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What We Know About Police's Gang Database

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ASSESSMENT DATABASE



Maintained by the
Boston Regional Intelligence Center

[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	1996	DEPORTED
	FIRST	DOB (mm/dd/yyyy)	PERSON STATUS

NICKNAMES

[REDACTED]

ASSOCIATIONS & VERIFICATIONS

PRIMARY	INACTIVE	Associate (6 points)
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Boston police maintains a gang database tracking 5,300 individuals listed as actively, or previously, having been in a gang (Boston Police)

Boston Police Department documents obtained by WBUR provide, for the first time, a glimpse into the department's gang database and how gangs are tracked in the city.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts [sued Boston Police](#) last year to gain access to the department's Gang Assessment Database, which is maintained by the [Boston Regional Intelligence Center](#). BRIC is a unit of the Boston Police Department that gathers and analyzes intelligence, which is accessible to federal law enforcement.

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The lawsuit was prompted by concerns over how allegations of gang affiliation are used in immigration court proceedings. Civil liberties advocates, and those who study policing, say they have concerns about the accuracy of the database, and the impact it could have on individuals wrongly identified as a gang member. And they want to know more about how police track those contained on its rolls.

Current Gang Picture In Boston

Boston police generated an analysis in response to the ACLU's lawsuit, providing what it calls the "current gang picture in


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Boston."

It lists:

- Approximately 160 "documented gangs" in Boston (but not the names of the gangs)
- 100 "active" gangs, with about 30 gangs "actively driving violence"
- About 5,300 total individuals
- Approximately 2,800 "active" gang members
- The remainder — or about 2,500 individuals — are classified as "inactive," "deceased," or "long term incarcerated"

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Asked to clarify how a person or group is classified as gang-involved, a Boston police spokesman referred WBUR to its [rules and procedures](#). A "gang" is a group of three or more people with a common name or identifying signs (like colors or symbols) who frequent a specific area. They also must have members who individually or together engage in criminal activity, which may include targeting rival gang members or being targeted by other gangs.

Someone is considered "active" if they've reached the criteria to be at least a gang associate, and had contact with another gang member, or participated in some form of gang activity within the last five years.

Thomas Nolan was formerly a lieutenant with the Boston Police Department and worked as a supervisor of the Boston police gang task force. He's surprised, and troubled, by the current numbers of documented gangs and individuals listed in the database.

"I look at the criteria [BPD] use[s] to put people into the gang assessment database, and then draw these conclusions about having 160 separate gangs in the city," Nolan said.

"That's a lot of gangs for a city the size of Boston."

By comparison, a 2018 [Chicago Crime Commission](#) report documented [59 active street gangs](#) in that city. Chicago's population is four times larger than Boston's.

Gang Member Identification

The analysis also provides a list of [what qualifies someone as a gang member](#), with a point system for each criterion. More than 10 points, and a person is considered a gang member. Six to 10 points, and a person is a gang associate.

Criteria include: self-admitted gang membership (eight points), possession of gang paraphernalia (four points), or becoming a victim or target of gang violence (three to eight points), among several others.

Nolan said many of those criteria are hard to verify, and could be leading to more people included in the database than are actually in a gang.

"That's a pretty broad brush stroke," Nolan said. "That's why they're coming up with this number of 160 [gangs], which really, to me, strains the bounds of credibility."

Boston police [provided redacted documents](#) showing how gang members and associates are tracked. An individual's name and photo, aliases and nicknames, and gang affiliations are listed.

In one example, a man is documented as an "INACTIVE" gang associate who was born in 1996. According to the document, the man was interrogated in the field by Homeland Security Investigations, an investigative arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The report states that the man was wearing a brand of hat that's known to be worn by gang members (four points). The type of hat was redacted by Boston Police. He was also seen in East Boston "alongside 3 other males, all of which are now verified [redacted] gang members" (two points).

Statistics And Access

Part of the ACLU's public records request, which led to the current [lawsuit](#), included a breakdown of race and gender for those individuals listed in the gang database.

However, Boston police doesn't track the race and gender of suspected gang members. Instead, BPD said in order to provide the ACLU with breakdowns, the department had to cross reference criminal records maintained by Boston police. According to the report, 93% of the people in the gang database have a prior Boston arrest.

For the remaining 7%, the department wasn't able to tell the ACLU what the race or gender is of people in their own gang database.

Here's a snapshot of that breakdown as of January 2, 2019:

- 66.4% black non-Hispanic
- 14.1% white Hispanic
- 9.7% black Hispanic
- 2.3 % white non-Hispanic
- 0.4% Asian

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Of the suspected gang members Boston police was able to identify the gender of, nearly all were male. Only 26 were women.

Adriana Lafaille, a staff attorney with the ACLU, said these numbers confirm what the organization has suspected --- that the gang database disproportionately includes men of color.

"What we see is a pattern of youth being surveilled inside their schools and outside their schools, in their neighborhoods, and being labeled as gang members often simply because of the people they're being seen with and sometimes the clothing that they wear," she said.

WBUR has [previously reported](#) on the impact of the gang database. Orlando, a former student at East Boston High School, was labeled a gang associate by a Boston School Police sergeant — a separate department from Boston police. The teen, an immigrant from El Salvador, had no criminal record and was on track to receive a green card when he was involved in a lunchtime scuffle.

The Boston School Police incident report listed Orlando as a associate of the gang MS-13. That same incident report showed up during his immigration proceedings. He was ultimately deported after spending more than a year in immigration detention.

According to the BPD documents, several agencies outside of the department are able

to access the gang database, including:

- 1 person with MBTA transit police
- 1 person with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
- 1 person with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- 1 person with Boston Housing Authority police
- 1 person with Suffolk County Sheriff's Department
- 2 people with Boston School Police

The ACLU says it still has outstanding document requests with the BPD.

"We're still waiting for more documents and the full picture of how information gets into the gang database," Lafaille said. "How that information is then shared out with other agencies is still a mystery to us."

This segment aired on July 30, 2019.

Related:

- [What A Boston Student's Deportation Reveals About School Police And Gang Intelligence](#)
- [ACLU Sues Boston Police For Access To Gang Database](#)



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Shannon Dooling is an immigration reporter at WBUR, Boston's NPR news station.

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