

Law Enforcement Scoured Protester Communications and Exaggerated Threats to Minneapolis Cops, Leaked Documents Show

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Newly leaked documents reveal that, in the wake of George Floyd's killing, local and federal law enforcement agencies repeatedly told police in Minnesota that they were under attack. The fears stoked by the warnings appear to have set the stage for the police's escalating, violent response to the protests, including the [widespread use](#) of tear gas, [concussion grenades](#), and rubber bullets, sometimes fired at close range.

The documents show that law enforcement leadership warned of potential threats from antifa and "black racially motivated violent extremists," as well as vaguely described social media users. Federal and local agencies collected intelligence drawn from private online messaging groups and Slack channels, according to the documents. The agencies also tracked Facebook RSVPs to peaceful protest events, including a suburban candlelight vigil.

The window into the police's internal memos came thanks to a trove of documents called BlueLeaks, which were published on the website [Distributed Denial of Secrets](#). The site's founder told [Wired](#) that the documents came from the hacking collective Anonymous, or someone claiming to be affiliated with the group. Government officials whose files appeared among the documents told the Intercept they were "illegally obtained," but no questions have been raised about their authenticity. The documents on Minnesota are from a host of local and federal law enforcement agencies and coordinating offices that worked to share information between them.

While the documents reveal concern over groups with a professed commitment to unrest, like the far-right group Boogaloo, they also suggest a tendency to categorize standard protest behavior as a threat to police. For instance, a May 28 [document](#) from the Minnesota Fusion Center, a post-9/11 body that coordinates among various law enforcement agencies, warned that police should look out for a dizzying array of suspicious behaviors, including people possessing balloons or bike locks and wearing masks — a description that includes many of those who took to the streets during the pandemic.

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Similar warnings were issued in other parts of the country. A May 29 [briefing](#) from the Joint Regional Intelligence Center, which coordinates federal, state, and local intelligence in the Los Angeles area, said that protesters might use "Black Bloc Tactics" involving "collective, frequently violent action." Though some examples of these tactics offered in the document would constitute crimes, others were entirely lawful and widespread activities like monitoring police scanners and communicating over encrypted apps to direct "ground movement."

The documents also warn of a number of impending events that apparently never came to pass. A May 30 [update](#) from the Multi-Agency Command Center, a temporary coordinating agency under the Minnesota Department of Public Safety that was activated on May 29, mentioned “unconfirmed reports of the possibility of affluent neighborhoods and areas outside of the immediate metro being targeted.” Other warnings were hazy: A command center [update](#), also from May 30, described “unconfirmed reports of extremist group activity in Minnesota related to civil unrest.” A spokesperson for the Minnesota Department of Public Safety declined to comment, adding, “We will not respond to questions based on illegally obtained documents.” The Multi-Agency Command Center ended its operations on June 7.

Some of the substantial property damage in the Twin Cities in the days following George Floyd’s killing was indeed directed at law enforcement, with the Minneapolis Police Department’s Third Precinct burned to the ground and various police vehicles vandalized. But, though there were [reports](#) of rocks being thrown at officers, an incident of [shots](#) fired at a police car, and scattered law enforcement injuries during the protests, even a [list](#) distributed by the Multi-Agency Command Center of nationwide officer injuries and deaths during the protests includes no examples from Minnesota.

Unjustified fear has long played into abuse in policing. “Since they know that they are hated, they are always afraid,” James Baldwin [wrote](#) of the police in *The Nation* in 1966. “One cannot possibly arrive at a more surefire formula for cruelty.” According to Dan O’Flaherty and Rajiv Sethi’s book “[Shadows of Doubt: Stereotypes, Crime, and the Pursuit of Justice](#),” undue security service fears based on errant information have historically contributed to police killing and injuring civilians.

The anxiety that pervades the leaked documents from Minneapolis seemed to be reflected in the extreme police reaction throughout the days that followed, as protests spread across the country. In Minneapolis, the police and other security services were accused of undertaking confrontations with demonstrators and residents alike, including [advancing on peaceful protests](#) using “less-lethal” munitions and tear gas, and [attacking](#) on-lookers standing on their own porch.

