

This Sheriff Says His Department Eliminated Racial Bias. Data Shows Otherwise. — ProPublica

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March 26, 2026

Reporting Highlights

- **Racial Profiling Lawsuit:** The sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, Jerry Sheridan, contends that his department has eliminated the racial bias that plagued it under his former boss, Joe Arpaio.
- **Disparities Persist:** Sheridan cites a monthly sampling of a few dozen traffic stops as evidence, while annual reviews have repeatedly shown continued disparities affecting Latino drivers.
- **Question of Trust:** Latino activists and residents contend the sheriff's department has yet to prove it can be trusted to police without bias and that court oversight should continue.

These highlights were written by the reporters and editors who worked on this story.

In one talk radio appearance after another, Sheriff Jerry Sheridan has declared that his department had eliminated the racial bias that plagued it under his former boss Joe Arpaio. As a result, he's quick to add, a landmark racial profiling court case dictating much of what the Maricopa County, Arizona, sheriff's department does should be dismissed.

"I believe we are in compliance with the court order. We're not a racist organization, and we don't racial profile," he said on Phoenix-area talk radio in March 2025.

In May, he told the same radio host: "Is the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office racially profiling or are they racially biased? We have documentation for well over 10 years that that is not the case."

His evidence for ending oversight stemming from *Melendres v. Arpaio*, the federal case whose 2013 settlement imposed parameters the department has operated under ever since, was a monthly sampling of a few dozen traffic stops. The settlement requires deputies to document each stop in exacting detail. The report, analyzed by a court-appointed monitor, showed individual deputies had not used race to initiate that limited sample of traffic stops.

But annual reviews of every traffic stop or arrest of a Latino driver have repeatedly contradicted Sheridan's claim. With the exception of one year, [each of the past 10 reports showed disparities affecting Latino drivers](#). The latest, [covering 2024](#), found, "Stops involving Hispanic drivers were more likely to result in an arrest than stops involving White drivers."

Under Sheriff Arpaio, deputies began in 2007 to use traffic stops to arrest people on immigration charges, illegally racially profiling Latinos in the process. When the constitutional violations spurred the Melendres lawsuit, a judge found they were so widespread that he included the county's more than 1 million Latino residents as plaintiffs in the case. Fallout from it ended Arpaio's political career.

Sheridan, a Republican, was Arpaio's second-in-command. During his campaign for sheriff in 2024, Sheridan pledged to cooperate with the court-appointed monitor. He predicted that the judge overseeing the case, U.S. District Judge G. Murray Snow, would be pleased to see him back in the courtroom given his understanding of the settlement. He could hit the ground running and bring the case to a close, Sheridan said.

In June 2025, the latest report finding bias against Latino drivers was released. Months later, in October, Sheridan was back on the radio repeating his argument: "There has been no racial profiling or bias in well over 10 years, and that's the gist of this lawsuit. The judge didn't want MCSO to racially profile or be biased, and we have proven time and time again that the deputies are not."

Latino activists and residents who endured the racial profiling and anti-immigrant policing of the Arpaio era tracked Sheridan's first year as sheriff with growing alarm.

They remembered that as chief deputy, Sheridan was caught on camera telling deputies that court-mandated reforms were "ludicrous" and "crap." (He later [apologized to the judge](#).) They also pointed out that Sheridan staffed his administration with key figures from Arpaio's time.

The activists and residents said their concerns were also rooted in the reality of the second Trump administration.

As Sheridan took office, President Donald Trump was initiating plans for mass deportations. Trump tasked Immigration and Customs Enforcement with expanding local law enforcement's involvement in street and workplace operations. If the case ended now, Sheridan would be free to join forces with ICE, critics said. Without the court to keep it in check, the Sheriff's Office could backslide.

The anxiety and anger were evident in the town of Guadalupe in February 2025, as Sheridan arrived for his first court-mandated public meeting as sheriff. Guadalupe was among the communities most affected by Arpaio's immigration patrols and workplace raids. Residents, who were there to receive an update on the court case, greeted the new sheriff with signs saying, "Deport Jerry Sheridan," and "We belong together not separated."

