

Questions for the Youth Violence Strike Force

The Youth Violence Strike Force's investigative use of social media information has evolved substantially over the last 10 years. Previously, social media was primarily used to corroborate group affiliations and gang identifiers, such as hats and clothing indicating allegiance to a particular gang. The intelligence was considered corroborative rather than actionable.

Presently, gang members routinely communicate their intentions to carry out future acts of violence through social media platforms, most commonly Facebook and Snap Chat. Social media has become the new method of posting derogatory digital graffiti in a rival gang's turf.

Social media is also used to initiate acts of violence: for example, a gang member taunting a rival by posting videos and images of themselves in rival gang areas, often with firearms. Shootings have been committed as a result of a social media posting where a rival is insulted or ridiculed. Because these posts are often public, there is often a violent response to these posts. It has become common for these acts to be broadcast, sometimes live, on social media. It is imperative in gang culture that public insults be retaliated against and the detection of Law Enforcement is outweighed by the perceived need to be seen as not having been "punked" by a rival.

Often times these individuals are aware that law enforcement will be monitoring this public interaction, but the common sentiment is that fear of detection by law enforcement is dwarfed by the need to be perceived as un-afraid of their rivals and the willingness to be publicly supportive of their respective gang. Publicly backing down from a rival, referred to as "taking a short," results in ridicule and shame from friend and foe alike.

It is increasingly common for a shooting to be predicated by a social media post, often where a gang member will explicitly taunt a rival. Often times, individuals in rival gangs will pre-plan an act of violence with rivals. Meet spots and times will be arranged and a "shoot on sight" rule will be set.

Through social media monitoring, officers seek to interrupt and prevent intended acts of violence and, in many cases, arrest the offender for firearm-related offenses. Investigators proactively monitor social media accounts of individuals believed to be active in firearm activity and gang related violence.

Proactive policing has also allowed Investigators the ability to direct firearm related investigations toward individuals known to be actively carrying firearms. This has led to the recovery of hundreds of firearms from individuals known to carry out acts of violence. In addition to the benefit of reducing acts of violence by gang members, it has allowed Investigators to focus their efforts on the violent members of a particular gang rather than lesser involved individuals.

Intelligence-based policing, often aided with information gained through social media, has guided the police in investigative stops and minimized encounters with citizens who have no connection to gang activity or violence.

- 1. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force monitor any individuals or groups on an ongoing basis, either through routine or periodic manual review of their social media profiles, automated alerts, or other tracking tools? If so, how were those individuals or groups identified for ongoing review?**

The Department does not own or pay for subscription-based licensing for "Social Media Monitoring Software." The Department accesses information from publicly available sources, such as social media platforms, including, but not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and SnapChat, and utilizes publicly available applications to improve efficiency in reviewing such information, such as Snapmap and Tweetdeck.

Individuals or groups are monitored through routine or periodic manual review of social media. Individuals or groups are identified for ongoing review based on whether the Investigator has prior knowledge or reason to believe at least one of the following:

- Following the account may lead to information relating to criminal/gang-related activity; or
- The account belongs to a person suspected of being involved in criminal/gang-related activity; or
- The account belongs to a person who is associated with an active gang member; or
- The account belongs to a person who has been connected to or directly present for violence and/or criminal/gang-related activity; or
- The account belongs to a person who may lead to information about a person involved in criminal/gang-related activity.

- 2. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force use social media accounts of individuals or groups already being monitored to identify new individuals or groups to monitor? If so, how?**

Social media applications may suggest a "friendship" or the same may be initiated because the account is associated with (e.g., tagged by, followed by, friend of) an account previously followed. Any "suggested add" friend request would not require prior knowledge. This suggested add would occur as a result of accounts being followed that meet the criteria set forth above.

- 3. What factors or criteria would prompt or cause the Youth Violence Strike Force to monitor an individual or group's social media presence, including but not limited to a threat reported by another law enforcement agent or by the target of that threat? Where are those factors or criteria documented?**

The factors or criteria are listed above in response to Question 1. All officers shall consult with their supervisor(s) prior to initiating any social media investigation.

Observations that result in significant encounters and/or criminal charges must be documented in a Form 26. Within the Form 26, the Officer operating the undercover account must document how the target was identified and "friended" on social media and what knowledge the Officer had of the target prior to the encounter. The Form 26 must also document the name of the target account, the observations made by the Officer operating the undercover account, and any actions taken as a result of these observations. Once completed, a copy of the Form 26 and any video evidence will be forwarded to a Detective and Sergeant Detective assigned to the Officer's unit or station.

4. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force target the social media accounts of individuals whose identities are unknown (e.g., where the username or other information on the account does not identify the account owner)? If so, what are the protocols or procedures for identifying and monitoring those accounts?

Yes. YVSF members go to great lengths to identify targets that are not identified but are drawing attention, mostly through their observed interactions with known gang members and/or posts that show them in possession of a firearm.

5. Is information collected by the Youth Violence Strike Force from social media searchable? If so, what parameters can the Youth Violence Strike Force use to retrieve information that it or other components of BPD have previously collected from social media? If not, how is that information stored/maintained and accessed?

No. The YVSF does not maintain any type of database with social media intelligence. Social media observations that result in significant encounters and/or criminal charges are documented in Form 26 reports.

6. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force monitor children under the age of 18 on social media? Are the criteria for monitoring minors different than individuals over the age of 18? Is there any age under which the Youth Violence Strike Force applies different criteria for monitoring?

Yes, individuals under the age of 18 that meet the criteria listed above may be investigated via social media. Note, the YVSF very rarely "targets" juveniles for possessory offenses absent their clear connection to recent violence.

7. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force monitor crime victims on social media? If so, under what circumstances? How is that monitoring documented, and how is the resulting information stored and retained?

The YVSF does not monitor individuals solely because they were the victim of a crime.

8. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force request to see individuals' mobile phones or other devices to look at their social media posts, friend networks, or other social media information?

The YVSF conducts investigations wherein cellphones are searched pursuant to a lawfully issued search warrant or with lawful consent from the owner of the phone.

9. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force request social media passwords from individuals? If so, under what circumstances?

The YVSF is unaware if this has occurred. Again, in a typical investigation that requires the search for content of a mobile device, that device is forensically examined pursuant to a lawfully issued search warrant or consent of the owner.

10. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force take referrals from Boston public school teachers or administrators about minors to monitor on social media?

Chapter 16.63 of the City of Boston Municipal Code (Ordinance on Surveillance Oversight and Information Sharing) at Section 16-63.4 (Boston Public Schools And Boston Police Department Information-sharing Policy) provides the circumstances in which BPS personnel may transmit or share information about students with the Boston Police Department.

11. Does the Youth Violence Strike Force conduct any training or distribute materials to Boston public school teachers or administrators on minors' use of social media?

No.