

# 'Beholden to no one': Kentucky sheriffs remain in office despite criminal charges, convictions

**Josh Wood and Keyla Holmes** Louisville Courier Journal

Updated Sept. 17, 2025, 9:18 a.m. ET

---

## Key Points

A Courier Journal investigation found at least one in six of Kentucky's 120 counties has had a sheriff criminally charged since 2010.

Several criminally charged or convicted sheriffs remain in office in Kentucky today.

---

CADIZ, Ky. — Trigg County Sheriff Aaron Acree was ready to resign.

He had just confessed to lying to the FBI about an affair he was having with a woman whom he'd given the security code to the sheriff's office, allowing her to access the secure facility for their intimate rendezvous.

He knew lying to the FBI was bad, but he was trying to do damage control.

"I am prepared to resign and walk away and leave this position without any type of disturbance," Acree, now 36, told an FBI agent in a recorded March 2022 phone call, one day after he attempted to mislead investigators about his relationship with the woman. "I would hope that it was left up to me to explain to my wife why I'm resigning."

But Acree didn't resign.

Not then.

Not when he was later investigated for allegedly roughing up and repeatedly threatening to kill a shackled woman in a storage room at the sheriff's office.

Not when he was criminally charged in that incident — and for using his position to secure a free room at the Lake Barkley State Resort Park to carry out his sexual affair.

And not when he took a plea deal on those state-level charges in 2023 and got two years of probation.

Instead, he remains sheriff today, carrying a gun and badge while patrolling this rural county, his criminal record seemingly of no consequence.

Acree stands among a brotherhood of bad sheriffs, a Courier Journal investigation has found, with one in six of Kentucky's 120 counties having at least one sheriff since 2010 criminally charged or convicted over actions they performed while in office.

Several were acquitted, and one died before their case was resolved. But out of closed cases, most were convicted — on charges ranging from DUIs and embezzling taxpayer dollars, to drug trafficking and murder.

The Courier Journal's tally does not include several other sheriffs who were criminally charged or convicted over events that occurred after their time in office.

In many parts of Kentucky, particularly rural counties, sheriff's offices serve as the primary law enforcement agency patrolling the roads and responding to emergencies. Elected by voters, sheriffs have little oversight and can't easily be fired like a city police chief can.

Once in office, they essentially have no boss.

The only individual who can single-handedly initiate removal proceedings is Gov. Andy Beshear.

But despite pleas from local residents for him to give sheriffs the boot, Beshear has so far not done so.

**More:** [Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear has the power to remove convicted sheriffs. Why hasn't he?](#)

Beshear's inaction — as well as the failure to act by lawmakers, who can impeach sheriffs and other elected officials — has ensured Acree and several other sheriffs remain in power despite being criminally charged or convicted.

Their continued tenure has damaged trust in law enforcement in multiple communities, leaving some residents afraid to encounter sheriff's office personnel and hesitant to dial 911 in an emergency.

Their incumbency also has the potential to tank criminal cases in their counties if prosecutors believe sheriffs seem too untrustworthy to be put on the stand in court.

One county was left without any local law enforcement to speak of after the person believed to be its sole officer at the time, its sheriff, was arrested.

Beyond Acree, sheriffs who remain in office despite charges or convictions include:

Robertson County Sheriff Terry Gray, who was arrested for driving drunk twice within a nine-month span, including one incident where he was in uniform operating a departmental vehicle.

Todd County Sheriff Tracy White, who is facing misdemeanor charges over a 2024 confrontation with a Logan County man.

[Nelson County Sheriff Ramon Pineiroa](#), who was indicted on multiple felony charges earlier this year related to the seizure and sale of vehicles by his office. His attorney has previously called the charges "baseless."

Some sheriffs, like [former Letcher County Sheriff Mickey Stines](#), who is charged with gunning down Judge Kevin Mullins in his chambers last year, [resign when they are criminally charged](#) or have serious allegations surface.

But others, like Acree, dig in their heels, accountable to no one but voters.

"He's the king. He's the emperor. He created this empire. That came out of his mouth," one of Acree's civilian employees told FBI and Kentucky State Police investigators.

The Courier Journal obtained a recording of that employee's FBI interview, and others, under Kentucky's open records law alongside thousands of pages of documents related to criminal investigations of sheriffs.

The newspaper also reviewed old press clippings, watched hours of video footage, read through voluminous court records and interviewed individuals who experienced alleged misconduct at the hands of Kentucky sheriffs.

