East Baton Rouge jail. The EBR jail has notoriously terrible conditions and 41 people have died in the sheriff's custody since 2012. Research by EBRPPRC into the sheriff's funding sources found that in East Baton Rouge, like the rest of Louisiana, a property tax helps to pay for the operations of the sheriff's office, contributing more than \$16 million annually. In July 2020, that tax came up for voter approval, which happens every 10 years. EBRPPRC, working in coalition with Louisiana and national organizations, led a campaign to defeat the tax renewal, focusing on how those funds could instead go to education and housing. The effort came up short, by five percentage points, but far exceeded the opposition to the tax in 2010, when the measure passed with 84% of the vote.



THE BUDGET CYCLE

The best time to advocate on many fronts, such as for a decrease in personnel or against the expansion/increased funding of jail facilities, is during the budget cycle when county property taxes and other local revenue sources are allocated:

1 YEAR BUDGET CYCLE FALL:

The budget officer/county manager provides direction regarding budget preparation and submission. This is a time to reach out to county commissioners/officials to discuss their and your priorities so they can work to submit changes in their departmental budgets.

1 YEAR BUDGET CYCLE EARLY SPRING:

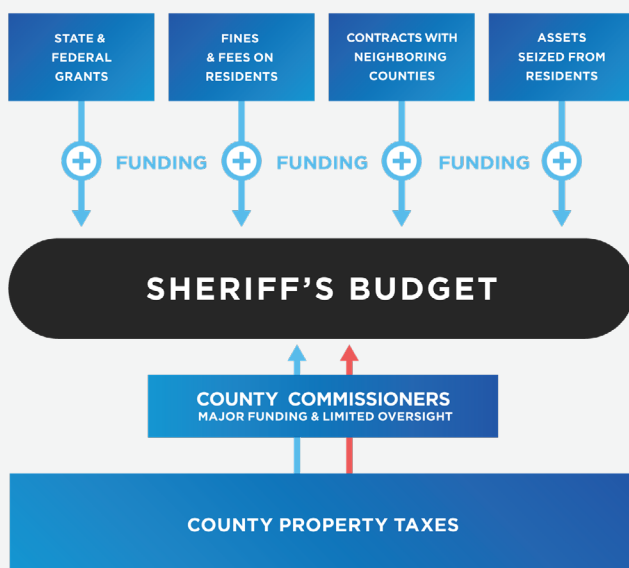
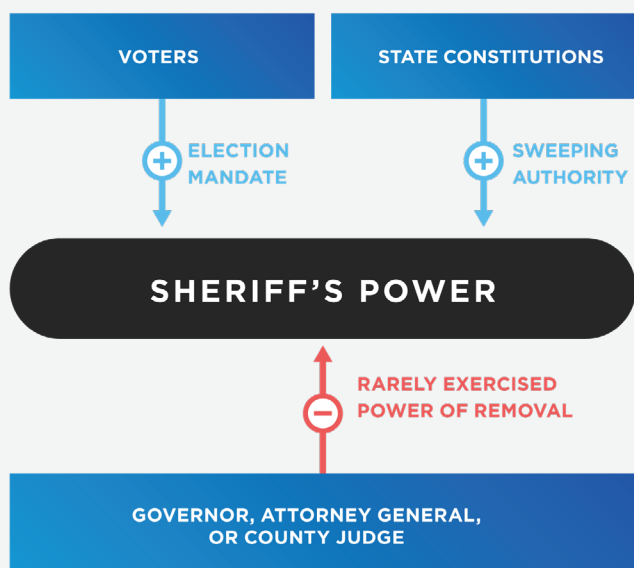
Each local department typically submits a budget request and revenue estimate to the budget officer/county manager for the upcoming fiscal year. The budget officer/county manager then prepares a budget for consideration by the county commissioners/decision makers (around June). A budget hearing for public input and discussion is then announced.

1 YEAR BUDGET CYCLE SUMMER:

In July, a budget ordinance (which lays out the budget revenues and expected expenses for the following fiscal year) is passed. The ordinance sets the spending priorities and revenue collection anticipated by the local government entity. Adjustments to the budget are made throughout the year depending on a variety of factors.

Some contracts come up for renewal throughout the year. These renewals are opportunities to push to end the contracts and the funding that comes with them. Examples include: school resource officer MOUs, jail contracts and ICE agreements.

THE SHERIFF'S EXPANSIVE AUTHORITY



SKETCH OUT A BIG TENT VISION

DEFUNDING SHERIFFS SHOULD BE AN URGENT PRIORITY FOR ANYONE CONCERNED WITH MASS INCARCERATION AND POLICE VIOLENCE.

Defunding also should be an urgent priority for anyone working on immigration, housing insecurity, economic justice, racial justice and many other issues. By sketching a big, bold vision for your community, you can generate more power and ensure that success in defunding the sheriff doesn't just lead to the same dollars being used to purchase military weaponry for other law enforcement agencies or the same jail cells being filled with different people.

