

Much of America wants policing to change. But these self-proclaimed experts tell officers they're doing just fine.

By [Robert Klemko](#)

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Listen to Robert Klemko read his story.

Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" screamed from the casino conference room speakers as hundreds of police officers stood to welcome Tomi Lahren with cheers and whistles.

The 29-year-old political commentator was the most anticipated presenter at the Street Cop Training Conference in Atlantic City in October, pumping up officers at a time when shootings by police, especially of Black civilians, have fueled calls for a rethinking of public safety and most Americans doubt police are adequately trained to avoid using excessive force. Lahren offered a starkly different worldview, one in which Black Lives Matter activists are "thugs, felons and criminals" and a "terrorist organization," and Democrats are instilling violent chaos in an effort to nationalize policing and restrict individual freedoms.

"If I'm wrong, please point it out," she told a crowd that organizers said numbered more than 1,000, from police departments large and small across New Jersey and beyond. "But all these major headline incidents that we've had in this country involving law enforcement in the last at least five years could have all been prevented if people would just comply with police, would follow orders and not resist arrest."



Tomi Lahren at the Street Cop Training Conference

The audience of law enforcement officers clapped and cheered.

Such rhetoric is flourishing in commercial police training settings, a Washington Post investigation shows, as departments try to respond to demands for change but also find themselves on the defensive in many communities.

With local, state and federal money for training plentiful, and with little guidance or oversight for what officers should be taught, some speakers at training conferences tell officers that pushback against conventional policing is a media invention. Others demonize civilian protesters and reformers, describing them as loud voices holding minority opinions. Still others say police should maintain a “warrior mentality” to weather the rigors of what they describe as the most dangerous job outside of military service. (In reality, law enforcement is the 22nd most dangerous occupation, safer than roofing and collecting garbage, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries.) Trainers include many former law enforcement officers and military personnel, some of whom are linked to extremist groups and anti-government movements.

To understand what officers are being taught, The Post interviewed 18 trainers and experts, watched recorded sessions of the Street Cop Training Conference in October and joined the Cornelius Project, a Christian ministry focusing on mental health in law enforcement, at a November conference in Idaho Falls, Idaho. In some cases, police and sheriffs’ departments paid for their officers to attend the conferences. In others, officers covered the cost. While police reformers and legislators nationwide have stressed a service-oriented approach to police training that emphasizes de-escalation and the avoidance of physical conflict, many sessions at these conferences presented violent confrontation as a rite of policing and, frequently, the only path.

“The curriculum is that you are a good person and reveling in violence and being an expert in violence is not morally wrong,” said Michael Sierra-Arévalo, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin who attended the Street Cop Conference. “In fact, it’s your moral duty because you’re a paladin. You are this kind of warrior.”

Little oversight, much secrecy

The International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training is the closest thing in the United States to a national regulatory group for police training. But its national certification program has certified only about 5 to 10 percent of the law enforcement industry’s available training courses, chief executive Mike Becar said. The organization usually functions more as a trade association, advising state commissions — known as Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) offices — on best practices.

Only one state, Nevada, requires certification from Becar’s group for vendors that offer in-service training. And even then, it’s only required in some cases.

State commissions typically define standards for the training of recruits, Becar said. Years ago, when he was executive director of Idaho’s Peace Officer Standards and Training office, vendors also submitted lesson plans for midcareer training, and those materials — along with the vendors’ résumés — would be reviewed by policing experts. But as police training became more specialized in the past 20 years, many states began leaving such reviews to police chiefs and sheriffs, Becar said.

“Most of [the POSTs] have gotten out of that business because they don’t have the expertise and they don’t have the time,” Becar said. “And they say, ‘Well, if the agency sends their people to the training, we’ll accept it.’ The problem with that is the agencies don’t know what’s valid, defensible, safe training, using the best methods.”

The New Jersey attorney general’s office said it has taken action to prevent officers from attending training considered inappropriate. But a spokesperson declined to provide examples and said the state does not review course curricula or evaluate teachers.

The lack of oversight of police training is becoming more problematic, Becar said, as the national push for police reform boosts the opportunities that ex-officers, ex-soldiers and others see in providing in-service education. The founder of Street Cop Training — whose programs are accepted by the state of New Jersey — left policing less than a year before his township settled an excessive-force lawsuit against him. Texas and Montana have certified training that is offered by Richard Mack, a former sheriff who has built a reputation pushing back against gun-safety laws and mask requirements and markets himself as “the constitutional sheriff.” This November, a hacked membership list for the Oath Keepers, a far-right, anti-government group that participated in the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, showed that 65 members had worked as law enforcement trainers.

“Because of all the police reform that’s been in the news, a lot of them are seeing where they can make a dollar by offering some kind of training,” Becar said.

