

Florida sheriff's department creates intelligence-led police program to monitor and harass residents

Alex Johnson
8 September 2020

A *Tampa Bay Times* investigative report released last week exposed a policing operation in Pasco County, Florida, which has deployed mass monitoring, targeted intimidation, and harassment tactics against hundreds of resident families for years under the pretense of preempting crime. The extraordinary *Times* report gives a chilling glimpse into brutal police-state measures utilized by one of the largest police districts in the state.

Since 2011, the Pasco County Sheriff's Office has implemented their system as an intelligence-led operation with the stated intention of reducing property crimes. The agency, which has 650 law-enforcement officers and oversees a county of approximately 500,000 residents in the Tampa Bay area, would use the information it gathered to make predictions about where future crimes were likely to take place, who was likely to commit them, and use this as a mechanism for tracking individuals.

The main subjects for the Sheriff's Office's operation were county residents with past offenses who the office deemed probable to commit future crimes, even if there was a significant gap in the arrest records or police reports.

Sheriff's office records as well as countless testimonials from victimized families demonstrate that this nearly decade-long intelligence operation spanned a wide range of invasive and unlawful activities.

Law enforcement officers would invariably terrorize residents at their homes, make arbitrary requests to question individuals placed on their monitoring lists and surveil their movements. Sheriff's deputies would write exorbitant tickets, inundating families with court dates and fines, often based on thinly justified and even fabricated legal violations, ranging from missing mailbox numbers to overgrown grass in their front yards.

In interviews with *Times* journalists, 21 families labeled as "targets" by the program recounted how deputies would invariably pound on their front doors all hours of the day and night. Nearly half of the families interviewed said deputies sometimes surrounded their homes, lined their streets with patrol cars or shined flashlights into their windows to initiate a campaign of aggression and intimidation.

One of the more menacing products of the program was its prioritization of young people, a demographic that made up a majority of those earmarked for monitoring and attack by the Sheriff's Office. Among the 20 addresses visited by enforcement teams, more than half were home to middle or high schoolers that were chosen as targets.

In several cases, young people were seen as targets after having only one or two arrests.

The *Times* recounted the case of Rio Wojtecki, a 15-year-old, who was aggressively harassed by law enforcement from September 2019 to January 2020 after violating trespassing laws and stealing motorcycles.

Dispatch logs showed that Pasco deputies went to his home at least 21

times to solicit information about criminal activities, despite Wojtecki already having a state-assigned probation officer checking in on him.

In addition to Wojtecki's home, deputies went to his mom's car dealership, his friend's house, and checked his gym to see if he had signed in. In the aftermath of one visit by police, the teen suffered from an anxiety attack triggered by the constant threats from law enforcement and was taken to the emergency room.

Another instance of police harassment involved a teenage target that deputies had spotted smoking a cigarette with a friend at his home. After both refused to come outside and the teen's father, Robert A. Jones, refused to make them go, the police arrested Jones for contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

The charges were later dropped but deputies arrested Jones nine days later for missing a court hearing. Less than three months later, Jones was arrested again after having his vehicle and home searched randomly by police in which a small amount of marijuana was found. Jones told the *Times*, "It was like a gang. They were like, 'How can we get this dude?'"

Jone's was later forced to move his family to a motel to get away from the harassment, and then eventually moved out of Pasco County.

Dalanea Taylor, who is now 20, reported being harassed repeatedly by officers for her arrest record as a minor, despite going months without being arrested or having any legal troubles. Deputies routinely showed up at her home and asked who she was hanging out with, demanded information she had on certain people, and wanted to know if she was in a relationship. Once, after Taylor posted a photo with a male friend on Facebook, deputies asked about the friend and later she said a deputy followed her in a patrol car as she walked down her neighborhood street.

The initiative was launched by Pasco County Sheriff Chris Nocco when he took office in 2011. According to the *Times*, Nocco had far less experience in law enforcement duties than the outgoing sheriff but had close ties with the state Republican Party.

When asked about the surveillance program by the *Times*, Nocco, an appointee of former Governor Rick Scott, told reporters that deputies were ordered to identify residents and "take them out," in order to thwart criminal activity before it occurred.

Upon taking office, Nocco made intelligence gathering his office's central axis. Deputies were responsible for practicing "intensive monitoring" strategies against potential suspects. One section of deputies involved in the effort, known as the Strategic Targeted Area Response (STAR) team, were the most rabid in the program's objectives.

Email reports document STAR deputies driving by targets' homes, determined to find any evidence of wrongdoing they could use for legal prosecution. In one email thread, deputies reported spotting an orange mountain bike outside one young offender's house and checked to see if any bicycles matching that description had been reported stolen.

Deputies also recorded and exchanged information relating to non-criminal, personal descriptions of targets, such as changes in bodily appearance or school development. In one thread, officers noted that one high school-aged target “has cut his hair, which is now short.” For the same youth the record noted after summer break he “will be going to 9th grade at Shwettman (Education Center). He claimed not to be associating with any of his friends.”

According to the *Times*, Pasco County deputies manufactured its lists of potential offenders based on their arrest history, various fragments of unspecified intelligence, and haphazard decisions reached by police analysts. The system was built for officers to locate and interrogate any listed name, often without probable cause, a search warrant, or evidence of a crime.