The court-appointed monitor, Robert Warshaw, told the crowd inside an elementary school cafeteria that Sheridan had requested that the meeting be canceled, citing safety concerns related to ongoing anti-ICE protests around metro Phoenix. (The request was denied.) This angered the residents.

Their frustration grew as Warshaw noted that although the Sheriff's Office was complying with more than 90% of the settlement, it fell short in two critical areas: continued racial disparities in traffic stops and failure to quickly investigate misconduct claims against deputies. Long delays in such investigations discouraged the public from reporting wrongdoing by deputies, attorneys and advocates said.

When it was Sheridan's time to speak, he addressed the doubters, citing the sample of traffic stops that showed deputies didn't use race to initiate traffic stops. He has also noted that the department is prioritizing the investigation of deputy misconduct complaints from Latino residents.

"The judge wants bias-free policing, and I want bias-free policing," Sheridan said. "All I can ask from all of you in this room, the people that live in this community, and the 4.6 million people in Maricopa County, is to let me show you by actions the things that I have said and the fact that we all want bias-free police."

Joel Cornejo, a community activist from south Phoenix who had protested Sheridan's arrival, told the sheriff that he'd come of age during Arpaio's raids. He said he was skeptical that Sheridan would fully comply with the lawsuit.

"We learned to fight your department," Cornejo said. "We destroyed Joe Arpaio's career. And if you target our community, we will do the same to your career."

Sheridan repeated his pledge to show them the department had truly changed.

"I need that opportunity from you, to give me that chance," he said.

Sheridan's victory in the sheriff's race capped a comeback that began after Arpaio lost reelection in 2016.

Under Arpaio, Sheridan rose through the ranks to chief of custody in 1999, running the county's jails. In 2010, Arpaio elevated him to chief deputy, helping oversee the entire department. He held the job for six years.

During those years, Snow later ruled, the Sheriff's Office illegally enforced federal immigration laws, violated residents' constitutional rights and ignored the judge's orders to end these practices.

Sheridan tried to distance himself from the controversies that led to Arpaio's defeat, rarely speaking of his former boss. He maintained that the immigration sweeps and patrols were carried out by a separate division while he was focused on running the jails.

Sheridan stands by his work as detention chief, which included supervising 60 detention officers certified through an ICE program known as 287(g), allowing the department to process people in its jails for deportation. Maricopa County remains the only Arizona county to provide office space for ICE agents in its jails.

Arpaio's efforts to arrest undocumented immigrants began under the same 287(g) agreement, which also allowed local officers to question individuals' immigration status during routine policing. Sheridan says he disagreed with Arpaio's tactics and tried to persuade him to not target day laborers or set up patrols in mostly Latino communities like Guadalupe. (Arpaio told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica that he considered enforcing immigration laws to be part of his job.)

During a 2015 court hearing, Sheridan denied that he knew about a 2011 preliminary injunction — issued while he was Arpaio's chief deputy — barring the Sheriff's Office from making immigration arrests. He didn't learn about the injunction until 2014, Sheridan said.

Evidence presented in court showed Sheridan had been notified starting in 2011. Snow accused Sheridan and Arpaio of "deliberately" violating the order, withholding evidence and failing to investigate and discipline deputy misconduct, among other things. "Sheriff Arpaio and Chief Deputy Sheridan are the authors of the manipulation and misconduct that has prevented the fair, uniform, and appropriate application of discipline on MCSO employees," Snow wrote in a 2016 ruling. He held them in civil contempt of court.

"I don't even remember exactly why the judge held me in contempt of the court — what exactly he used against me," Sheridan told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica. "He didn't think that I was truthful because I wasn't aware of something. And I was very truthful."

Arpaio did not endorse Sheridan's 2024 bid for sheriff and has declined to talk about him while hinting at a falling-out. "I made a couple mistakes, which are management mistakes," Arpaio told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica. "I may have appointed a couple of wrong people. But in managing, you try to back up your people and so on. So, in any big organization, you can't be perfect."

