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Recent wave of creepy clown reports has yet to reach Boston area. But it's happened here before.

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Since August, people in many states have reported scary or suspicious encounters with people dressed like clowns.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 03, 2016

UPDATE: Students at Merrimack College were [briefly told to shelter in place Monday night](#) and a dorm was evacuated after a report of an armed clown in the residence hall, but authorities found “no suspicious persons” in the facility, a spokesman said.

Residents in at least 26 states have reported to police unsettling encounters in recent weeks with people dressed as creepy, menacing clowns. At least one such sighting has been reported in Massachusetts, and the cases recall a strange outbreak in the Boston area in the 1980s.

The recent [cases](#) have included reports of clowns lurking in the shadows, trying to lure children, or chasing people.

Online threats from people in clown garb have also been posted.



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[Arrests](#) have been made after some of the incidents. Some threats have prompted [school closures](#).

The reports have drawn the attention of officials at the FBI and the trend may be linked to at least one death, The [New York Times](#) reported last week.



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Creepy clowns are everywhere, and real clowns aren't laughing

Turns out that people with a lot of face makeup and bizarre, billowy hair aren't just frightening America from behind debate podiums.

Clown group backs out of parade amid rash of creepy clown reports

Police are concerned about creepy copycats

Creepy clown sightings in South Carolina cause a frenzy

In some cases, people were found to be engaging in what they considered harmless pranks. In others, the reports were fake.

In the recent Massachusetts case, someone called police on the night of Sept. 17 in the western city of Greenfield to report that they saw someone dressed as a clown and “lurking” at the Franklin County Fairgrounds, according to Lieutenant Joe Burge.

Officers checked the area, but found nothing, Burge said.

That sighting was [first reported](#) by The Recorder of Greenfield.





It's unclear whether other municipal police departments around the state may have fielded similar reports recently. State Police spokesman David Procopio said that agency was not aware of any such reports. Boston police spokesman Stephen McNulty said his department had not received any, either.

Back in the early 1980s, the Boston area dealt with a similar wave of bizarre reports.

In early May 1981, local authorities fielded numerous complaints of elementary school children being harassed by at least one person wearing clown garb, [according](#) to Globe [articles](#) at the time.

Boston police issued a citywide notice seeking a man who had been reported wearing a clown suit from the waist up, while naked from the waist down. He had been seen frequently driving a black van in parts of Roxbury and Jamaica Plain.

The head of the school system sent a memo to elementary and district school principals, urging them to warn students.

“Please advise all students,” it said, “that they must stay away from strangers, especially ones dressed as clowns.”

Brookline police investigated after reports of that two men wearing clown outfits, riding in a van, were using candy to try to lure children.

Authorities at the time said that virtually all the clown sighting reports had originated with young children. Police said they had found no evidence confirming any child had actually been harassed.

“If it's someone's idea of a joke, it's a sick joke,” Cambridge Police Captain Alan Hughes told the Globe. “We've had rumors, but nothing substantiated.”

“Kids were taking it [the rumor] home from school to their parents, and the parents were calling the police, and then one parent to another and to their kids, and it just snowballed. It’s self-perpetuating,” Hughes added.

Officer Robert O’Toole, a Boston police spokesman at the time, said, “We’ve had calls saying there was a clown at a certain intersection and we happened to have [police] cars sitting there, and the officers saw nothing. We’ve had over 20 calls on 911. When the officers get there, no one tells them anything. I don’t know if someone’s got a hoax going or not, but it’s really foolhardy.”

In that same spring of 1981, [similar reports](#) were made in several other states, including Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Those reports came just one year after John Wayne Gacy, a man who dressed as a clown to entertain children, was sentenced to death after he was convicted of sexually assaulting and killing 33 boys and young men between 1972 and 1978. He was nicknamed the “Killer Clown.”

Another rash of clown sightings was reported in the fall of 2014. Cases popped up around the country, including California, New Mexico, and Florida, according to an [ABC News report](#) at the time.

The trend this year appeared to have [begun in South Carolina](#) in August.

Some have suggested that there has been a copycat effect — fueled by news reports and social media — among those who have dressed up and those who have filed false reports.

The timing of the cases shortly before Halloween may also be a factor.

Some have even wondered if the wave of reports might be tied to a marketing ploy by the team behind an upcoming remake of the horror film “It,” a film based on the 1986 Stephen King novel about a supernatural entity that appears as a clown called Pennywise and terrorizes residents, primarily children, of a small town in Maine.

The studio behind the movie, due for release next fall, told [The Hollywood Reporter](#) last week that it is “absolutely not involved in the rash of clown sightings.”

King, a Maine resident, weighed in on the recent sightings in an interview with the [Bangor Daily News](#) this month.

“I suspect it’s a kind of low-level hysteria, like Slender Man, or the so-called Bunny Man,” King told the news outlet. “The clown furor will pass, as these things do, but it will come back, because under the right circumstances, clowns really can be terrifying.”

This story has been updated to include a recent Massachusetts sighting pointed out by a Globe reader Monday morning.

Where creepy clown sightings have been reported recently

Since August, reports of encounters with creepy clowns have been made to authorities in at least 26 states around the country, including Massachusetts. The trend appeared to have begun in South Carolina. In at least three other states, Arizona, Nevada, and Texas online threats have been made invoking images of menacing-looking clowns. Web-based threats have also been made in several of the states where sightings have been reported.

SOURCE: Globe review of media reports
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