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David Carabin, Director Boston Regional Intelligence Center, testifies before the Boston City Council on March 9, 2021.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Boston center's gang database lists 3,853 people.

Advocates hit lack of transparency at City Council hearing

 SARAH BETANCOURT Mar 9, 2021

THE DIRECTOR of the Boston Regional Intelligence Center said on Tuesday that the center's gang database is comprised of 3,853 people with active status.

In a hearing held by the Boston City Council's Public Safety Committee, David Carabin, the director of the center, said approximately "one half of 1 percent of the city's population is represented in the gang database" and that 94 percent of those listed have a criminal history in or around Boston.

The BRIC is a unit of the Boston Police Department that gathers and investigates information in an effort to reduce violence in Boston, and stores the data in a database that is accessible to federal law enforcement agencies (like the Department of Homeland Security) and local entities like the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department and Boston Housing Authority.

Carabin said one of the BRIC's most significant responsibilities is tracking violent criminal offenses, but in an exchange with Councilor Ricardo Arroyo he admitted he couldn't say whether the gang database has actually helped solve a murder.

"I don't think so, no," said Carabin. He said the database is used to "get ahead of retaliatory gang violence, but do I have a tracking mechanism that calculates every single time that happens or catches data from other units? We don't have any system like that in the BRIC."

The Tuesday public hearing on the Boston Police Department's use of a gang database was sponsored by Councilor Andrea Campbell and Arroyo.



Boston City Councilor Ricardo Arroyo discusses racial disparities in individuals reported to the gang database.

According to previous reports, youths under 18 find themselves in the database when school resource officers, or school liaisons to local police departments, include them. The resource officers have significant discretion in deciding whether high school students are gang-involved.

A student can accrue points in a 10-point verification system and if they hit that amount, they're put into the database, by a school resource officer. Being seen with an alleged gang associate, even if the person is a family member, earns two points. A *victim* of gang-related violence could be given eight points. If given six points, the person is labeled as a gang associate. With 10 points, they are considered a gang member. Wearing a hat with what is considered a gang symbol can mean three points added.

Controversy over the gang database picked up in 2018 when a school police officer at East Boston High School filed an incident report detailing a non-violent altercation with students and shared it with the BRIC. The report resulted in one immigrant student, who had no criminal record, accruing sufficient points to be held by immigration officials at a federal detention center for 16 months.

Officials from the BRIC and Boston Police Department said people are not alerted if they're included in the database, and there's no way for someone to check if they are on the list. The officials said they were aware of only one person who has successfully contested being included in the database and had his name removed.

Several city councilors have spoke out against the BRIC and its information sharing, and seek to abolish the existence of the gang database and delete its contents. Deputy Superintendent Kenneth Gaines of the Bureau of Field Services read parts of multiple letters supporting the continuation of the gang database's usage from Mayor Martin Walsh, Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins, and nonprofit Roca.

In a new development, Carabin revealed someone seeking to have their name removed would need to write a letter to the Boston Police Department's legal advisor, which would prompt an assessment from officials with the Boston Police Department and the BRIC.

Rahsaan Hall, director of the Racial Justice Program at the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, said removing oneself from the gang database is nearly impossible.

“That’s just the problem,” he said. “There’s a lack of transparency about what the process is. Ideally there would be a process where you can check your existence in the gang database, and that you can appeal your existence in it.”

Fatema Ahmad, executive director of the Muslim Justice League, an advocacy organization that works with immigrants and immigrant youth, said the database doesn’t reduce or address violence and accentuates racial inequities. In the last round of data about the BRIC released through records requests, the database comprised of only 2.3% white members, 75% Black, and the rest, Hispanic and other races.

The Boston Police Department has said as recently as 2020 that school resource officers no longer communicate with BRIC, and in turn, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“Even if we assume that school resource officers are no longer communicating with the BRIC, the years of data stored, is of concern,” said Elizabeth Badger a senior attorney at PAIR Project, which works with immigrant youth. Badger noted that through court records, she saw the BPD used BRIC data entered in 2005 against a client in 2018. “The burden is on the immigrant to disprove anything that has been alleged in those reports, which is next to impossible,” said Badger.

Carabin said a number of changes are proposed for the system, including additional criteria for verification and addition to the database beyond field investigation and observation. He didn’t say what that new criteria would be. BRIC also intends to annually report how many people have been deleted from the database.

Campbell asked Carabin what spurred the changes, and he replied they were prompted by public concerns and court opinions.

“Regardless of the effectiveness of the gang database to date, we remain committed to excellence and continued improvement in order to constantly improve our policies and procedures,” said Carabin.

Tagged in: criminal justice/ Elementary and Secondary Education

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