Here are a few key considerations for any campaign to defund a sheriff's office:

1. DEFUNDING MEANS DECRIMINALIZING

Defunding sheriffs can help force our communities to explore solutions beyond policing, incarceration and deportation. However, if there are still 11 million admissions to jails each year, sheriffs will argue they do not have the resources to care for people in jails. That rationale is why defunding efforts simultaneously must dramatically reduce jail populations, include widespread decriminalization efforts and demand an end to electronic monitoring. These changes start with ending pretrial detention – as well as surveillance technology such as electronic monitoring and risk assessment tools, which are rapidly emerging as alternatives to traditional pretrial detention policies but still reproduce punitive and racially discriminatory criminal legal practices. Ending pretrial detention in a transformative way

can be accomplished by creating alternatives to arrest and incarceration; wide-scale decriminalization, starting with survival and drug economies; and sheriffs and elected officials operating on a presumption that people being held pretrial should be released.

As described on Page 17, sheriffs have the formal power to unilaterally decrease jail populations, which many demonstrated during the Covid-19 crisis. They can also use cite and release or desk appearance tickets in place of pretrial detention. And sheriffs also have enormous informal power, which they can use to encourage prosecutors to drop charges and release people held pretrial. Given sheriffs' political influence, efforts to divest should include demands that sheriffs pressure state lawmakers to decriminalize various crimes, create alternatives to incarceration and diversion programs, reduce time sentencing, end mandatory minimums and money bail and generally reduce jail populations.

2. FREE THEM ALL

A large portion of the sheriff's budget goes towards the jail, which has become the nation's answer to mental health issues, housing insecurity, drug crises and a number of social problems. If this approach is going to change, the approach has to be holistic and rooted in solidarity. Because sheriffs are often financially incentivized to keep jail cells full, they have a long history of responding to successful decarceral campaigns by replacing one incarcerated population with

another. Breaking this cycle – and ensuring that some people’s freedom does not come at the expense of others – requires connecting the fights of members of our communities across race, nationality, immigration status and housing status. This solidarity means ensuring that cutting one funding source does not accidentally motivate sheriffs to pursue contracts or grants from state or federal agencies that simply shift who they are policing or jailing.

Strategies to defund sheriffs should be paired with strategies to defund the police, prosecutors, state troopers and other parts of the carceral infrastructure. [Dream Defenders](#) and [Interrupting Criminalization](#) have produced incredible toolkits that identify resources for those campaigns.

3. INVEST IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND STOP EVICTIONS

Housing security is directly linked to the carceral system and mass evictions are to come as a result of the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, divesting from policing also should center stopping sheriffs from evicting families, which exposes people to criminalization and arrest. Developing homeless prevention and creating alternatives to evictions – such as guaranteed housing and support when someone falls

behind and faces evictions – is key. The United States has enough resources to stop homelessness, prevent evictions and end the privatization of profit over people; sheriffs are at the frontlines of enforcing evictions and maintaining cycles of homelessness and housing insecurity.

4. BE CREATIVE AND CLEAR ON THE ALTERNATIVES

Jails have become the central treatment facilities for mental health care and substance use disorder. We must begin to divest from these failed institutions and instead invest in community-based answers to safety, mental health and harm reduction. Defunding sheriff’s offices should simultaneously merge with reinvesting funds into community resources and institutions – including hospitals, housing, healthcare, economic security, living-wage employment, education, parks and community programs. Communities can imagine alternatives to policing such as violence interrupters, mental health crisis responders, homelessness outreach and prevention teams and non-police traffic safety alternatives. Providing concrete and compelling visions of these alternatives will help win community support. The Interrupting Criminalization Toolkit [provides](#) profiles of many of the possibilities.





JOIN THE MOVEMENT

Organizations such as the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison Reform Coalition and Dignity and Power Now offer many lessons for running successful defunding campaigns, and we have included additional resources below.

The coming year will also provide many opportunities to learn from one another as movements to defund sheriffs sprout across the country. Since the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, organizers across the country have called for defunding of sheriff's offices. In Snohomish County, WA, organizers successfully supported budget cuts to the sheriff's office. In Alachua County, FL, defunding of the office became a critical issue in the 2020 election. In Frederick County, MD, organizers paired a call for decreasing funding with a call to end collaboration with ICE through the 287(g) program. Organizers in Sacramento, Contra Costa and Alameda, CA have called for defunding or even getting rid of the office all together. By organizing to defund your sheriff, you can join this national movement that aims to create a fairer and more just system of public safety that meets the needs of all of our communities.

Working Families, Faith in Action Fund and Sheriffs for Trusting Communities are working with organizers to reimagine public safety, stop deportations and build power, through pressuring county sheriffs.

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