“In the weeks since Floyd’s death, we have seen many videos and pretty well substantiated reports of unjustified police use of force, including several questionable homicides,” said O’Flaherty. “These incidents make you scratch your head. ‘What were they thinking? They knew the whole world was watching.’ The most cogent explanation is fear.”

Monitoring Protest Activity

The warnings began soon after Floyd’s death. On May 27, the day before Minneapolis’s Third Precinct burned, the Minnesota Fusion Center published a [bulletin](#) titled “Possibility for Increased Threatening Activity towards Law Enforcement and Government Officials following Worldwide Coverage of Minneapolis In-Custody Death.” At that point, the protests in Minneapolis had been overwhelmingly peaceful. But the document described “threats directed toward the four MPD” officers involved in Floyd’s killing — including the publishing of personal details about two of the officers online.

The bulletin urged all employees of the Minneapolis Police Department, including administrative staff, to look for suspicious people and vehicles and to “consider varying travel plans to avoid surveillance.” As further evidence that police were in danger, the dispatch

offered examples of property damage, including photos of a vandalized police squad car and a broken police station window, as well as a threatening tweet sent to the Minneapolis Police Department's Twitter account. "While recent online chatter specifically discusses targeting the four MPD officers, individuals may seek to harm any law enforcement personnel," the bulletin stressed.

In the days that followed, the Minnesota Fusion Center and the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office Criminal Information Sharing and Analysis Unit disseminated the RSVP counts for protest-related events, apparently taken from Facebook. "At the time of reporting, 833 people indicated online that they are attending, while 3,300 people appear interested," read a [note](#) about a protest event titled "Justice 4 George Floyd — Stop Police Crimes — Free Them All."

"I'm laughing because we know they're monitoring us," said Sam Martinez, a spokesperson for one of the organizations that planned the event, the Twin Cities Coalition for Justice 4 Jamar. Martinez estimated that 5,000 people attended and said organizers had not heard of any violence taking place, adding that the monitoring was "ridiculous."

The documents make clear that, in some cases, law enforcement had visibility into private communications. A [dispatch](#) from the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office on June 1 described a "private social media chat app post" that advocated targeting National Guard soldiers. According to the police document, the post claimed that members of the National Guard are "easy targets who are barely trained at all."

Other intelligence disseminated in the reports was gleaned from Slack. A June 6 [report](#) from the Multi-Agency Command Center contended that "a revolutionary anti-capitalist group" in Minneapolis had collected details on law enforcement's whereabouts, adding that the group's members "used the Slack messaging app to pass intelligence to the Antifa portion of the group." The information was attributed to the FBI.

In these two cases, it is unclear whether law enforcement had infiltrated the online groups or were tipped off by a member.

In another [instance](#), the FBI received a tip from "a sensitive source with excellent access" about channels on the messaging app Telegram used by protesters to coordinate and "'keep people safe from police' during riots." The document noted that these included "'announcement channels,' 'police scanner channels,' and 'chat/coordination channels' in several cities."

And the documents show that the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office [kept tabs](#) on RSVPs to even small events favored by families and clergy, such as a [Peace and Prayers BBQ](#) at a church in North Minneapolis and a [candlelight vigil](#) in Maple Grove, a placid suburb. Tanwi Prigge, one of the organizers of the vigil, said that she and her co-hosts had alerted police ahead of time, and that officers had helped direct traffic at the event. (The sheriff's office declined to comment.)

The Multi-Agency Command Center reports, disseminated multiple times each day, include lists of upcoming protests and gatherings across the state. The authors of the reports were self-conscious of the potential for their surveillance to violate the Constitution. "Individuals or groups named in this product have been identified as participating in activities that are protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution," a disclaimer repeated on several

of the [reports](#) notes. “However, based on known intelligence and/or specific, historical observations, it is possible the protected activity could invite a violent reaction towards the subject individuals or groups, or the activity could be used as a means to target law enforcement.”

“Extremists”

Much of the anxiety about attacks on law enforcement centered on so-called extremists. On Saturday, May 30, agencies noted a change in the tone of the protests. “Domestic violent extremists are attempting to structure the protests to target specific symbols of state, local, and federal authority,” a Department of Homeland Security [intelligence note](#) stated. The document went on to say that the department had “high confidence” that “during the period of darkness from 30 to 31 May the violent protest movements will grow and DVEs” — domestic violent extremists — “and others will seek to take over government facilities and attack law enforcement.”