Police analysts are tasked with scavenging police reports, property records, Facebook pages, bank statements and surveillance photos to enable deputies to investigate and track their targets, according to the agency’s latest intelligence-led policing manual. Individuals or families placed on their secret lists are labeled what the department calls “prolific offenders.” The manual further describes them as people who’ve “taken to a career of crime” and ominously designated as “not likely to reform.”

To identify potential “prolific offenders,” the department uses an algorithm that assigns targets with scores based on their criminal records. People are issued points for each time they are arrested, even after charges are dropped, while targets are also susceptible to acquiring points for merely being identified as a suspect. According to the intelligence manual, a potential offender’s score is “enhanced” by an indefinite amount if they miss court dates, violate probation or simply appear in five or more police reports, even if they were listed as a witness or the victim.

Pasco County Sheriff’s Office officials told the *Times* that a computer generates the scores and creates a list of offenders every 90 days but a special group of police analysts run through the lists manually and make a determination about which 100 people should be listed. Analysts work with command staff to pick out “district targets,” those who the department believes it has enough evidence on to charge with crimes. Deputies are then tasked with visiting “prolific offenders” and other targets as part of their daily responsibilities. In a forum with the Council of Neighborhood Associations in 2012, Nocco described the routine as “bothering criminals.”

The intelligence manual’s mission statement states plainly that the program is ultimately designed to coerce and bully as many listed targets in the county as it possibly can and instill fear in the population. “If the offender does not feel the pressure,” the manual states, “if the offender is not arrested when they commit their next crime, or if the offender is left to feel their punishment is menial, the strategy will have no impact.”

According to one former deputy involved in the directive, the program was set up to “make their [targets] lives miserable until they move or sue.” Over the course of just five years the program targeted nearly 1,000 people in Pasco County. One in ten of those surveilled and harassed by the sheriff’s office were minors under the age of 18 during that same period. In many cases, deputies would continuously and ferociously harass their suspects until they found any reason to arrest them.

A one-time STAR team member and former corporal, Royce Rodgers, said in an interview with the *Times* that Pasco’s program involved “directed harassment.” Rodgers and his team would frequently visit people’s homes simply to make them uncomfortable. In one approach, which was not logged into the agency’s official records, he and other agents parked five patrol cars outside a target’s home all night and went to the house six times in a single day. They would do the same to targets’ friends and relatives, even if they “have nothing to do with the offender,” Rodgers said.

If a so-called target or their family members or “associates” refused to speak to deputies or answer questions, STAR team deputies were told to

look for any code enforcement violation to legally entrap their victims, such as faded mailbox numbers or forgotten bags of trash in front of houses. “We would literally go out there and take a tape measure and measure the grass if somebody didn’t want to cooperate with us,” Rodgers said.

Times reporters analyzed thousands of pages of court and police documents, hours of body-camera footage, and obtained the target list, which had previously been kept hidden from public scrutiny. In fact, the program’s methods were largely hidden from public view even though Nocco routinely praised its supposed accomplishments in community forums and debates.

Six weeks prior to publishing the story, the *Times* shared its findings with the Sheriff’s Office, with Nocco and other top agents declining to comment on the allegations advanced by reporters.

The agency instead responded to the story in a 30-page statement defending the Sheriff’s intelligence-led program, calling their practices “basic law enforcement functions” and justifying their achievements with statistics showing a decline in property crimes such as burglaries and auto thefts. These crimes, however, declined in Pasco County at a rate similar to the seven largest nearby police districts throughout the time the program was in full swing.

The *Times* report elicited significant backlash and condemnation from criminal justice experts. Matthew Barge, an expert in police practices and civil rights who addressed police misconduct cases in Baltimore and Cleveland, called the program “morally repugnant.” David Kennedy, a renowned criminologist at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, told the newspaper that Nocco’s initiative was “[o]ne of the worst manifestations of the intersection of junk science and bad policing” and an “absolute absence of common sense and humanity.”

Such insidious tactics are not unique to the Pasco County Sheriff’s Office. In Hillsborough County, the fourth largest district in the state of Florida and home to Tampa and its immediate suburbs, the Sheriff’s Office has recently started using arrest statistics to predict future crimes and identify repeat offenders. In one of the counter-statements released by the Pasco agency, it said that departments in both counties have discussed techniques on gathering intelligence. Pasco County police were given a \$95,000 federal grant to upgrade their computer systems and hire a trained team of civilian analysts.

The Chicago Police Department, which infamously and secretly operated a “black-site” interrogation and torture facility in Homan Square for several years, has also acknowledged using an intelligence system for identifying people it labels likely to be involved in gun-violence incidents. Earlier this year Baltimore implemented an aerial surveillance program using a plane equipped with high resolution cameras to film the entire city and track individuals’ movements.

In New Orleans, a deal was struck in 2012 between the city government and Palantir, a secretive technology contractor with ties to the Pentagon and US intelligence agencies, for conducting surveillance on the entire city without the population’s knowledge.

In a blatant violation of the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable searches and seizures, Palantir’s data mining software was contracted to create statistical models to predict certain behaviors people would engage in beforehand. This operation was based on factors such as family and other personal relationships, as well as geographical location, socioeconomic factors and social media posts.

These developments over the past several years underscore the campaign of the ruling class to establish dictatorial forms of rule to crush growing working class resistance, while militarizing police agencies, local crime units and federal forces to spearhead anti-democratic and reactionary attacks on the working class. This process has accelerated under President Donald Trump, who has incessantly encouraged attacks on workers and escalating repression of opponents of police violence

through repeated fascistic invocations of “law-and-order.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact