

Dismantling Predictive Policing in Los Angeles

May 8th 2018 Report Summary

Predictive policing refers to a range of policing practices that claim to use pre-existing demographic, environmental, and historic crime data to predict future patterns of crime as well as presuming “where crime will occur,” and “who” will commit crime. Predictive policing can be best understood within the broader creep of data-intensive surveillance on the part of law enforcement.



Stop LAPD Spying Coalition is a grassroots community organization calling for the dismantling of predictive policing tactics as a harm reduction strategy on the road toward abolition.

1 / Predpol

- / LAPD uses a location-based predictive policing technology created by PredPol Inc. PredPol is based on a statistically driven model used to predict “clusters of earthquake aftershocks.”
- / Predpol predicts crime patterns throughout Los Angeles using the time and location of historic crime data. These two pieces of “violent” and “property” crime records are acquired from police reports and calls to police.
- / Time and location data points are fed into an equation that evaluates a year’s worth of crime data. *see figure 1 below
- / The past year of data, with more recent crimes are weighted more heavily and are used to guess which 500x500 blocks of the city have a higher underlying rate of crime.
- / The output of this process is a list of blocks with an assigned probabilities of crime, which creates a priority list for police to patrol. Predictive policing thus, in effect, sets into motion the criminalization of spaces in Los Angeles - spaces that are mostly occupied by Brown and Black Angelenos.

*figure 1

This is the expected rate of crimes in box n at time t , or the “hotness of the spot.” The hotness of the spot is equal to the sum of the short and long term components of the model.

This is the short-term component of the model. It’s short-term because it weights more recent crimes more heavily in predictions-this offsets the other part of the model by allowing the model to respond to more recent trends.

$$\lambda_n(t) = \mu_n + \sum_{t_n^i < t} \theta \omega e^{-\omega(t-t_n^i)}$$

This is the long-term component of the model. It’s long-term because it’s based on the historical average rates of crimes in the spot, and it weights all events that have happened equally regardless of when they happened.

2 / Operation LASER - Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration

In September of 2011, LASER, a person-based Predictive Policing Program began developing hotspots in neighborhoods and a list of people for police to track and trace.

To keep track of people on the list:

1 / A Chronic Offender Bulletin (COB) similar to a most wanted poster, is created. COBs are created by analysing data collected by patrol officers and parole compliance units.

2 / Field interview cards, citations, release from custody, crime and arrest reports are reviewed. With the use of Palantir (a powerful search engine), a person's criminal history, physical characteristics, addresses, and more are put on the COB.

COBs are ranked and five risk factors are weighed:

/5 points if the individual is a gang member

/5 points if the individual is on parole or probation

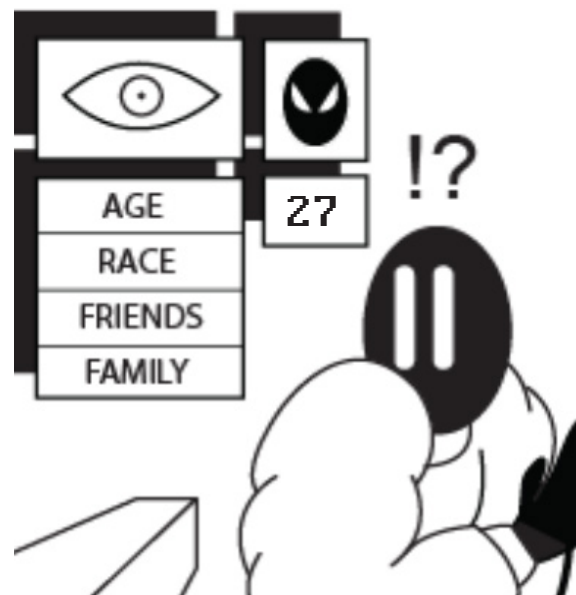
/5 points for each incident "involving a gun" over the previous two years

/5 points for each violent crime arrest over the previous two years

/1 point for every "quality" police contact over the last two years, based on FIs, arrests, and other reports

The individuals with the most points become the primary targets of patrol and special units.

With the help of Palantir, the LAPD creates a Chronic Offender Bulletin. This Bulletin acts like a most wanted poster. This has people's physical description, past history with police, areas they hangout, who they know, what cars they drive. It also gives people a risk score.



3 / Crime Data: A Biased and Racist Social Construct

LASER and PredPol rely on historic crime data, which is a necessary element of every predictive policing program. Arguments centering around “crime data” being biased or unbiased, however, overlook that the collection of data, of any type, can never escape bias.

The collection of data carries an inherent purpose and intention. Historically and currently there exist an intention and purpose of categorizing and documenting acts by certain communities as criminal. That is, crime is created and enacted into law by those in power in order to serve their interests and as a result, crime data is a reflection of law enforcement’s responses to particular kinds of behaviors committed by certain subsets of the population.

“From slavery to sharecropping to the current prison industrial complex, crime has been constructed to criminalize and incarcerate Black, Brown and poor people in order to generate revenue for the state and private entities.”



“Prisoners picking cotton in Louisiana State Prison, 2000’s” from The Plantation to the Penitentiary

4 / The Blind Spots of Predpol

Jeff Brantingham, Anthropology professor at the University of California Los Angeles and also co-founder of PredPol, Inc., asserted that “criminals are effectively foragers... choosing what car to steal is like choosing which animal to hunt.” Predictive modeling is based on assumptions, and if those assumptions are not universally true, the models are erroneous. Brantingham’s predictive modeling assumes that cultural factors are basically “noise” and that human behavior can be operationalized. This archaeological application of a reductionist model fails because of the complexities of human behavior and/or the incompleteness of the archaeological record.