Sheridan filled key leadership positions in his administration with former colleagues who worked under Arpaio and who, like Sheridan, had left the Sheriff's Office after Arpaio lost reelection. Sheridan appointed retired Sgt. Clint Doyle to the Court Implementation Division, which is responsible for enforcing the court's mandates. And he rehired Paul Chagolla, who ran public relations at the time of Arpaio's raids and sweeps. Snow criticized Doyle's appointment, calling out Sheridan for attempting to bypass a court requirement that key leadership roles dealing with the Melendres settlement be approved by the monitor.

Doyle and Chagolla didn't respond to requests for comment.

Christine Wee, the lead attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Arizona, told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica that it was alarming to see so many from Arpaio's administration return. "These folks were instrumental in the abuse and the terror that so many of our clients had to experience," she said. "And then to bring them back in again, I think it sends a dangerous message to the community."

Sheridan acknowledges the criticism, but points to improvements like significantly reducing the misconduct complaints backlog. “From the sins of the previous administration, we’re now three different sheriffs since then, and some people just don’t want to let go.”

Residents of Gila Bend, Arizona, at a March 2025 town hall with Sheridan and other representatives of the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office.

Since Sheridan took office last January, Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica have attended seven of his public appearances, reviewed his public remarks and interviewed him on three occasions. During that time, his assertions that the department had done enough to justify ending court oversight grew bolder, and Republican allies amplified his efforts.

“It’s about time that the public gets over some of the things that happened well over a decade ago and to realize the deputy sheriffs that work in their community are really good law enforcement officers,” he told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica in a March 2025 interview.

Ending the settlement would eliminate the near-constant recordkeeping tasks deputies face while on duty, including documenting 13 details about each traffic stop. This hampers their “ability to do the job,” Sheridan said, and discourages interacting with the public. Deputies fear prolonging a traffic stop, even for a brief chat, will lead to discipline.

“If they see somebody walking down the street, they can’t just pull over and say, ‘Hi, how are you doing?’” Sheridan told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica. “Every time they contact a member of the public, it is a lengthy process. And so it slows them down and it intimidates them not to want to do it.”

Last March, Sheridan began organizing meetings, in addition to the court-ordered gatherings, in rural communities policed by the Sheriff’s Office.

In Gila Bend, a town of about 1,800 southwest of Phoenix, Sheridan said he wanted to hear about locals’ needs. The town pays more than \$900,000 a year to the Sheriff’s Office for public safety services.

“I’m a good leader and our deputies are responsive to your needs,” Sheridan told the group inside a community center. “And that’s really what this is all about, right? The sheriff’s main job is to keep people safe.”

A slide displayed data about traffic stops, calls for service and dispatch times. “For the population that’s here in Gila Bend, for the number of violent crimes — at least the ones that are notated here — you guys are a very safe community,” a sheriff’s office lieutenant told the group.

The town’s vice mayor, Chris Riggs, a former deputy himself, disagreed. Crimes weren’t being reported, making the town seem safer than it is, he said.

Residents “just don’t trust MCSO anymore,” Riggs said. “They’ll deal with it themselves.” Several residents agreed.

No deputies live in Gila Bend, where response times lag and police services have suffered, they said.

“Deputies aren’t like they used to be, where they get out and they mingle with the community,” Riggs said.

Sheridan blamed the settlement for overburdening the department.

Ten days later, residents of Aguila, an unincorporated community nestled among farms where the population swells to about 1,000 during the winter growing season, told the sheriff they too felt neglected by deputies.

“We have 9,224 square miles to cover” and limited resources, Sheridan said.

Sheridan has tried to address this. When he took office, there were about 140 vacancies for patrol deputies. He raised starting pay to compete with other local law enforcement agencies in the county. By the start of 2026, vacancies declined to 65, according to his office. Sheridan called it one of his biggest successes in his first year.

But hiring was still hindered by the paperwork deputies do to comply with the settlement, he said.

The Sheriff’s Office has made significant progress on a key requirement of the court: reducing the backlog of misconduct investigations. Although it has been cut by 76% since November 2022, there are still about [475 claims](#) that haven’t been investigated, and three recently completed investigations dated from 2017.

In June, the Sheriff’s Office released the court-mandated traffic stop report for 2024.

