

Court Clerk's Error Exposed Data Involving Thousands of Juvenile Defendants, Violating State Law

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In a violation of state law, the Cook County court clerk's office accidentally exposed online the names of at least 5,000 children charged with crimes, raising serious concerns by their attorneys that their clients could be dogged by allegations that are mandated by law to be kept secret.

The information was available for nearly two weeks. Technology officials in the office have not been able to nail down how many outside users accessed the search while it was live. Thousands of juvenile records are in the system. But they say they're confident in security measures that would have prevented third-party websites from scraping and publishing the data en masse. Users would have needed the names of the juvenile defendants and other identifying information to access the records.

“It has been determined that any potential exposure was brief, non-damaging and limited in nature,” a court clerk’s office spokesman, Cesar Rolón, wrote in a statement. The clerk’s office notified the chief judge’s office of the data exposure.

The office did not dispute that the data exposure violated the state’s juvenile court laws, which are designed to prevent crimes committed by minors from being made public.



The office of Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Iris Martinez, shown here in a 2019 photo, has called the exposure of juvenile data “brief, non-damaging and limited in nature.” (Credit: Mina Bloom/Block Club file photo)

The oversight was the latest misstep to plague the \$134 million Clerk of the Circuit Court’s Office since the election of Clerk Iris Martinez in 2020, according

to the county's top public defender.

"There was an idea that things had hit rock bottom . . . when it comes to the operations of the clerk system," Cook County Public Defender Sharone Mitchell said in an interview. "I think what we've seen since then is just an out-and-out, complete failure to operate the system."

On Jan. 12, officials in Martinez's office added a new section to the court system's online case search webpage allowing members of the public to look up criminal court records. Officials did not announce the new search function, instead intending it as a "soft launch" only for use by employees of their newly opened customer service call center.

Part of a long-running upgrade to the court's case-management system, the function was designed to let adult defendants and their attorneys look up information about their cases. It had been under development for months before its launch in January, Rolón said.

Officials across the court system had been pushing the court clerk's office for more than a year to launch a simple search function so that criminal defendants could look up their next court date or search the status of a warrant, Mitchell said. Such tools are common among court systems around the country.

No one ever asked to allow public access to juvenile records, Mitchell said.

Adults' conviction and arrest records are etched into the public record, searchable through background checks or, often, basic online searches. But Illinois law has different rules for crimes involving people 17 or younger — and for good reason, said Stephanie Kollmann, policy director at Northwestern University's Children and Family Justice Center.

"One of the key protections of juvenile court is supposed to be that you can be restored and rehabilitated from youthful mishaps," Kollmann said. Even if they're serious, "they're committed when you're at an age developmentally where your mistakes are not supposed to follow you for life."

Any county exposure of youth records is "very harmful," Kollmann said.

On Jan. 24, more than a week after the search function went live, the clerk's office held a meeting with a wide network of attorneys, advocates and

administrators across the court system to share the new tool.

The next day, a private attorney notified the Cook County Public Defender's Office that a search through the website had turned up personal information about one of her underage clients.

Within hours, Amber Miller, chief of the public defender's juvenile justice division, contacted Darren Ganir, chief information officer for the Clerk of the Circuit Court, according to an internal email obtained by the Illinois Answers Project.

"You understand that the ability to be able to search and obtain juvenile court records through your website is in violation of the law and as such needs further development to make sure greater protections are in place in accordance with the law," Miller wrote, summarizing a phone call she had with Ganir minutes earlier. "We requested that you cease and desist the function of this website until those protections are in place . . ."

The clerk's office removed the search function within 20 minutes of being notified, court clerk officials said.

Nearly 38,000 juvenile delinquency petitions have been filed with the Cook County court system in the past 10 years, including almost 3,000 in 2023 alone, according to the clerk's office. The petitions were not visible through the search function, nor were court documents associated with each youth defendant, court clerk officials said. But while the system was live, anyone who entered the full name and date of birth of a youth would have been able to see information entered by police at the time of their arrest, including the offense they were arrested for.

The court system has that identifying information on file for 5,673 juveniles who were charged with crimes, according to the clerk's office.

On the evening of Jan. 26, officials in the circuit court clerk's office confirmed that the youth data had been removed from their search system, according to an email from Artez Jackson, a chief deputy clerk in Martinez's office, to Miller at the public defender's office.

"I want to make it clear, all hands were on deck to remedy this issue," Jackson wrote. "We have made some changes to our website at the criminal node to

exclude juvenile case types.”

Kollmann said last week that she and her colleagues were still scrubbing third-party databases like mugshots.com to see if any of their clients’ information were picked up and republished as a result of the two-week exposure. So far, they have not found any.

Rolón contended it is “improbable” that any third-party website or data scraper would have been able to mine the clerk’s site for youth data. Any such program would have had to input the full name and birth date of each defendant. Even then, technology officials in the clerk’s office say the website has safeguards designed to shut down rapid-fire searches.

Martinez, who is running for reelection this year, has touted her office’s follow-through on a long-delayed upgrade of the software underlying the court’s sprawling case-management system. Completion of the office’s switch to the Odyssey case management system in August 2023 represented a culmination of the “advances in technology and transparency” the office had achieved since Martinez was elected, she told county commissioners during an October budget hearing. Martinez had campaigned on a promise to professionalize the office after Dorothy Brown, her legally embattled and widely criticized predecessor, held the post for 20 years.

The upgrades have not gone smoothly, according to Elizabeth Monkus, civil court project director for the Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts. Monkus said she was not surprised to hear about last month’s data exposure, pointing to ongoing struggles she and her colleagues have had pulling accurate case information from the court clerk’s system.

“If you are managing your cases electronically, then you should be coding them properly when they go into the system,” Monkus said. “It’s my impression that they are not doing that.”

Public defenders have run into the same issues. Attorneys in Mitchell’s office often complain of missing records and inaccurate reporting of even basic court motions, Mitchell said.

“Whether you’re a public defender or a defense attorney or a prosecutor or a judge or a sheriff or probation officer, it is absolutely fundamental to have clean

and accurate records of what's happened," Mitchell said. "If you can't do that, terrible things can happen."

Mitchell pointed to last year's [reporting by WBEZ](#) revealing that a data error in Martinez's office had tacked conviction records onto people who completed probation programs and were entitled to have their slates wiped clean. He called the episode "disastrous."

The exposure of youth data showed Mitchell the office has yet to learn from its mistakes, he said.

"There's been a lot of issues, and we've been communicating with [Martinez's office] about them for quite some time," Mitchell said. "The worry is that it's not getting better."

Carmen Navarro Gercone, a top deputy in the clerk's office, said officials are working on an "after-action report" with a full explanation of the data exposure and a plan to prevent it from happening again.