

THE WATCHDOGS NEWS CHICAGO

A look inside the watch list Chicago police fought to keep secret

By Mick Dumke and Frank Main | May 18, 2017, 9:26am CDT



Police Supt. Eddie Johnson, left, with Jonathan Lewin, the department's chief of technical services. | AP

As Chicago endured a devastating surge in gun violence last summer, scores of people with long rap sheets stood atop the Chicago Police Department's secret watch list, newly obtained records show.

One of the men had been arrested 12 times for violent crimes, all before turning 20. He'd also been charged with illegal gun possession. Two others each had been arrested eight times for violent crimes and caught three times with guns. Another man had been busted three times for illegal guns, racked up four arrests for violent offenses and been shot twice.

“We have 1,400 individuals that drive this gun violence in this city,” police Supt. Eddie Johnson said in August, assuring the public his department was keeping tabs on the people on its closely guarded “Strategic Subject List.” “We’ve gotten very good at predicting who will be the perpetrators or victims of gun violence.”

Yet the list is far broader and more extensive than Johnson and other police officials have suggested. It includes more than 398,000 entries — encompassing everyone who has been arrested and fingerprinted in Chicago since 2013.

Nearly half of the people at the top of the list have never been arrested for illegal gun possession. About 13 percent have never been charged with any violent crime. And 20 of the 153 people deemed most at risk to be involved in violent crime, as victim or shooter, have never been arrested either for guns or violence.

That’s according to a version of the list that the police department released to the Chicago Sun-Times after a lengthy legal dispute.

The police concluded the people who hadn’t been arrested for guns or violence were at great risk to commit a violent crime or become the victim of one — and, as a result, should be watched closely — because they:

- Had been shot or assaulted.
- Had been identified by the police as a gang member.
- Or recently were arrested for any crime, even a nonviolent offense.

The police say the list helps them determine which people they need to target for warnings or offers of help.

A police spokesman says the list has evolved over time, and the department is focused on those with the highest “risk-assessment” scores used to create the list. The highest possible score — given to those deemed most at risk — is 500.

“Like a credit score, the SSL is simply a tool that calculates risk,” spokesman Anthony Guglielmi says. “Individuals only really come on our radar with scores of 250 and

above.”

The police say the risk scores were based on eight factors, including arrests for gun crimes, violent crimes or drugs, the number of times the person had been assaulted or shot, age at the time of the last arrest, gang membership and a formula that rated whether the person was becoming more actively involved in crime.

But the database doesn’t indicate — and the police won’t say — how much weight is given to each factor in computing the scores, which are produced using an algorithm developed at the Illinois Institute of Technology.



Karen Sheley of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois.

Karen Sheley, director of police practices for the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, calls the newly released data “a huge step forward to understand more about the list, but there should be transparency around the algorithm itself” — and how it’s used.

“If the government is going to outsource decision-making to a computer, the public should be able to examine how the decisions are made and whether it’s fair and effective.”

When the police began developing the list several years ago, they said it was inspired by the research of Yale University sociology professor Andrew Papachristos, who has found that violence in Chicago and elsewhere tends to run in social networks.



Andrew Papachristos. | Yale University

“Let’s say you’ve never been shot or been arrested,” Papachristos says. “But if your friends have been shot, you are at a greater risk of being shot.”

But Papachristos, a Chicago native, now distances himself from the way the police are using the Strategic Subject List in Chicago, noting that his work focuses on identifying potential victims, not on predicting the chances someone will shoot another person.

He also questions why the department hasn’t been “transparent” about discussing the algorithm that produces the rankings.

Papachristos says he’s not sure whether the police department uses the kinds of social-networking calculations on which his work is based. “I have no idea if that’s what they’re doing with their model,” he says.



Ald. Chris Taliaferro (29th). | Sun-Times files

Ald. Chris Taliaferro (29th), a former Chicago cop who's on leave from the department, says he was surprised to learn some at the top of the list aren't violent offenders with gun arrests.

"I would certainly say that's the way it's been related to me," says the alderman, who represents much of Austin, the West Side neighborhood where many of those with the highest scores were most recently arrested. "I know the superintendent has said it's been effective at identifying that small group involved in a lot of the violence. But I don't know whether it's been effective or not, since shootings are still up."

The Sun-Times first requested a copy of the full list last August under the Illinois Freedom of Information Act. The police department denied that request and even objected to providing the list with names and other identifying information removed. It said criminals still could use the list to "thwart" the police, even though it was based on public information, such as arrest histories.

In February, Attorney General Lisa Madigan's office issued a finding that the police department was violating the law by withholding the records.

When the department finally released the database, it provided a list from eight months earlier.

The police say they regularly update the list and recently changed the way scores are computed. Gun and drug arrests are now given less weight than they were in the August database, says Jonathan Lewin, the department's chief of technical services.

