

Since its creation in 1993, the Illinois “Gang File” from the Law Enforcement Agencies Data System has grown to more than 90,000 names. Along with two other gang databases (maintained by the Chicago Police Department and the Cook County Sheriff’s Department), the Gang File raises serious racial justice concerns about verification and racial equity.

The names on the list are not public information, but metadata concerning a subset of the database was made available to Michael Dumke of ProPublica Illinois via FOIA request. Dumke’s work has helped bring sunlight to lists of alleged gang-members, resulting in a collection of exposes and data reports.

The Gang File metadata, released by ProPublica, distinguished among 5 racial identifiers: White or Latinx (W), African-American (B), Asian (A), (I), and Unknown (U). This data, accounting for approximately one-third of the full list, only includes entries made by state and local police (outside of the prison system).

A.

In the early years of the database, a majority of new entries were coded African-American. African-Americans make up less than 15% of the state’s population. After the first decade, White & Latinx entries became more frequent, eventually becoming the largest racial category in the database. Because the state did not make information distinguishing between White versus Latinx entrants public, it cannot be verified whether the acceleration may have reflected increased surveillance of the Latinx population.

B.

Compared to their demographic prevalence, African-Americans have been disproportionately represented in the database throughout its lifetime. An expectation for fair representation was computed based on the total number of entrants and the 2010 Census data on Illinois racial demographics (1990 Census data yielded similar predictions). For each year, the true number of African-American entrants was compared to the predicted number based on random sampling over all races. African-Americans have been approximately four times more prevalent in new entries than expected from Illinois racial demographics.

C.

The state gang database grew quickly in its early years, and again in the late 2000s. Since then, the database has grown more slowly by the year, while other databases of potential gang members have ballooned.

D.

However, while the database is growing more slowly, it is not becoming more racially equitable. A dashed line marks the prevalence of African-Americans in Illinois based on 2010 Census data. A solid line marks the actual fraction of African-Americans within new entries to the database. Since 2010, African-Americans have accounted for an increasingly large share of new entries.