

I. What are CRIME ALERT emails?

These emails are sent to all active users of the campus email system; recipients cannot unsubscribe from them. In 2019, thirteen emails were sent; there were also thirteen in 2020.

CRIME ALERT emails have two main goals. One is to fulfill reporting requirements under the federal Clery Act; the second is “to aid in the prevention of similar crimes by alerting the community about the incident and providing information on actions people can take to diminish their chances of being victimized” (CUPD website). In their current form, however, these emails have a counterproductive, additional effect: they foreground and insist upon a racial nature to local crime. By consistently listing the race of suspected perpetrators, even when there is not enough information for recipients to identify a suspect, they encourage generalized suspicion of black people, including our students, faculty, and visitors.

II. How are CRIME ALERT emails raced?

Since January 2019, 75% of the suspects whose race was identified in CRIME ALERT emails were Black men. Here are two brief examples: after the 2020 robbery of the Universal Deli, the CRIME ALERT described the perpetrator as “an unknown black male approximately 5’ 7” with an average build, dark skin, wearing all black clothing and a black mask.” Considering that height estimations are untrustworthy, this could be almost any Black man. This information is useless to protect the community from the perpetrator — unless one believes it is protective to mistrust or avoid all average black men, which would precisely constitute a racist prejudice. After the December 14, 2019 burglary of 105 Highland place, the thief was described as a “black male in his 20’s, average height and weight, with black hair. He was last seen wearing a beige shirt (possibly long sleeve), and dark pants.” This describes many students — so many that an attitude of suspicion arising from the email would be indistinguishable from a generalized fear of Black men on campus.

In these particular cases, the doubling of blackness — vaguely saying that a black male has dark skin, or superfluously reporting that a black male has black hair — argues to us that there is unexamined cultural work being done through these emails. They feel jarringly ignorant of the drumbeat of anti-Black violence that we see every day.

III. Do we need race in CRIME ALERT emails?

While there is no direct way to study the influence of Clery Act reporting on campus crime, there is a broad consensus among experts that the law does not substantially prevent crime. Gregory Sammons’ 2019 dissertation argues that while police departments surveyed generally said the Clery Act has had a positive effect on police transparency, only 10% of law enforcement officers, 8% of students and 13% of victim advocates believe that the Act positively influences recipient behavior. We wonder whether this tiny minority of officers who feel that the Clery Act supports campus safety are clustered on extremely small campuses. On a town-sized campus where a single petty larceny is broadcast to tens of thousands of recipients, it seems unlikely that even actionable information is of great use, much less the extremely limited information available immediately after a crime is committed. Edward Davis, former police commissioner of Boston and a nationwide expert on Clery reporting, argues that the law’s reporting requirements “create misperceptions among students and parents about campus safety” and that the Clery Act as a whole “is taking resources away from the mission of campus safety.”

It seems clear, therefore, that CRIME ALERT emails serve to endanger Black students, faculty, staff, and community members far more than they serve to protect the community as a whole. This danger is sharpest when the emails work as claimed, encouraging community members to see Black people as criminal suspects. At Yale University in 2015, a campus police officer drew a gun on Tahj

Blow, a Yale chemistry major because he, like a suspected criminal, was black; in July 2015, UCLA was forced to pay \$500,000 for the physical and emotional trauma caused by their racial profiling of a black motorist. Past concrete violence, though, there is an unmeasurable impact on Black students, who we currently require to see themselves described in police emails several times a year.

IV. Do timely reporting requirements under the Clery Act require racial descriptors of suspects?

No. Section 6-12 of the 2016 “Handbook of Campus Safety and Security Reporting” explains the requirement only as “pertinent information about the crime.” Even if the race of the suspect might be considered pertinent by some, it does not require the reporting of *all* pertinent information, and makes clear exceptions for information that harms public safety.

After Brown University quietly discontinued raced language in crime reports in 2016, and after protests at the University of Minnesota forced them to change their policies, both continued to uphold the letter and spirit of the Act, which does not require race reporting.

V. How would this proposal interact with more intensive reform?

Many community members are right now advocating for or debating bigger, structural changes to the Cornell Police. Do Better Cornell has an active petition requesting the transparent release of CUPD data as well as its use of force policy; the September 7 letter from the Cornell Faculty Coalition, which hundreds of faculty have signed, suggests moving resources from policing towards equity in hiring, fairness in retention, and the support of BIPOC community members. If these important proposals become policy, federal law will still require timely reporting emails, and the practice of discriminating against and endangering community members by racializing crime reporting will still need to be changed.

VI. Conclusion

In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander describes the racialized culture of crime in America. She says that “seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem.” Identifying criminal suspects by race participates in traditions of stigma and dehumanization, and provides no care or support for anybody in the Cornell community. In this case, as in so many, antiracist action would make Cornell a stronger and safer community. In closing, however, we want to encourage continued action in response to proposals by Do Better Cornell and the Cornell Faculty Coalition, and we support the formation and empowerment of the Cornell University Police Oversight Committee as the campus works together to add a new and more just chapter to a long history of unequal policing.