

Detroit police have gathered electronic dossiers on hundreds of protesters

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Documents and interviews provided to the *Detroit Free Press* have revealed that the Detroit Police Department has been monitoring and gathering information on hundreds of individuals involved in Black Lives Matter demonstrations and protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

In an investigative report published on September 13, the *Free Press* said it had reviewed an internal police department document on anti-genocide protesters which “reads much like a dossier, containing details on dozens of people associated with a recent demonstration. The 11-page packet does not specify whether each person was suspected of a crime.”

The folder of documents was provided to the *Free Press* by a former police lieutenant, who has filed a lawsuit against the police department saying he was suspended without due process for using “bias-based policing tactics” on protesters.

The suspended lieutenant and two other unnamed Detroit police officers also gave extensive interviews to the *Free Press* detailing the political surveillance that has been going on for years. The *Free Press* also interviewed one of the individuals that the Detroit police had collected information about.

Lieutenant Brandon Cole told the *Free Press* that a specialized unit, the mobile field force—which he led during demonstrations until his suspension—has been gathering details and monitoring the social media accounts of demonstrators for at least the past four years.

Cole said once advertising of protests begins, information about who is supporting or attending the events is gathered. “Once the information (demonstrators) start putting out in the public domain becomes valuable, then they start getting monitored.”

The *Free Press* report continued:

Throughout the summer of 2020, officers with the mobile field force identified and scoured the public social media profiles of an estimated 750 demonstrators amid nightly protests in Detroit over the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Cole and one of the officers said. They gathered additional publicly available background information using online search tools.

“We would do ... reverse image searches on people’s social media platforms to look up the groups, so like (Students for Justice in Palestine),” Cole said. “We’d throw (their) logo into a Google image search and reverse back to anyone that posted that image, so we could see additional (demonstration) dates, additional people.”

The goal, he said, was not only to identify events that might require police presence, but “to figure out who our players were.” Early demonstrations in the city that summer erupted in clashes with police before settling into a largely peaceful rhythm under the leadership of activist group Detroit Will Breathe.

“By the end of 2020, we knew everyone in Detroit Will Breathe—from the players, to the fundraising, to who was the guy doing security, who was the one bringing medical supplies, how they were getting their funding,” Cole said.

The activity was encouraged by the department’s top brass, Cole said, adding they assigned him eight staffers to identify and dig into the demonstrators.

When asked about the mobile field force, Detroit Police Chief James White said, “We’re not keeping tabs on folks.” Cole’s lawsuit says the police chief’s comment is a lie, and “he knew it when he said it.” The statement was

qualified by a department spokeswoman, who said that the Detroit police do not keep tabs on people if they are not suspected of a crime.

Official department policy bans surveillance, investigation and social media monitoring of people based on their views, beliefs and other activity, which is protected by the First Amendment. However, Detroit Police Chief of Staff Commander Michael Parish told the *Free Press* that anyone suspected of violating Michigan law, including minor infractions, could make a demonstrator eligible for monitoring.

Parish claimed that First Amendment rights were being guarded by Detroit police “to the fullest extent possible,” but he went on to say, “if people are committing crimes—be it a caravan going through red lights or vandalizing property or burning down buildings to get their messaging across—that’s different, that’s a crime and the department will investigate it as such.”

When asked about the 11-page packet of anti-genocide protesters, no one in the police department would comment. Neither would anyone from the department acknowledge that the activity of the mobile field force, as described by Cole, was a violation of department policy.

Cole also described the relationship of the mobile field force with the Detroit police department’s crime intelligence section, which helps with information gathering and assembled the packet reviewed by the *Free Press*.

The crime intelligence group builds the dossier once someone is “tagged” to be followed. From that point, Cole said, crime intelligence assembles a “living history” of the social media activity, videos and associations of the individual.

Cole was suspended after he approached Palestinian American activist Lexis Zeidan during a protest in May and told her to, “Go back to Mexico.” The comment was based on Instagram photos of Zeidan during a trip she took to Mexico that Cole had reviewed in the police department file that had been gathered on her.

Zeidan, 32, is a leading organizer of the national “Uncommitted” movement, which opposed the nomination of Joe Biden as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party because of his facilitation of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

The *Free Press* also interviewed Dana Kornberg, an assistant professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, whose identity was included in the packet shared with the *Free Press*. Kornberg, who was unaware she was being monitored by the police until she was informed by

the newspaper, said, “This is a matter of repression and criminalization.”

Kornberg, 41, pleaded no contest to interfering with a government officer earlier this month, part of a deal that requires she have no police contact for six months to remove the conviction from her records. She said she will now curb her protest activity against the Gaza genocide in advance the November presidential election.

She said the police tactics are used to “just criminalize us and criminalize the movement. And you can see the effects of that.”

The surveillance by the Detroit Police Department exposed in the lawsuit by Cole shows that electronic spying on the public is a critical aspect of the nationwide crackdown on demonstrations against war and genocide which is being spearhead by the Biden White House and the Democratic Party. Along with the implementation of undemocratic rules on college campuses aimed at suppressing freedom of speech and assembly rights, for example, a massive surveillance infrastructure is being built up.

According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), tools are being used on campuses that “overlap with the street-level surveillance used by law enforcement.” EFF says that a mix of visible and invisible surveillance may be used to identify protesters, including, “administrators or law enforcement simply attending and keeping notes of what is said,” or digital recordings can be used to make that same approach less plainly visible.

“This doesn’t just include video and audio recordings—protesters may also be subject to tracking methods like face recognition technology and location tracking from their phone, school ID usage, or other sensors,” the EFF report says, adding, “This may also be paired with online surveillance. The university or police may monitor activity on social media, even joining private or closed groups to gather information. Of course, any services hosted by the university, such as email or Wifi networks, can also be monitored for activity.”



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