Search

89.7 WGBH

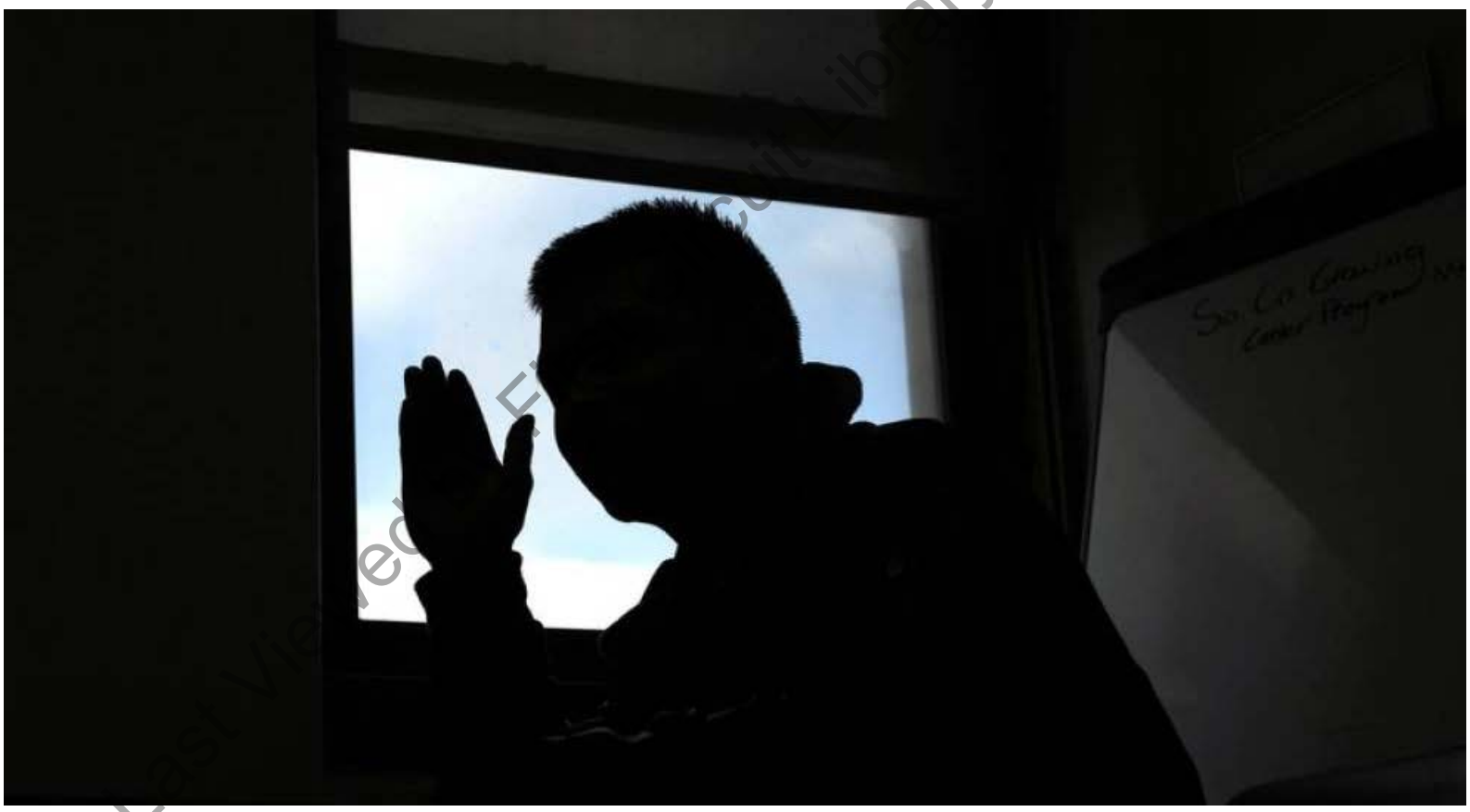
Listen Live: Boston's Local NPR

# WGBH NEWS

LOCAL

## Inside The Boston Police Gang Database





*An immigrant from El Salvador speaks with a reporter from The Associated Press, in Somerville, Mass. The informant was detained for seven months in 2018 by ICE, which accused him of being a member of MS-13 after he got into a fight at high school. Boston Police are tracking nearly 5,000 people, almost all of them young, black and Latino men, through a secretive gang database, newly released data from the department shows.*

*Steven Senne/Associated Press*

By Phillip Marcelo | Associated Press

July 30, 2019



BOSTON (AP) — Boston police are tracking nearly 5,000 people — almost all of them young black and Latino men — through a secretive gang database, newly released data from the department shows.

