Since its creation in 1993, the Illinois gang database has grown to nearly 18,000 names. Two other databases within the state have also raised racial justice concerns: the Chicago City Police list, and the Cook County Sheriff’s List. The names on the list are not public information, but metadata concerning the database was made available to ProPublica via FOIA request. The public metadata distinguished among 5 racial identifiers: White or Latinx (W), African-American (B), Asian (A), (I), and Unknown (U).

**A.**

Initially, a majority of the names in the database were coded African-American, although African-Americans made up less than 15% of the state’s population. After the first decade, African-Americans continued to be over-represented in the database, but the White & Latino category began to grow more quickly and soon became 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. For each year of data collection, 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 were compared to the predicted number based on racial equity. Over the life of the database so far, African-Americans have been three times more prevalent in new entries than expected based on state 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, 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. The fractional representation of African-Americans now appears to be nearly as skewed as the earliest, dramatically biased years of the list.

From Mike Dumke’s reporting at ProPublica Illinois:

They were added not just by state troopers — more than 1,500 police departments, correctional facilities and other law enforcement agencies also have access to the database. In fact, two-thirds of the people in the database were entered by officials at county jails and state prisons, according to state police officials and records.

The other 31,000 were added by state police and local departments. A file provided by the state police shows that the biggest group was put into the system in the 1990s. Almost half are listed as white — though that also includes Hispanics.

The file is missing plenty of other important details. “We do not collect an ‘age’ data set,” a state police official wrote me. “We are also unable to provide data on ‘gang affiliation’ or ‘where the individual was first entered,’ nor are we able to provide the ‘reason the individual was entered’ because that is not included in our data sets.”

…

But records show the list of agencies that can access and use the information includes court systems, U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement, and investigative offices at the Chicago Housing Authority, the Illinois Tollway and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Even some private-sector institutions, such as the public safety department at the Moody Bible Institute, can get into the database.

In other words, the state police gang data potentially could surface in immigration enforcement, court proceedings, public housing investigations and campus policing — whether it’s accurate or not.