To Philip Stinson, a former police officer who [studies law enforcement misconduct](#) as a professor at Ohio's Bowling Green State University, the reason why sheriffs like Acree refuse to step down is simple.

"Power," he said. "The power that comes with being the county sheriff — and the lack of oversight and controls in place."

Robert Chase, an associate professor of history at New York's Stony Brook University who is working on a book about sheriffs, was similarly unsurprised.

"Sheriffs wield so much power in their counties," he said, "that they can really act like kings."

## 'My way'

Crystal Smith was deep in the throes of heroin addiction, driving despondently one day in January 2022 around Cadiz, the quiet Trigg County seat of 2,500 people known for its [annual country ham festival](#).

The drugs had been her way of numbing the razor-sharp pain gnawing away at her since her 11-year-old son, Kameron, died in a gun accident just months before.

"I was in a really bad place," Smith, 48, told The Courier Journal in a recent interview.

Her destination, that day, was meant to be her son's grave. She said she was praying, surrendering to God, when she felt something pull her off course.

Before she knew it, she was unlawfully entering someone else's home.

It happened to belong to Acree, the county sheriff.

She was soon arrested by Cadiz Police, who, according to an arrest citation, said she admitted to taking items from Acree's home and putting them in her car.

Police also found heroin in her purse.

Smith, a former restaurant server, knew she was going to jail. Instead, Trigg County Jailer James Hughes drove Smith to the sheriff's office, an industrial-looking building on the eastern outskirts of Cadiz. Once there, Acree brought Smith, who was handcuffed and shackled, into a small storage room.

Inside, Smith said, Acree picked her up, pinned her against the wall and repeatedly threatened to kill her if she ever came to his home again.

As they were exiting, she said, Acree pushed her from behind, causing her to slam into the concrete floor, which she said left her heavily bruised.

Hughes, the jailer, later told investigators he had heard thuds and shouting inside.

“(Acree) said: ‘Don’t you ever come to my house, I’ll f---ing kill you.’ He said that three or four times,” Hughes said.

He added: “She couldn’t defend herself. ... She was belly-chained and shackled and handcuffed. She was helpless.”

Sheriff’s office employees in the building told investigators they also heard Acree threatening Smith’s life.

When Acree emerged with Smith, Hughes said he told Acree he was being too rough.

“(Acree) said: ‘Sometimes you gotta do things my way,’” Hughes recalled.

Acree has denied threatening Smith or pushing her to the ground, according to a deposition in a lawsuit she filed. Acree said he requested Hughes bring Smith by his office so he could check her for additional stolen items, notably a ring. Smith admits to taking a ring from Acree’s home, which was recovered once she was booked in jail.

Appointed sheriff in 2020, Acree, a former Cadiz cop and state trooper, was supposed to restore the good name of the Trigg County Sheriff’s Office after his predecessor stepped down amid allegations he and several deputies sexually groomed a sheriff’s office intern who was in high school.

That predecessor, [Jason Barnes](#), [pleaded guilty](#) to providing alcohol to a minor and witness tampering and, like Acree, admitted to lying to investigators.

The county agreed to pay \$100,000 to settle a lawsuit from the woman, who alleged she was sexually groomed during her internship and had sex with Barnes, sheriff’s deputies and a Cadiz Police officer after she turned 18.

Now, Acree was well on his way to being the county's second criminally convicted sheriff in a row.

By the time federal and state investigators began looking at Acree's confrontation with Smith, they had already probed his on-the-clock affair.

Despite his confession to the FBI, Acree maintained that an encounter he had with the woman at Lake Barkley occurred in a room he paid for with his personal credit card.

But Kentucky State Police later deemed that to be untrue. An email from the hotel's manager told higher-ups Acree requested a room "to observe a potential drug deal," and a receipt later showed Acree paid for the room only after investigators asked him about it.

"This clearly shows Sheriff Acree was lying during our interview," a KSP investigator wrote.

Both KSP and the FBI looked into Acree's affair and the incident with Smith, but only state-level charges were filed. Neither the FBI nor KSP agreed to interview requests from The Courier Journal about the case.

In 2023, after [Acree pleaded guilty](#) to two counts of official misconduct and two counts of menacing related to the incidents, Beshear publicly chastised the lawman's behavior [as "wrong and inappropriate."](#)

But Beshear never tried to remove him.

In a written statement sent to The Courier Journal through his attorney, Acree characterized the charges as resulting from "personal matters" during his first election campaign in 2022, which he won despite the ongoing investigation.