A summary provided by the department shows that 66% of those in its database are black, 24% are Latino and 2% are white. Black people comprise about 25% of all Boston residents, Latinos about 20% and white people more than 50%.

The racial disparity is “stark and troublesome,” said Adriana Lafaille, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, which, along with other civil rights groups, sued the department in state court in November to shed light into who is listed on the database and how the information is used.

Central American youths are being wrongly listed as active gang members “based on nothing more than the clothing they are seen in and the classmates they are seen with,” and that’s led some to be deported, the organizations say in their lawsuit, citing the cases of three Central American youths facing deportation based largely on their status on the gang database.

“This has consequences,” Lafaille said. “People are being deported back to the countries that they fled, in many cases, to escape gangs.”

Boston police haven’t provided comment after multiple requests, but Commissioner William Gross has previously defended the database as a tool in combating MS-13 and other gangs.

One 24-year-old native of El Salvador nearly deported last year over his alleged gang involvement said he was a victim of harassment and bullying by Bloods members as a youth and was never an MS-13 member, as police claim.

The man spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because he fears

retribution from gang members.

He said he never knew he'd made the list while in high school until he was picked up years later in a 2017 immigration sweep.

The gang database listed him as a "verified" member of MS-13 because he was seen associating with known MS-13 members, had feuded with members of the rival Bloods street gang, and was even charged with assault and battery following a fight at school, according to records provided by his lawyer, Alex Mooradian.

Mooradian said he noted in immigration court that the man, who was granted special immigrant juvenile status in 2014, reported at least one altercation with Bloods members to police and cooperated with the investigation. Witnesses also testified about the man's good character and work ethic as a longtime dishwasher at a restaurant.

"Bottom line, this was a person by all metrics who was doing everything right," said Mooradian. "He had legal status. He went to school. He worked full time. He called police when he was in trouble. And it still landed him in jail."

Boston is merely the latest city to run into opposition with a gang database. An advocacy group filed a lawsuit **this month** in Providence, Rhode Island, arguing the city's database violates constitutional rights. Portland, Oregon, **discontinued** its database in 2017 after it was revealed more than 80% of people listed on it were minorities.

In Chicago, police this year **proposed** changes after an audit found their database's roughly 134,000 entries were riddled with outdated and unverified information. Mayor Lori Lightfoot also **cut off** U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement access ahead of planned immigration raids this month.

California's Department of Justice has been issuing annual **reports** on the state's database since a 2017 law began requiring it. And in New York City, records requests and lawsuits have prompted the department to disclose **more information** about its database.

In Boston, where Democratic Mayor Marty Walsh has **proposed** strengthening the city's sanctuary policy, the ACLU suggests specifically banning police from contributing to any database to which

ICE has access, or at least requiring police to provide annual reports on the database. Walsh's office deferred questions about the gang database to police.

Like others, Boston's gang database follows a points-based system. A person who accrues at least six points is classified as a "gang associate." Ten or more points means they're considered a full-fledged gang member.

The points range from having a known gang tattoo (eight points) to wearing gang paraphernalia (four points) or interacting with a known gang member or associate (two points per interaction).

The summary provided by Boston police provides a snapshot of the database as of January.

Of the 4,728 people listed at the time, a little more than half were considered "active" gang associates, meaning they had contact with or participated in some form of gang activity in the past five years. The rest were classified as "inactive," the summary states.

Men account for more than 90% of the suspected gang members, and people between ages 25 and 40 comprise nearly 75% of the listing.

The department last week provided the summary along with the department's policy for placing people on the database after the AP filed a records request in June.

The ACLU was also provided the same documents in response to its lawsuit as well as a trove of other related policy memos and heavily redacted reports for each of the 4,728 people listed on the database as of January, according to documents provided by the ACLU and **first reported** Friday by WBUR.

The ACLU has asked the city for less-redacted reports, Lafaille said. It's also still waiting for information about how often ICE accesses the database and how police gather gang intel in schools.

"After all this time, we still don't have an understanding about who can access this information and how it's shared," she said. "That's something the public has a right to know."

