

How a national police misconduct registry can help rebuild trust in law enforcement

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This week, the USC Safe Communities Institute announced the pilot rollout of the [Law Enforcement Work Inquiry System Registry](#), the first comprehensive national catalog of police officers who have been

terminated or resigned due to misconduct. The [LEWIS Registry](#), named after the late Rep. John Lewis, is designed to hold police officers and departments accountable and increase public trust in law enforcement. All information in the registry on misconduct—such as excessive use of force, corruption, domestic violence, assault and hate group affiliation—is drawn from public sources like official department statements, court records, news reports and other open sources.

USC News discussed the launch of the LEWIS Registry with co-founder Erroll Southers, director of the Safe Communities Institute and of Homegrown Violent Extremism Studies at the USC Price School of Public Policy.



Erroll Southers is a former police officer and FBI special agent and an expert in homegrown violent extremism studies. Credit: Kelly Buccola

Why is there a need for this kind of database?

Southers: The need is brought about by the fact that when [police officers](#) are terminated, they often go to another department. A recent Yale study was able to corroborate the fact that when they go to other departments, their behaviors become even worse.

Just as importantly, the payouts for misconduct across the country are alarming. One study that showed when you look at the three largest cities, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, they spent over \$2.3 billion in misconduct payouts over a decade.

Having served in three [law enforcement agencies](#) myself, I understand that this is not so much a training issue as it is a culture and people issue. Having been an assistant chief, I also know how difficult it is to fire an officer. The fact is that 23% of officers who get fired get reinstated. When they're fired, they need to be removed from the profession.

I believe this registry could really effect change in law enforcement and in the communities they serve, that must have trust in them.

You launched this registry on the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd, during continued Black Lives Matter protests against police violence. Did these protests make this registry possible?

The timing is absolutely connected. I grew up in an era when there were no cellphones, as a person of color subjected to police misconduct and abuse. You know, the only time my mother ever cursed, was when she

called the police department after I had gotten harassed walking down the street with some friends and the desk sergeant told her it didn't happen.

That was largely the motivation for me becoming an officer. After it happened several times, my father said to me, "You can't change the castle from outside the moat." I decided to become an officer to be part of that change I wanted to see.

I've served in three agencies, including the FBI. I know that there are good officers out there who are doing the right thing, and they're being painted with a broad brush by some people that shouldn't be in the profession.

What would you say to critics of this registry who think it's about "canceling" police officers?

To those people who believe that perhaps this is cancel culture, I say the misconduct that will get you fired, and get you entered into the LEWIS Registry, is crystal clear. I've spoken to chiefs across the country who are largely friends of mine, who all said they don't want people that would be entered into LEWIS Registry to work in their agencies.

I was a background investigator when I was in the Santa Monica Police Department. I wish I'd had a LEWIS Registry that would have immediately told me if an officer had come from another agency in California or another state in the country and had been fired. It would have saved my agency thousands of dollars and saved me lots of hours.

We aren't operating in a vacuum. Last summer, we did a nationally representative survey, which was funded by former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. We found that 80% of the people who took the

survey support a registry for officers who've been fired or resigned due to misconduct: 74% of Republicans, 76% of independents and 90% of Democrats.

There's pretty bipartisan support for this, then. Why didn't this registry already exist?

There's something called the "peace officers' bill of rights" and most states have one. There are the police unions. In the interest of full disclosure, I used to be on the board of a police union. We responded to allegations of misconduct requiring us to defend officers who were engaged in incidents that can only be described as unbelievable, both on and off duty. And then, of course, if an officer does get fired, the fact is you've got a 23% chance that they'll get reinstated with back pay. So those are the forces that keep us from having a national database of this type or having developed it even sooner.

I think that, with all due respect, the murder of George Floyd was an incredible game changer. Like many others, his murder was just an incredibly pivotal moment in my life and career.

To watch George Floyd get killed at the hands of the police, during nine and a half minutes in real time, seized the moral conscience of America and the world. Activists, law enforcement and communities across the country fully understand that this has got to change. I have had little to no pushback on this effort since we started. The only thing we have been asked is, "Why did this take so long?"

How will the beta testing of this registry work?

We have 22 departments that have volunteered to beta test the system, providing information that doesn't violate any human resources or

privacy laws. As a result of our analysis, we hope to identify trends and patterns that those chiefs may use to develop policy with regards to how they understand predictive indicators of potentially problem officers and reduce the risk of this happening.

Can you talk about the process of developing LEWIS and describe some of the other stakeholders involved in developing it?

We reached out to activists and community organizations like the Citizens United Against Police Brutality in Minnesota, the Los Angeles Urban League and the Los Angeles Brotherhood Crusade. We reached out to the police chiefs. We're currently conducting a survey with 300 law enforcement executives—the majority are chiefs across the country—to ask them deeper questions about how a registry would be useful to them.

We've talked to other institutions across the country that collect officer misconduct data to determine how we might collaborate and leverage our collective experience and expertise. The sole focus of the LEWIS Registry is on those officers who have been fired, so they don't "bounce" to another department.

Part of the motivation for this comes from my home state of New Jersey, unfortunately, where there's a 32-year-old officer who's working for his ninth police department. He has been fired by three of them. And he is still working. Why? New Jersey is one of the five states that if you get fired, you keep your certification for several more years. In California, if you get fired, you keep your what's called your POST [Peace Officer Standards and Training] certificate for three more years, so you are able to be employed elsewhere.

What's next for the LEWIS Registry?

We're populating the database. We've examined approximately two-thirds of the country and have over 200 officers already entered. We have already had people on social media who are aware of the registry contributing links to [news reports](#) about officers who are fired that we didn't know about.

There will be a public-facing side of the database that will be available for free, where people will be able to query any state and any agency to see who's been fired. And then there'll be a law enforcement only side where we'll have more sensitive data that law enforcement can examine and query for their own background information. That's taking some time, as we're developing government-level security protocols. There will be encrypted, password-protected access for law enforcement, so they can review predictive indicators and other information.

By next year, we hope to be fully operational for both law enforcement and the public.

What will success look like when it is fully up and running?

This is something that is going to benefit communities and it's going to benefit law enforcement. I think it's going to keep people safer. I have always felt that [law enforcement](#) was a noble profession. I still do. It's the reason that I was part of it.

This is something that I think can bring about real change and to reiterate—it has bipartisan support. I'm proud that USC could do it. You can't see me at this moment, but I have a big smile on my face. I like to see USC be first. Additionally, Dana Goldman, the interim dean of USC

Price, has been nothing but supportive since the very first time I even mentioned this initiative. Responding to challenges are easier when leadership supports your efforts to identify evidence-based solutions that can improve the quality of life for people and their communities.

Provided by University of Southern California

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