While Acree said he took responsibility for his interaction with Smith, he reiterated his denial of ever assaulting or threatening her.

"More than anything else, my election aptly demonstrates how these overblown past allegations against me lack credibility within the community and likely come from people with self-interested lawsuits or political ambitions," he said, adding that support for his office "has only grown stronger and larger" since.

In 2022, Acree defeated a write-in candidate, Michael Sandbrink, a former Trigg County Sheriff's Office deputy who was fired by Acree amid the investigation.

Sandbrink — [who is running for sheriff again next year](#) — and another deputy filed a 2022 lawsuit against Acree alleging they were fired for going to the FBI to report potential misconduct by the sheriff.

## 'Beholden to no one'

There are more than 3,000 sheriff's offices nationwide, ranging from one-man agencies like Kentucky's Robertson County Sheriff's Office to the behemoth Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which has [more than 10,000 sworn officers](#).

In 2020, sheriff's deputies [made up about a quarter of all law enforcement personnel](#), according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

As elected officials, sheriffs' tenures can be long. Jefferson County Sheriff John Aubrey, who recently announced [he will not run for re-election next year](#), has been in office a quarter-century.

In Louisville's Jefferson County, the sheriff's office role is limited to things like tax collection, evictions and court security, while police take the lead on most law enforcement activities.

But elsewhere, they are the primary law enforcement agency.

Sheriffs occupy a unique place in America, said Chase, the Stony Brook University professor, looming large in American imagination and representing the very heart of democracy.

Their elected nature grants sheriffs enormous power. In fact, sheriff is a political position as much as it is a matter of law enforcement, Chase said.

"And that means they are beholden to no one," he said. "They are not beholden to a mayor, as a police chief is. ... They are their own political entity beholden to the people themselves."

## 'It's kinda scary, you know'

Several counties east of Cadiz, Logan County resident Adam Weatherford enjoyed taking his banjo and his dog, Toby, down to a nearby creek where the 40-year-old forklift driver would strum tunes as Toby chased beavers and tried to catch fish.

But over the course of months last year, he said, a group of teens on four-wheelers and dirt bikes would repeatedly break the tranquility, revving their engines as they drove by, before

doubling back to where he was parked.

“They would come find me, wherever I was,” he told The Courier Journal.

One night in May 2024, after another run-in with the kids, Weatherford was about to jump in the shower when the top lawman from the neighboring county — Todd County Sheriff Tracy White — showed up to his door.

White, 55, was out of uniform, wearing a Kentucky Peace Officers Association T-shirt, but Weatherford knew who he was.

He was also wearing gloves — “in case things went south,” White later explained to KSP.

During an insult-laced tirade that Weatherford filmed, White accused Weatherford of “threatening my kids” and ramming one of the children’s vehicles — an incident he said was captured on camera.

There was one threat from the sheriff that chilled Weatherford: “I’m going to get your a-- another way, buddy.”

White made the remark right after Weatherford said he would have already been in jail if he’d rammed the child’s vehicle, according to video footage viewed by The Courier Journal.

“It’s kinda scary, you know. For about six months, every day, in the afternoon I’d drive by Sharon Grove, and I knew he lived there. I was pretty nervous,” Weatherford said, referring to the community where White lives.

At one point during the encounter, Weatherford said, White struck the phone he was using to record, causing it to hit Weatherford’s face and injure his lip.

White was indicted on harassment and menacing charges last December. Scheduled to stand trial in November, he faces a maximum penalty of 90 days in jail for each charge if convicted.

The third-term sheriff told KSP he was not at Weatherford’s door as law enforcement the night of the confrontation, saying “I went over there as a daddy is what I done.”

However, White would tell KSP his children were not actually present that day, but that they had previously complained to him about Weatherford. Instead, White said he had received a



phone call from a person he knew claiming Weatherford was “harassing” children riding four-wheelers.

He denied threatening Weatherford or touching him.

Weeks after he was indicted, White's wife filed a petition for an emergency protective order against him, claiming he pulled her hair and slapped her while upset and drinking.

While several individuals petitioned Beshear to remove White from office after the video of his confrontation with Weatherford was posted online, he remains Todd County’s sheriff.

Repeated messages to White's attorney seeking an interview or comment were not returned, nor were messages left with the Todd County Sheriff's Office.

### **'It wasn't worth my life'**

Sheriff issues are not limited to Western Kentucky.