Tagged:
**CRIME**
**RACE**



## LATEST STORIES

**WHO Bows To Calls From Countries For Independent Virus Probe**

**Asian Americans Lead In Internet-Based TV Use, Study Shows**

**Immigration Agency Asks For Emergency Funds, Will Raise Fees**

**How Do You Stay Safe Now That States Are Reopening? An Expert Explains How To Assess Risk When Reconnecting With Friends And Family**

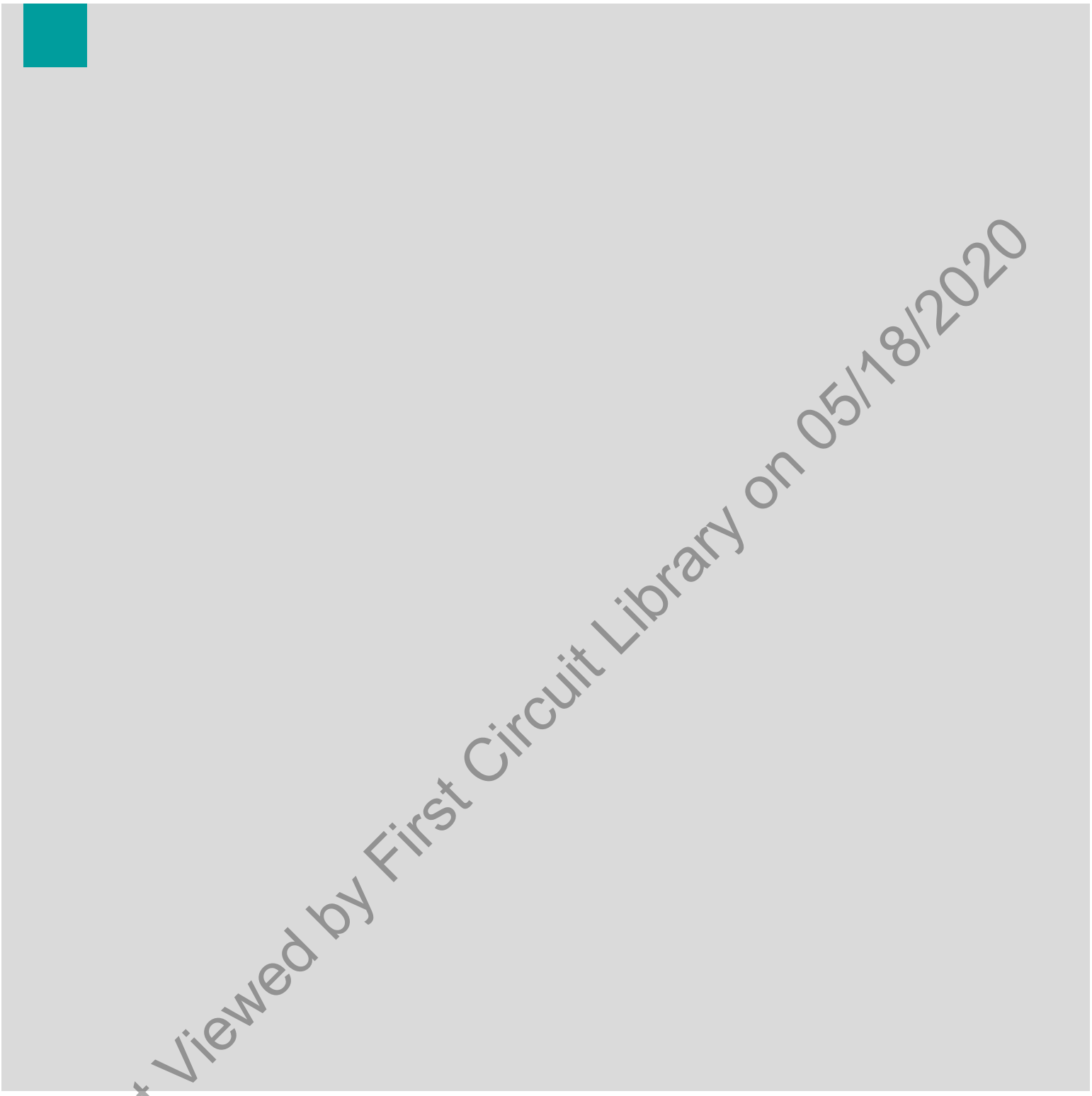
**Encouraging Vaccine Tests Let Moderna Think About Production**