It tracked some improvements. But when all traffic stops by deputies were analyzed, the report concluded: “Stops involving Hispanic drivers were more likely to result in an arrest than stops involving White drivers”; and traffic stops involving Black drivers, who are not covered in the Melendres settlement, were more likely to take longer and result in an arrest compared to stops of white drivers.

Despite the findings, Sheridan insisted there was no racial profiling at the department.

In July, the court’s monitor team held another community meeting to review the Sheriff’s Office’s progress. It was in Maryvale, a West Phoenix neighborhood where three-quarters of the residents identify as Latino.

Before it began, Sheridan told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica that while he remained committed to reaching full compliance with the court's requirements, a majority of Republicans on the county's governing board "have a different perspective because they're the ones that fund what the sheriff does."

Three members of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors were at the meeting.

Latino residents and advocates from the heavily Democratic area typically made up a majority of attendees. But this crowd was mostly white Republicans, including some from retirement communities miles away. From the front of the gym, Sheridan could see signs that read, "We support MCSO," and, "Take the handcuffs off Jerry!"

The West Phoenix neighborhood of Maryvale is predominantly Latino. Residents from other parts of Maricopa County, many of them white, filled a community meeting to call for court oversight of the Sheriff's Office to end.

Republican Supervisor Debbie Lesko, who represents retirement communities in western parts of the metro area, said she believed the settlement was getting in the way of public safety. "They're spending a lot of time on paperwork instead of being able to provide public safety. And when I talked to the sheriff's department, they said it's hurting the morale of the deputies."

When Latino residents asked questions and voiced concerns, they were interrupted by jeers and groans from white members of the audience.

Warshaw, the court monitor, pleaded for the crowd to allow others to speak.

Sheridan's supporters focused on \$350 million the county supervisors had approved since 2013 to implement the court-mandated reforms, including \$226 million allocated to the Sheriff's Office. The monitor later found that the Sheriff's Office had greatly exaggerated total expenses, and the judge cautioned county leaders against citing the dollar figure because it was misleading.

"Mr. Warshaw, tell the judge to stop looting Maricopa County tax dollars to pay for that oversight," Tom Berry, a retiree from Sun City, said to the monitor. "Advise the judge to stop the oversight."

The case hinges on how well the Sheriff's Office complies with 368 paragraphs outlined in four court orders aimed at rooting out racial profiling, Warshaw responded. "Is there still work to be done? Yes, there is still work to be done. Is this thing going to go on forever? No."

"It looks like it," a woman blurted.

Salvador Reza is a longtime organizer of Latino communities and day laborers who regularly attends meetings related to the settlement. He said it appeared Republicans were organizing to call for an immediate end to court oversight, which Sheridan would welcome.

“That’s what he’s hoping, that the federal court lets him off the hook so he can do whatever he wants,” Reza said, noting he was concerned by Sheridan’s history with Arpaio and approach to the case since taking office. “So there’s no way that we can rebuild trust in the community knowing very well who Sheridan is.”

Sheridan denied he had coordinated with the supervisors to publicly call for an end to the settlement.

Months later, debate over the settlement’s cost came to a head.

Community members asked for details about how the \$226 million the sheriff’s department had attributed to enforcing the settlement was spent. The monitor’s team published a report in October that concluded the Sheriff’s Office had greatly exaggerated the cost. More than \$163 million, about 72%, of the total attributed to the reforms was unrelated or lacked justification, the report found.

Sheridan attacked the audit.

“These guys are not CPAs, they don’t have the experience to do an audit of a huge government operation,” he said on the conservative talk radio show where he regularly appeared. “The sheriff’s budget is about \$700 million a year, and the county’s budget is a couple of billion. They don’t have the expertise to do this, and so they come up with this report.”

He listed some expenses, including an order to create and staff new divisions. “We have three Ph.D.s that are analysts, and all of this has led to the fact that there has been no racial profiling or bias in well over 10 years, and that’s the gist of this lawsuit.”

Sheridan’s attorneys petitioned the court to dispute the audit but later dropped the challenge, saying the county wanted to avoid additional “unnecessary” expenses.

The audit reinforced many Latino community members’ belief that the agency couldn’t be trusted.