“Criminal offenders are essentially hunter-gatherers; they forage for opportunities to commit crimes,” said Brantingham, a UCLA associate professor of anthropology. “The behaviors that a hunter-gatherer uses to choose a wildebeest versus a gazelle are the same calculations a criminal uses to choose a Honda versus a Lexus.”

Jeff Brantingham, <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/can-math-and-science-help-solve-153986>

Predicting human behavior with any real certainty is impossible for a multitude of reasons (the base rationale here being that there are numerous factors contributing to human reaction and no algorithm can measure and account for all of them), and for this reason has absolutely no place in creating public policies related to policing. Predictive Policing is nothing more than racial profiling hidden behind the veil of “scientific” and “mathematical” modeling.

5 / Irrationality of “Blended Theory”

Theories exist that claim crime is predictable because criminals reoffend close to the same time and location as before. The criminological theory that supports this is called Blended Theory which includes-rational choice, routine activities, and crime patterns theory.

Rational Choice theory is a ‘cost/benefit’ analysis in which a person logically gauges whether or not to commit a crime based on its risk or benefits. In routine activities theory there exist three criteria for a crime to occur: a “target of crime” must be present, the target’s protector must be able to be overtaken, and an offender who has rationally planned to commit the crime must exist.

In crime pattern theory criminologists look at the “cultural, legal, economic, political, temporal, and spatial characteristics” of an area to gauge whether a location is conducive for crime to occur. Crime pattern theory suffers from the same explanatory deficiencies as routine activities and rational choice theory; namely, that it offers a more effective explanation of crime victimization while failing to adequately account for the myriad of factors that motivate a person to commit a crime.

These theories are not only fundamentally reactive in their worldview, but maintain various, interlocked systems of oppression and provide an empirical gloss to the same racist and classist police practices.

6 / The Continued Militarization of Policing

Predictive policing technologies derive from military techniques used in the foreign and domestic wars. PredPol, for instance, is a direct descendent of military-funded university research based on statistics from the 2003 Iraq insurgency.

Predpol's founders originally developed algorithms to predict insurgent activity on Middle East battlefields, and the results influenced the algorithm used by PredPol six years later. Operation LASER, meanwhile, draws on technology provided by Palantir, a big data company that mines government and corporate databases for signs of criminal and or international terrorist activity.

Palantir's founder and largest shareholder, Peter Thiel, is a prominent advisor to and supporter of Donald Trump; the Trump administration's aggressive stance towards undocumented immigrants means that the data-driven tactics used for the broader war on terror will increasingly drive Los Angeles' approach to policing.



Inferring Structure and Forecasting Dynamics on Evolving Networks, Jeff Brantingham

7 / Legal Implications

Because the Supreme Court has found that characterizing a location as a “high-crime area” counts toward the suspicion necessary to justify a stop, search, or arrest, predictive policing “hotspots” make it easier for police to justify stopping and searching a person hanging out on a street corner.

Predictive policing might also lead to more uses of deadly force by police. The police are likely to argue that the predictive policing “hotspots” and “Chronic Offender Bulletins” justified their fear and actions, and courts are likely to credit the fears of officer safety finding that the police behaved lawfully.

The covert characteristics of predictive policing—algorithms that use historic crime data to generate predictions about location based crime or Chronic Offender Bulletins/heat lists that turn individuals into prime suspects before they have committed a crime, the inability of a person or community to know, much less challenge, their designation as a likely offender—all threaten due process and our human rights.

8 / Market-Based Solutions

Predictive policing is a for-profit commodity driven by economic interests; as such, it leads to the marketization of public safety and policing.

Predpol, for instance, works with municipalities for around \$30,000 to \$100,000 a piece per contract. Even though there is not yet significant proof that predictive policing works effectively, the lure of the claimed, but ultimately false objectivity of big data technologies are lucrative for PredPol shareholders and appealing to law enforcement.

In regards to LASER, Justice Security Strategies (JSS), a private corporation, was able to secure a business arrangement with

the LAPD wherein which JSS would be monetarily compensated to analyze department records in order to make predictions about future criminals that then would inform the allocation of enforcement efforts. It is also worth noting that assessments of LASER’s success in reducing crime are conducted by JSS, the company that developed the program.

9 / Our Demands

Instead of supporting and justifying the expansion of the police state through reform and ordinances, we invite advocates seeking to eliminate the reach of state surveillance programs, and others organizing against the national security police state to join in our efforts toward:

- /Immediate ban on deployment and use of policing tactics and programs such as Predictive Policing;

- /Immediate abolition of any and all current use of surveillance technology and programs;

- /Total prohibition on the acquisition of any new surveillance technology or development of surveillance programs;

- /Full disclosure on the use of surveillance technology and policing programs since their inception including informing individuals and organizations who have been targeted;

- /Full reparations for individuals and organizations whose human rights have been violated;

- /Immediately cease all funding for surveillance programs and divert those resources to invest in the health and well being of our communities. We urgently need more investments in public housing, education, health centers, youth development programs, healthy food, and steady employment—factors that promote real public safety.



Before the Bullet Hits the Body: Dismantling Predictive Policing in Los Angeles



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