The U.S. Justice Department issues tens of millions of dollars in grants annually that police departments can use for training, but the agency leaves it up to regional and local governments to determine what that training should be. Experts say it is inevitable that at least some federal money ends up funding training that emphasizes violence over de-escalation and demonizes social-justice groups. The department declined to comment.

The surge in for-profit police training affects rural areas the most, said Jonathan Smith, the executive director of the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, since officers from small departments rarely have convenient access to government-run in-service training and must rely on the private sector.

“They’ve got no internal affairs capacity. They don’t have an early-warning system,” Smith said, referring to a computerized system used to track officer performance and identify problematic behavioral trends. “It’s in some ways incredibly dangerous that these small departments are using these vendors.”

Many companies decline to release course materials for public scrutiny. Occasionally, media entities obtain unsavory lesson plans and transcripts, prompting outrage. In 2020, the BlueLeaks hack, in which activists obtained and released a trove of police-related data, revealed that instructors for a federally funded training group, the Midwest Counterdrug Training Center, used homophobic and racist language, including the n-word, in lessons. Problems can surface with in-house police training also: a high school newspaper obtained images in 2020 from a Kentucky State Police slide show that quoted Robert E. Lee and Adolf Hitler and encouraged each trooper to become “a ruthless killer.”

“We have a severe missing-data issue, which is that we get locked out of these conferences,” Sierra-Arévalo said. “Every time that we get leaks from these things, the same rhetoric is there.”

What they’re teaching

There were two common threads in the conferences in Idaho and New Jersey: dismissal of the push for police reform as the overhyped effort of leftists and mainstream news organizations, and promoting violence as a central component of policing.

Experts said the former is a predictable reaction to the vigilance and scrutiny that has surrounded policing since the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

“It makes perfect sense, when you are attacked, rally around the flag, metaphorically,” said David A. Klinger, a professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. “That’s sort of a natural human instinct, so it would make sense to me that what you saw could be a reaction to the slings and arrows that were sent towards law enforcement in the last couple years.”

The conference organized by the Cornelius Project, named for the biblical Roman commander Cornelius, featured a session with Chris Amos, a former Norfolk police officer who gained viral Internet fame for his letter rebuking former NFL player Colin Kaepernick’s public calls for police reform. Amos painted a bleak picture of policing in Virginia, telling the audience he encouraged his son, a former police officer, to transfer out of the Norfolk Police Department because area leadership had been cowed by social justice advocates.

There’s a “war on cops,” and the goal is to dismantle police departments, Amos said. He described Floyd’s killing as a “perfect storm” for leftists looking to abolish policing.

With Floyd’s killing, “they had everything. They had a video. They had witnesses, including many officers,” Amos said, referring to activists seeking police reform. “So what do you do when you can demonize someone? Then it’s okay to burn down police stations. It’s okay to burn down precincts, it’s okay to burn out police cars. ... Law enforcement is so vilified ... it’s okay to lie in wait and ambush them.”



Chris Amos at the Cornelius Project conference

Earlier that day, the audience of more than 100 officers was reminded to fill out sign-up sheets in the church lobby so they would get in-service training credit for attending the conference. More than 120 officers from departments applied, including those of Provo (Utah) and Boise (Idaho), as well as the Wyoming Highway Patrol.

The seminar also included talks by officers about battling depression, organizing community initiatives and dealing with the aftermath of killing a suspect. It featured a presentation by retired Army Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, the father of an infamous brand of police training dubbed the “warrior mentality,” which emphasizes a militaristic approach to policing.

Grossman, too, told attendees that mainstream news organizations were wrongly painting police as villains — a theme Lahren and others stressed repeatedly at the Street Cop Conference in New Jersey.

“I know the world seems like it’s anti-police right now. But it’s not,” Street Cop Training founder Dennis Benigno, a former officer in Woodbridge Township, N.J., told those officers. “It’s the media portraying it that way. They get one out of 750,000 of us doing something stupid, we all pay the price ... but it doesn’t mean it’s true.”



Dennis Benigno at the Street Cop Training Conference

Benigno left policing in 2015, months before the township settled a lawsuit with three women who were arrested after he leaped onto the hood of their car and pointed a gun at the driver. The women’s lawyer said they were suspected of shoplifting. Officers didn’t recover anything stolen, however, and charges against the women — including assaulting Benigno — were dropped.

The women’s lawyer, Cynthia Hughes Hardaway, sounded shocked to learn about Benigno’s new career. “You say this man, who behaved like he was arresting a serial killer when my clients were only accused of shoplifting, is now training police officers?” she said. “Lord, Jesus.”