# Related Stories



## Family Asks Houston Police Not To Release Fatal Shooting Video Of Gospel Singer

GUN VIOLENCE, RACE



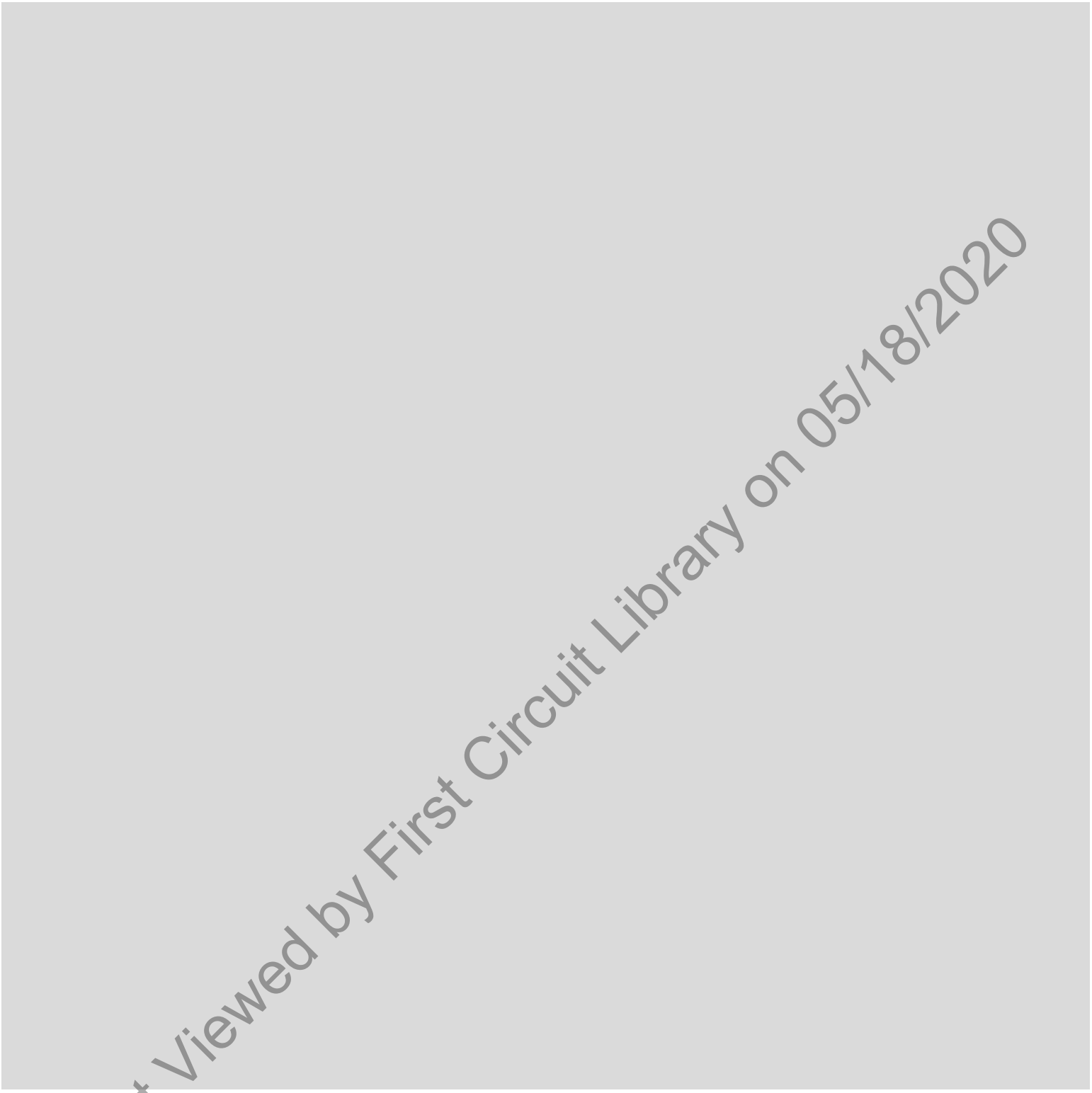


## Race, Police Connections Could Complicate Ahmaud Arbery Case

COURTS, RACE, MORNING EDITION

## Report: Anti-Semitic Incidents In US Hit Record High In 2019

CRIME





## Arrests Made In Shooting Death Of Black Man After Outcry

CRIME

1 2 3 NEXT PAGE