In the commonwealth’s least populous county, north-central Kentucky's Robertson County, Sheriff Terry Gray remains in office despite racking up two DUIs in a nine-month span in 2023-24 — incidents that prompted all five of the 2,200-person county’s magistrates to formally request Beshear sack Gray, to no avail.

In an August 2024 incident, Gray allegedly overturned a tractor while driving drunk.

And in a December 2023 incident, he was arrested while in uniform after driving his department vehicle with a blood alcohol content more than twice the legal limit.

Ahead of the in-uniform DUI, Gray, 48, showed up at the county’s public school complex where he got into a heated confrontation with the district’s school resource officer and superintendent, whom both have said Gray appeared to be drunk and refused to leave.

During that encounter, Gray radioed into dispatch requesting state troopers, saying his jurisdiction was being challenged by the school resource officer, Kenny Brockman. Gray told dispatch he was at the school "trying to watch traffic — traffic flow."

At times during the confrontation, the sheriff placed his hand on his gun, Brockman and the superintendent said.

In cell phone video footage reviewed by The Courier Journal, Gray can be seen taking out handcuffs and waving them at Brockman, who told the paper Gray also threatened to arrest him. Brockman had previously told Gray he planned to run against him in the next sheriff's election, Brockman said.

"I have the f---ing power, I will shut this place down," Gray said, Superintendent Sanford Holbrook recounted in a KSP interview.

Fearing for the safety of the hundreds of children inside the schools, a secretary told KSP she kept her hand hovering above a button to activate a school-wide lockdown.

Holbrook told The Courier Journal he feared he was going to be shot and, weeks later, unsuccessfully submitted his resignation to the school board over what happened.

"It wasn't worth my life working as superintendent," he told The Courier Journal.

After Gray left the schools, KSP troopers tracked him down to his home where they arrested him for DUI.

While KSP spent dozens of hours investigating events at the schools that afternoon, no charges were ever filed except for the DUI charge.

After the incident, an attorney representing the district's school board sent a letter to Gray barring him from school property and asserting the district would only contact KSP for emergencies, even though, according to Holbrook, it takes troopers 30 minutes to an hour to respond.

Brockman, letters from concerned citizens to Beshear and the top prosecutor for Robertson County all described Gray as the county's sole law enforcement officer. Robertson County Judge-Executive Valerie Grigson Miley told The Courier Journal the sheriff's office has a "deputized" administrative assistant, but declined to answer a question about whether that person had arrest powers, saying "I really can't discuss it."

Gray avoided jail time for the DUIs, with the court hitting pause on a 90-day jail sentence so long as he completed a rehab program and commits no new violations through 2026.

Fleming County Attorney Monica Hill, the special prosecutor in Gray's DUI cases, told The Courier Journal she has second thoughts about not more aggressively pushing for Gray to

resign.

"I understand the reason that people are upset — I would be upset, too," she said. "...I think resignation is something that he should have done. And I probably should have pushed it harder, but I did not."

In an October 2024 letter to Beshear calling for Gray's removal, Robertson County magistrates argued he could no longer do his job because he did not have a license.

"Further," they added, "the Fiscal Court has lost confidence in his ability to actually perform the job, even if [he had] a valid license."

Contacted by The Courier Journal by phone, Gray said "no comment" when asked about the incidents.

### **'You always have to look behind your back'**

Following her arrest for breaking into Acree's home in Cadiz, Smith spent more than half a year in jail.

She felt safe in her cell, but less so when she got out, constantly afraid she or her family would run into Acree.

Smith used to work as a restaurant server, but no longer does, afraid he'd come in one day.

Now she's left Trigg County and works at a factory where you need a keycard to get inside.

Smith thought, once everything was done with, that maybe Acree would step down, or that he would somehow be ousted.

"Because it makes sense: Why do you want someone to be the sheriff to your town, and protect you, when this took place?" she asked.

That did not happen.

Now she avoids Trigg County, only crossing the county line once or twice a month to visit her son's grave.

"You never know what's going to happen. You always have to look behind your back," she said.

**Tell us what you think.** [Submit your letter to the editor.](#)

*Josh Wood is an investigative reporter who focuses on public safety and government. He can be reached at [jwood@courier-journal.com](mailto:jwood@courier-journal.com) or on X at [@JWoodJourn](#).*

*Keyla Holmes was The Courier Journal's Ida B. Wells investigative intern during the summer of 2025. She is a senior at Texas State University.*