Benigno and his instructors encourage officers to pull drivers over for minor offenses after identifying behaviors that they say are consistent with illegal activity such as drug smuggling. That can include glancing quickly at a police officer, some said; or nodding at the officer, others said; or not looking at all, according to others. Benigno said that during his career, he pulled motorists over for traveling “three or four over the speed limit and other violations nobody employs.”

Research indicates that those policing tactics, known as pretextual stops, are associated with racial profiling and can lead to unnecessary confrontations with law-abiding citizens. They have drawn fire from liberal lawmakers across the country.

The week-long Street Cop Conference, which cost officers or their departments \$499 per person, also included addresses by ex-Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell, featured in the film “Lone Survivor,” and Tim Kennedy, an Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter who has served in the U.S. Special Forces. Asked by an officer what it meant to have a warrior mentality, Luttrell described a lion being harassed by jackals and hyenas, “till one day the lion gets up and tears the s--- out of everybody,” Luttrell said, “eats everything in its path. Sometimes, every now and again, you’ve got to remind those jackals what you are.”



Marcus Luttrell at the Street Cop Training Conference

Kennedy encouraged officers to be “more dangerous” than the situations they encountered and shared words that motivated him: “Be the calmest person in the room, but have a plan to kill everyone.”

“It wasn’t that long ago that we were drinking out of the skulls of our enemies,” Kennedy said. “Like, I’m gonna f---ing murder this guy, take his head, cut his head in half, and then I’m going to boil his skull and then have a drink out of that skull.”



Tim Kennedy at the Street Cop Training Conference

Inquiries rarely result in action

When problematic police training is identified, efforts to stop it can be minimal.

Last spring, Kim Vickers, the executive director of the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, a body akin to other states’ standards and training boards, began hearing concerns about a training program sweeping Texas and much of the Mountain West.

The classes were taught by Mack, a former sheriff of Graham County, Ariz., and a founding member of the Oath Keepers.

His classes are centered on the idea that many of the local, state and federal laws regulating and restricting guns are unconstitutional. In the past year, Mack also has aimed his ire at coronavirus-related mandates, which he argues sheriffs have no duty to enforce.

Vickers declined requests to be interviewed about Mack’s training program. But Gretchen Grigsby, the director of the Texas commission’s office of government relations, said the organization did not find evidence of training that encouraged law enforcement officers to violate state or federal laws.

“We received complaints about the group indicating they were teaching something outside the bounds of what is acceptable,” Grigsby said. “We sent two investigators to a class and found that wasn’t the case.”

A September report published by the [Anti-Defamation League](#), which monitors extremism, paints a different picture.

Senior research fellow Mark Pitcavage wrote that during a training session hosted by Mack in the Woodlands, a Houston suburb, “constitutional attorney’ KrisAnne Hall told law enforcement attendees that state and county laws are superior to federal law and that the county sheriff is the most powerful elected official in the country.”

It was a sheriff’s duty, she said, to disregard federal gun laws.

The International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training said it has found problems in numerous police training programs it has reviewed, including one delivered by former military personnel who taught tactics used in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We had a couple of programs that we’ve denied recently that have been problematic,” Becar said. “One of them was training that was being delivered by ex-military people. Every example was things that were done in Afghanistan and Iraq. And they were talking about enemy combatants and things like that. Well, the public are not enemy combatants. The others that we see are very biased, racially.”

He said he could not provide more specifics, however. The association is contractually bound to keep secret the identity of the vendors whose training materials it reviews — an incentive offered because applicants can be wary of being criticized publicly for training that does not meet standards.

For a \$1,000 fee, program director Peggy Schaefer and her fellow experts on policing curriculums will review a for-profit vendor’s course curriculum and materials and provide feedback on areas to improve.

Suggested changes can be minor. On occasion, Schaefer said, course material that is outright racist or encourages unconstitutional policing will prompt her to recommend that a vendor revamp its training. Becar said that many applicants take the advice but that some ignore it and forgo certification.

Schaefer, a former law enforcement officer in the city of Greensboro, N.C., and the state’s Guilford County, said she often sends feedback to trainers, suggesting ways to improve their curriculums or eliminate problematic parts. But the trainers do not always respond, she said.

“Sometimes they don’t come back,” she said.

So far, the certification effort, launched in 2015, has not had a significant impact on what programs can teach.

Smith, of the Lawyers’ Committee, predicted that the problem will only grow in the absence of a national oversight organization with teeth.

“There is lot of this rhetoric coming out of these organizations that misses what’s really going on, where people are crying out to think about policing differently,” Smith said. “Officers are getting trained in strategies and tactics that increase the risk to themselves, that increase the risk to people that they encounter, and undermine the legitimacy of law enforcement.”