

# New Jersey police departments repeatedly hired training firm that promotes violence and bigotry

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14 January 2025

Almost 400 police departments in New Jersey paid more than \$1 million over five years to a private police-training company that promoted discriminatory and unconstitutional tactics, according to a new report by the Office of the State Comptroller. Some police departments repeatedly hired the firm after the Comptroller publicly criticized it in a December 2023 report.

Street Cop Training, the firm in question, encouraged “dangerous, improper and likely illegal policing tactics,” according to Acting State Comptroller Kevin Walsh. After the agency released its December 2023 report, several Street Cop instructors asked the company to cover up their ties to the company and hide their training materials. Street Cop was happy to oblige.

An active New Jersey State Police trooper asked to keep offering his on-demand courses without Street Cop advertising them on its website to “avoid any scrutiny” from the state, according to the comptroller. In multiple messages, other Street Cop instructors, including active New Jersey police officers, requested the company to keep their involvement and their training materials “from getting out there.”

Records reviewed by the Comptroller show that at least 20 New Jersey police officers disregarded the state attorney general’s orders to avoid the company and later registered for Street Cop’s annual conference in Florida in 2024. The current report demonstrates not only that Street Cop has continued operating with inadequate oversight since the December 2023 report, but also that the problem is worse than previously realized, said the comptroller.

But the problem is by no means confined to New Jersey. More than 2,700 municipalities from every state but Hawaii spent public money on Street Cop training between January 2019 and March 2023. Similar private firms across the country provide police training with little guidance or oversight.

The company first drew state scrutiny when it held a

policing conference at Harrah’s Casino in Atlantic City in October 2021. About 1,000 officers from across the country, including 240 from New Jersey, attended the event. During the conference, Street Cop instructors made more than 100 bigoted and harassing remarks, “with repeated references to speakers’ genitalia, lewd gestures and demeaning quips about women and minorities,” according to the comptroller’s December 2023 report.

Promoting military techniques and glorifying violence, instructors encouraged attendees to view themselves as warriors combating an enemy. They dehumanized civilians by referring to them as excrement or “live tissue labs.” They made comments and displayed photos and videos that objectified women and disparaged blacks, Mexicans, people from the Middle East and sexual minorities.

The Comptroller’s Office obtained one video in which a “guest speaker,” former Green Beret Tim Kennedy, told the 2021 conference:

I love violence. I love fighting. I love shooting. And I f\*\*king love freedom ... It wasn’t that long ago that we were drinking out of the skulls of our enemies.

Attendees were given a “Reasonable Suspicion Factors (RAS) Checklist” to determine whether a driver should be stopped. Some factors on the list were arbitrary and contradictory and would encourage unconstitutional motor vehicle stops, according to the comptroller. For example, if a driver is passing a police car, the checklist deems it suspicious if he or she looks away from the police. It also deems it suspicious if the driver looks at the police car.

Instructors also trained attendees to prolong traffic stops illegally in order to concoct justifications for searches or canine sniffs. The RAS Checklist claims that drivers who

assert their right to privacy when asked for consent to a search are suspicious.

One of the videos released by the comptroller showed the company's founder, Dennis Benigno, telling the assembled cops how they should deal with people who record interactions with police, a right protected under the First Amendment:

Shut the (expletive) up, right? About to get pepper sprayed, (expletive) Tased. Windows broken out, mother (expletive).

A street cop himself for approximately 10 years in Woodbridge, New Jersey, Benigno resigned in 2015 after being charged in a federal lawsuit by an African American woman who said she was "falsely arrested, racially profiled, and assaulted by the defendant officers based on her race and gender." Benigno, according to the suit, jumped on her car hood, pointed a gun in her face, and threatened to shoot her. He was formally disciplined three times by his department, including for the use of racist slurs.

Several instructors at the 2021 conference also encouraged insubordination. They told attendees to ignore direct orders from superior officers and to reject prosecutors' legal advice. They also glorified behavior that undermines the decision-making authority of the courts.

After reviewing videos, documents, surveys and materials from other Street Cop classes, the comptroller found that the Atlantic City conference was representative of the training that the company routinely provides. Public funds have been used to pay for officers, including New Jersey State Police troopers, to attend Street Cop classes.

New Jersey Attorney General Matthew Platkin responded to the comptroller's initial report by requiring police officers who went to the Atlantic City conference to attend a mandatory three-hour retraining session and to cease their dealings with the company. He also prohibited the state's Department of Law and Public Safety from paying for Street Cop training.

But the comptroller's latest report shows that several police departments ignored Platkin's orders and continued to hire Street Cop to train their officers. In response to these findings, Platkin merely asked individual departments to consider implementing additional retraining. He also vowed to refer the new report to the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights for potential civil rights violations. These face-saving measures will result in no meaningful changes in police behavior.

Training by Street Cop and other private contractors has

fostered lawlessness, bigotry and brutality among New Jersey police officers. Police in Paterson, the state's third-largest city, have become notorious for killing citizens in mental health crises, shooting unarmed men as they run away and beating teenagers without provocation. In response to mounting public uproar, Platkin took over Paterson's police department in 2023, citing "a crisis of confidence in law enforcement in this city." A state appellate court later ruled that Platkin had exceeded his authority in doing so, and the matter will be decided by the New Jersey Supreme Court.

In 2024, police killed more than 1,250 people across the United States, according to nonprofit research group Mapping Police Violence. This finding makes 2024 the deadliest year since the group began tracking police killings in 2013.

This violence is directly related to historic levels of inequality. The three richest Americans now collectively control more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the population combined. Both major political parties represent the interests of this corporate and financial oligarchy. As agents of the state, the police are the armed enforcers of inequality and the guardians of the wealth and interests of the capitalist class.

President-elect Donald Trump is preparing mass deportations, the dismantling of what remains of public health and public education, the abrogation of democratic rights and war on Iran and China. Democrats such as Senators Charles Schumer and John Fetterman, and even self-proclaimed "socialist" Senator Bernie Sanders, have declared their willingness to cooperate with Trump. These policies will provoke massive strikes and demonstrations that the ruling class will seek to suppress through police violence. Violent police repression, austerity and predatory war can only be stopped through the mobilization of the international working class against their root cause: the capitalist system.



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