One precedent cited in the document for such violence is the case of Micah Johnson, who killed five Dallas police officers during a July 2016 protest against police violence. The document dubiously described him as a “black supremacist extremist.” In fact, Johnson acted alone and his involvement with what the FBI termed “black identity extremist” groups consisted of him [searching and liking](#) Facebook pages.

In Minneapolis, the agencies closely monitored the activities of various individuals that the reports framed as Black extremists. One report noted, for example, that members of a “black racially motivated violent extremist” group “planned to travel to the Government Center in Minneapolis” on May 31. The same [document](#), dated May 30, warned of “credible information” from a “Federal partner” that “a Minneapolis-based leader of a black separatist group” was armed, had participated in demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, and was “likely to be violent.”

While it is unclear what agency the “Federal partner” refers to, the FBI has previously used questionable labels like “[black separatist](#),” “black racially motivated violent extremist,” and “black identity extremist” for disparate groups and individuals, as Intercept [investigations](#) have [shown](#). Yet no major Black activist group has proven to be a significant violent threat to the public in the U.S.

The anti-fascist movement known as antifa also came in for special scrutiny. Intelligence from a “federal partner” described in a May 30 [document](#) suggests that Minneapolis’s Fourth Precinct could be a target for violence, apparently based on a social media post by a leader of the “General Defense Council (GDC),” which the document refers to as “a branch of Antifa.” Antifa is not an organization but rather a wide-ranging, leaderless movement. The officer may have been referring to the Industrial Workers of the World’s General Defense Committee, which does identify as anti-fascist.

“Antifa will utilize vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to launch attacks against National Guard and law enforcement agencies.”

A June 1 [report](#) from the Multi-Agency Command Center warned, “Antifa will utilize vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to launch attacks against National Guard and law enforcement agencies,” also citing intelligence collected by a federal partner. It continued: “The vehicles will bear fictitious license plates.” The warnings turned out to be

unfounded. There is no evidence that any groups used car bombs against military or police targets during the protests in Minneapolis.

Law enforcement agencies also monitored right-wing and white supremacist groups, the documents show. Most of the evidence cited apparently came from the internet, but a June 4 [bulletin](#) from the sheriff's office noted that "members of the 'Boohajideen,'" a term affiliated with the Boogaloo movement, had been spotted claiming to protect historically Black neighborhoods in North Minneapolis. Two documents noted the alleged presence of the white supremacist [Aryan Cowboys](#). A June 1 [report](#) said that the Minneapolis Hells Angels had allegedly brought "approximately 75" Aryan Cowboys from northern Minnesota to Minneapolis for protection. A [report](#) few days later noted that a source claimed motorcycle gang members with apparent white supremacist views had discussed "inciting riots while posing as Antifa members" and added that such individuals "have in fact participated in civil disturbances while posing as Antifa members."

Focus on Officer Injuries

As protests across the nation continued in the following weeks, police violence against protesters mounted. In Minneapolis, officers shot a rubber bullet at a photographer, who [lost her eye](#), and pepper-sprayed nonviolent demonstrators from their [moving vehicles](#). CBS News [reported](#) that at least 40 police brutality lawsuits have been filed across the U.S. in the wake of the protests.

Minnesota law enforcement, however, remained fixated on threats to officers. In the second week of protests, the Minnesota Fusion Center disseminated an [appendix](#) listing officer deaths and injuries across the U.S., and asked agencies to share additional incidents. No corresponding data about the myriad wounds protesters, media, and bystanders suffered at the hands of police attempting crowd control was included.

The leaked documents from Minneapolis are filled with rumors that may never be verified. They [warn](#) of a "truck full of Texas residents with AR-15s" and "busloads of people coming from Chicago" headed to the protest area. They also give a few telling examples of overreaction. "A rental vehicle was reported downtown Minneapolis in a parking ramp with Florida plates and radio equipment within," read a [dispatch](#) from the sheriff's office. "Security later confirmed it belonged to a media crew staying at the hotel."

Another, from May 30, [noted](#) that officers from a nearby police department "made contact with individuals from Wisconsin." The group had been en route to a protest but had changed their minds, according to the document: "The parties stated they had gotten cold feet and decided to go home."