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## PREDICTIVE POLICING: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

*New data-mining techniques promise to reinvent policing. Again.*

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. "Are we doing anything new or innovative with this data or are we just doing it better and quicker?" Lincoln police chief Tom Casady's remarks probably led to a few gasps. Still, as the plain-spoken Nebraska native pointed out at a [National Institute of Justice symposium](#) last November, its focal topic was nothing new: "It is a coalescing of interrelated police strategies and tactics that were already around, like intelligence-led policing and problem solving. This just brings them all under the umbrella of predictive policing."

Indeed, the strategy's core concern – officer deployment – has its roots in the lowly pin map, a low-tech but remarkably versatile technique that was used to distribute officers and create beats well into the 1960's. To be sure, pin maps had their limitations. Some variables weren't easy to depict, and the process was clumsy, requiring constant attention and presenting the ever-present risk of getting poked. Computers soon stepped in, allowing managers to print detailed reports denoting the nature, incidence and distribution of crime for any area or time period that they wished.

In the 1990's police departments and academics formed alliances to solicit Federal funding for innovative crime-fighting programs. Notable initiatives of the era include Boston's [Operation Ceasefire](#), a juvenile violence reduction program, Richmond's [Project Exile](#), a hard-edged effort to incarcerate armed felons, and directed-patrol experiments targeting illegal gun possession in [Kansas City and Indianapolis](#). Evaluations revealed that just like cops had always insisted, focused enforcement can have a measurable effect on crime and violence.

Academics also came to another conclusion long accepted by police, that crime and place were interconnected. "Hot spot" theory became the rage. Using probability statistics to distinguish hot spots from background noise, sophisticated software such as [CrimeStat](#) promised more efficient and effective officer deployment. It's an approach that fit in well with [Compstat](#), an NYPD innovation that uses crime data to hold precinct commanders accountable for identifying and responding to localized crime problems.

In 2009 NIJ jumped in, awarding [predictive policing grants](#) to Boston, Chicago, Shreveport, District of Columbia, the Maryland State Police, New York City and Los Angeles. [Los Angeles](#), Bratton's most recent fiefdom (he left earlier this year after completing his second and, by law, final five-year term) intends to go beyond crime data, gathering *non-crime information* from a variety of sources; for example, by extensively debriefing arrestees about their friends and associates. It's not unlike the approach that [fell flat](#) in New York City, where police were until recently entering all sorts of information from stop and frisks into the department's forbiddingly entitled "data warehouse." (Complaints from civil-rights groups and privacy advocates recently led the governor to sign a state law that prohibits computerizing information about persons who aren't arrested. Keeping paper records is still OK, though.)

And that's not all. In an application for a second predictive policing grant [LAPD proposes](#) to generate daily crime forecasts using probability statistics. Police managers would apply the information to make deployment decisions, with predictions streamed to patrol cars and displayed on computer screens. One can hear the conversations now: "Hey, partner, what do you say we hit sector eight? It's forty-percent certain that they'll have a burg in the next thirty days!"

Yet whether a Jetsons approach can distribute cops more efficiently is doubtful. Impossibly spread out and with only half the per capita staffing of New York City, L.A.'s patrol coverage is so thin that there may be precious little left to calibrate. One can't deploy fractions of a squad car, while diverting officers because computer models predict that the chances of crime are higher in one place than another is asking for trouble. Such predictions are subject to considerable error, and should the unexpected happen unprotected victims may be left wondering why they're paying taxes. As for roving task forces, they've long been placed where crime is rampant, so more number crunching is unlikely to yield substantial additional benefits. (To read more about LAPD staffing click [here](#) and [here](#).)

Really, it's not as though crime analysts have been sitting on their keyboards waiting for a new paradigm to come along. Police computers have been churning data for decades. A few years ago your blogger, working as a consultant, developed a computerized system for generating gun trafficking leads from ATF tracing data. While it seemed to work well enough, there are never enough variables in the mix, or in the right weights or order, to escape uncertainty. Printouts can't arrest anyone, and it takes plenty of shoe leather to sort through even the most fine-grained information, select likely targets and build a criminal case. At least to this observer, hopes that automation will substitute for cops are a pipe dream.

There are other concerns. At a time when many police departments are so beset with conduct, use of force, corruption and personnel issues that they're on the verge of nervous breakdowns (think, for example, [Denver](#), [Indianapolis](#), [Minneapolis](#), [New Orleans](#), [Tulsa](#) and [North Carolina](#)), obsessing over data may be a needless distraction. Measures can easily displace goals. Just ask cops in New York City, where more than a few [are complaining](#) that pressures from Compstat force them to make needless stops and unworthy arrests. [Two well known academics](#) (one is a former NYPD crime analyst) agree.

Alas, no grants are in the offing for rediscovering the craft of policing. Meanwhile, Bill Bratton, Compstat's indefatigable booster, has left government service. Now a top security executive, he [continues peddling his theories](#), albeit under the more expansive label of "predictive policing":

"I predict [that in] the next five to ten years that predictive policing, we'll be in a position with the information that creates the intelligence that will be available to us that we will be like a doctor, we'll be working increasingly with the diagnostic skills of the various machines they get to work with, the tests they get to do, that is the next era."