



Matt Williams for ProPublica

Criminal Justice

Missouri GOP's Effort to Take Over St. Louis Police Harkens Back to Civil War

City officials say the state's plan to wrest back control of the police department is an attempt by white conservatives to weaken Black political influence. It's part of a broader pattern of Missouri Republicans trying to override the will of voters.

by **Jeremy Kohler**

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The last time Missouri took control of St. Louis' police force was just before the start of the Civil War, when the state's secessionist-leaning leaders were trying to prevent police officers from taking up arms against the Confederacy.

The law that put the police department under state control was in effect for the next 152 years. In November 2012, nearly two-thirds of voters approved a statewide ballot measure, pushed by police reform activists and elected officials, that restored local authority and placed the department under the mayor's jurisdiction.

Now, the state's Republican governor and GOP-led legislature are again pushing to take over the St. Louis Police Department. They argue that the Democratic-run city government is responsible for a drop in officer morale and that statistics that show a decline in crime are inaccurate.

The Missouri House voted 106-47 last week to transfer control from the city to a state-appointed board this summer. The five-member board would be made up of the mayor and four commissioners appointed by the governor, essentially leaving the governor with the votes to control the police department.

The state Senate is debating the measure, but a vote has not yet been scheduled.

The attempt to reverse a measure overwhelmingly approved by state voters, albeit more than a decade

ago, is part of a broader pattern of Missouri's conservative-led government trying to override the will of the electorate, from repealing voter-approved redistricting reform to trying to reinstate an abortion ban even though voters approved a constitutional amendment last year legalizing the procedure.

State takeovers of metropolitan police departments are rare; Kansas City, Missouri, remains the only major U.S. city with its police force under state control. Its arrangement dates to Reconstruction, when Missouri lawmakers, aiming to limit Black political influence, stripped the city of its oversight role.

After a brief return to local control in the 1930s, the state reasserted authority over Kansas City police to weaken political boss Tom Pendergast, who had used the department for patronage and election fraud.

Baltimore recently regained control of its police department after 160 years of state control.

Republican-led states have taken away control of other aspects of government from local leaders in other cities with majority-Black populations. In Mississippi, officials have expanded the jurisdiction of the state-run Capitol Police beyond government buildings into residential and commercial areas in Jackson, the state capital. They've also created a state-run court with appointed judges and increased police funding while the Black-led Jackson Police Department struggles to respond to calls.

Texas and Missouri have intervened in local schools and city governments, leading to disputes about local control — though these takeovers have generally been temporary, with a path to restoring local authority. In Tennessee, the state comptroller backed down from taking over the majority-Black city of Mason after local officials agreed that a certified public accounting or law firm would help the town complete audits, balance its budget and train officials on proper use of tax revenue. It happens in states led by Democrats, too, but less frequently.

“It really is removing this political power from residents, allowing them to have less authority, oversight and voice in how their system of public safety and policing operates,” said Sandhya Kajeepeta, a senior researcher at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's Thurgood Marshall Institute.

Some St. Louis leaders see the current effort there as echoing 19th-century efforts to limit Black political power. They argue that a majority-white, conservative government is again moving to strip authority from local officials and diminish Black influence over policing.

State Sen. Karla May, a Black Democrat from St. Louis who has testified against the push for state control, said it's no coincidence that the plan became an urgent matter for legislators, and is advancing, during the tenure of Mayor Tishaura Jones, who also is Black.

May said the St. Louis Police Officers Association, the collective bargaining unit for city police officers, “does not want to be controlled by an African American mayor.” Representatives from the union did not respond to a request for comment.

A spokesperson for Jones did not make her available for an interview. But the mayor said in an emailed statement that “I don't think Republican legislators want to give a Black woman who is also a Democrat credit for dramatically reducing crime, increasing officer pay and building out successful public safety programs.” She said advocates for state control have never explained how it would improve public safety.

The push to take control of the St. Louis police is a top priority for Gov. Mike Kehoe, a newly elected Republican whose State of the State address framed the issue in economic terms. He said what mattered was whether businesses felt “safe enough to invest in our cities.” Kehoe, who is white, frequently invokes his upbringing in St. Louis to push for state control.

The House sponsor of the measure, Rep. Brad Christ, a white Republican from the southwestern suburbs of St. Louis, argues that calling his proposal “state control” is misleading because the governor's appointees would be required to have lived in the city for at least three years.

He noted that the effort to return the police to the state predates Jones’ term as mayor. A Black Democrat from St. Louis filed a [similar bill](#) that stalled in the House in 2019 during the tenure of Mayor Lyda Krewson, who is white. Christ said in a text that this was “clear evidence that the wild assertion that this effort has been race motivated is completely false.”

The Ethical Society of Police, a group that represents Black police officers in St. Louis, also [supports a state takeover](#). Its president, Donnell Walters, wrote an opinion piece in 2023 with then-Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, a Republican, [calling for state control](#) and alleging mismanagement and low morale under city control.

Walters did not return messages seeking comment.

Heather Taylor, a retired sergeant who led ESOP from 2015 to 2020 — and who later worked in the Jones administration before [resigning in 2023](#) after criticizing the mayor and the department on social media — said she worries the department will suffer under state control. But, she said, ESOP members believe that the city lacks urgency in providing basic support for officers and that the state might do a better job addressing those needs.

Jones has repeatedly pointed to city crime data showing a decline since she hired [Robert Tracy as police chief](#) two years ago. Notably, the city’s murder totals have plummeted.

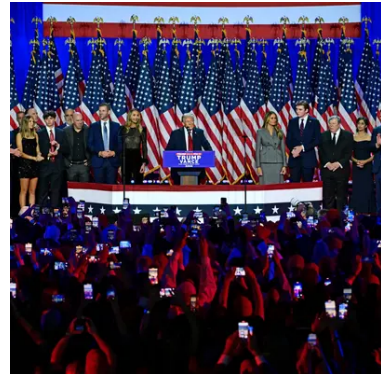
But many argue that the city’s statistics on other types of crimes don’t reflect the sense of lawlessness in St. Louis. Ness Sandoval, a professor of sociology and demography at Saint Louis University who studies crime trends, said he believes the city underreports crime and lacks transparency. “Most people who rely on the data believe there probably should be an asterisk,” he said. Jones has stood behind the crime numbers, saying they are accurate.

Still, the mayor and her police chief maintain that state control [does not necessarily reduce crime](#). In 2012, while the police were still under state oversight, Forbes magazine ranked St. Louis as the second-most-dangerous city in the nation.

Kansas City, which is still under state control, [continues to struggle with violent crime](#). Efforts to restore local oversight have never gained much traction there. Despite past studies and proposals — including a 1968 report listing local control as the top recommendation after police killed six Black residents during riots, and a 2013 mayoral committee vote for local control that failed by a single vote — no serious push has materialized.

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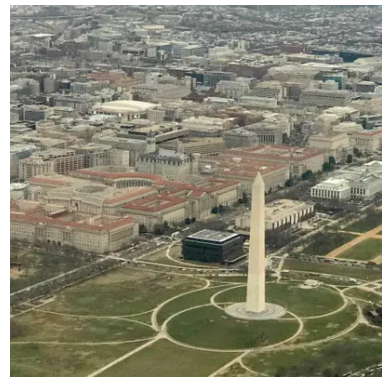
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Jeremy Kohler

I am a St. Louis-based reporter covering Missouri and the Midwest.

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