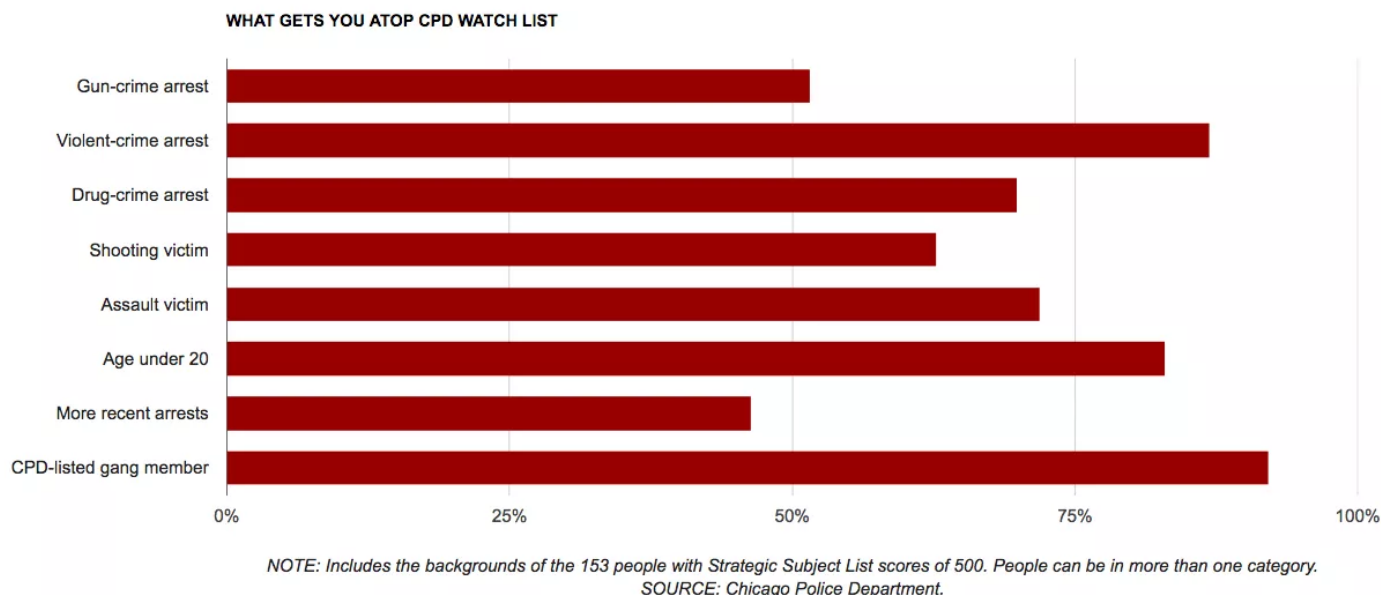
And gang membership is no longer considered because it wasn't very good at predicting involvement in shootings as either gunman or victim, though the police say they aren't sure why.

Police officials previously have said geography is a consideration in the risk assessment. Lewin now says it's not — though the database includes the census tract and community of each person's most recent arrest.

Lewin and other officials also say they don't rely on the scores alone when deciding which people to keep track of. Hundreds of people are flagged for interventions based on outstanding arrest warrants and "human intelligence" in addition to their scores — so those with the highest scores aren't always the primary targets, Lewin says.

Guglielmi says the scores are mostly used by police and outreach workers to warn those at risk they could be headed for catastrophe and to offer help finding jobs and counseling.

"It's not a list of individuals you go and arrest," he says. "We can't arrest someone just because you have a 500 score."



WHO'S ON POLICE WATCH LIST

The Chicago Police Department's "Strategic Subject List" database ranks people for how likely they're deemed to be at risk to become involved in gun violence or be a victim. It shows:

- Risk scores ranged from 10 to 500, with most above 250. Just 153 people were given the highest possible score of 500. Another 3,568 were given scores of 400 to 499 — also considered at high risk to shoot someone or become a victim.
- Of those with the maximum score, nearly half — 48 percent — had never been arrested for unlawful use of a weapon, the charge typically leveled for crimes involving an illegally owned gun. Another 30 percent had been arrested once. That means just 22 percent of the top scores went to the sorts of repeat gun offenders that police Supt. Eddie Johnson and Mayor Rahm Emanuel have frequently cited as being behind the city's rise in violence and shooting deaths.
- Still, 87 percent of those with the top score had been arrested for some kind of violent offense, though the records don't show the specific charges.
- Of those with the highest score, 63 percent had been shot before, and 72 percent had been victim of an assault or battery.

- On average, those with the highest score had been victims of one shooting and two assaults or batteries. They'd also been arrested three times for violent crimes, once for a gun offense and four times for drugs — all before they turned 20.
- The police say they do not include race or gender in the risk assessment. But the database includes that information and shows the vast majority of people with the highest score — 85 percent — were African-American men.

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