After the raucous gathering in Maryvale, advocates alleged there had been an effort to intimidate Latino residents, including the use of racial insults in a forum intended to gather their input and check on the Sheriff’s Office’s progress.

Judge Snow held the next public meeting at the federal courthouse. He acknowledged the increasingly vocal opposition to the settlement and its costs, but defended it as necessary.

“This is not an easy case. It is an expensive case. It is a case where everybody in Maricopa County has benefited, whether or not they appreciate it,” Snow said, before noting there was still work to do resolving the backlog of misconduct reports. “Sheriff Sheridan has done a considerable amount in reducing the backlog he was left with, but there is still a considerable backlog to be resolved.”

Sheridan conceded the settlement had made his office better, even if it sometimes caused friction. Still, attorneys for the Sheriff's Office and the county government argued to Snow that they had done enough to end his oversight.

In December, the county filed a motion to sidestep the remaining reforms and end court supervision. Sheridan's attorneys signed onto the motion in January.

"After 14 years, four sheriffs, and hundreds of millions spent tax dollars, it is essential to defend taxpayer money if federal oversight is no longer warranted," Thomas Galvin, the Republican chair of the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors at the time, said in a video statement released after the motion was filed.

Attorneys representing Latino residents in the Melendres case opposed the bid to end court oversight. Snow has yet to rule on the motion.

Raul Piña, a member of a court-mandated Community Advisory Board tasked with helping the Sheriff's Office rebuild trust with Latinos, said the push to end oversight ignored a plain fact: The most comprehensive data still showed the department hadn't eliminated bias from its policing.

"If Melendres goes away, that takes away significant protections for brown and Black people or the immigrant community in Maricopa County," he said.

Since it joined the Melendres case and settlement in 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice had supported the reforms. But with Trump back in the White House, Suraj Kumar, an attorney in the DOJ's Civil Rights Division, informed Snow in January that the DOJ backed efforts to end oversight of the Sheriff's Office.

This added to Latino community leaders' worries that the Sheriff's Office could once again, as it had under Arpaio, partner with ICE and allow deputies to enforce immigration laws.

Sheridan tried to put those concerns to rest, saying that if court oversight ended, he would not enter such an agreement.

But the questions grew louder as ICE surged into Los Angeles, Chicago and Minneapolis to carry out mass deportations. [Phoenix was reportedly next.](#)

After a U.S. citizen was killed during ICE operations in Minnesota, Sheridan was asked on a conservative radio talk show what he would do if something similar happened in Arizona.

His deputies would step in if ICE agents did anything "illegal," Sheridan said in the mid-January interview.

Four days later, Sheridan backtracked, saying he would instead side with immigration officers: "I will be here to protect them to do that and keep people from interfering with them."

Cornejo, the community activist who attended the meeting in Guadalupe, read the reversal as a sign that Sheridan was too easily swayed and could not be trusted without court oversight. “Facing a crowd that tends to lean to the left, he’s going to give rhetoric that kind of says that he’s working on those things that he’s supposed to be,” Cornejo said. “If he’s with more conservatives, his language and rhetoric is completely different.”

Sheridan said that his position has not changed and that he “firmly believes that the Sheriff’s Office is in full compliance and that the current oversight should be concluded.”

Later that month, ICE raided 15 metro Phoenix restaurants that federal prosecutors alleged had knowingly hired undocumented laborers. Protests erupted outside some of the raided restaurants.

Sheridan sent deputies to help with crowd control, saying ICE had first asked Tempe police for assistance but the request was declined.

“We went out there, not to facilitate what ICE was doing or get involved in their business, because we don’t do that,” Sheridan told Latino faith leaders and residents at a February town hall in the suburb of Gilbert. “We were there to keep the peace.”

The Tempe Police Department told Arizona Luminaria and ProPublica that it did not receive a request for help from ICE, nor was it notified in advance of the immigration operation. ICE did not respond to a question about local law enforcement participation in the raids.

Latino activists said the episode raised more questions about Sheridan’s willingness to collaborate with ICE and whether he would be transparent about his intentions. It would be harder for him to earn back their trust, they said.