



data fix-ation

“It’s important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you

have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. **None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”**

- Toni Morrison

**STOP LAPD
SPYING!**

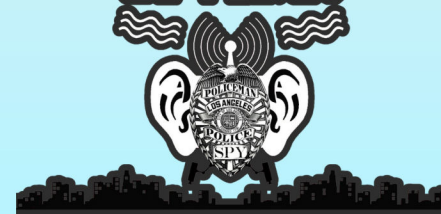
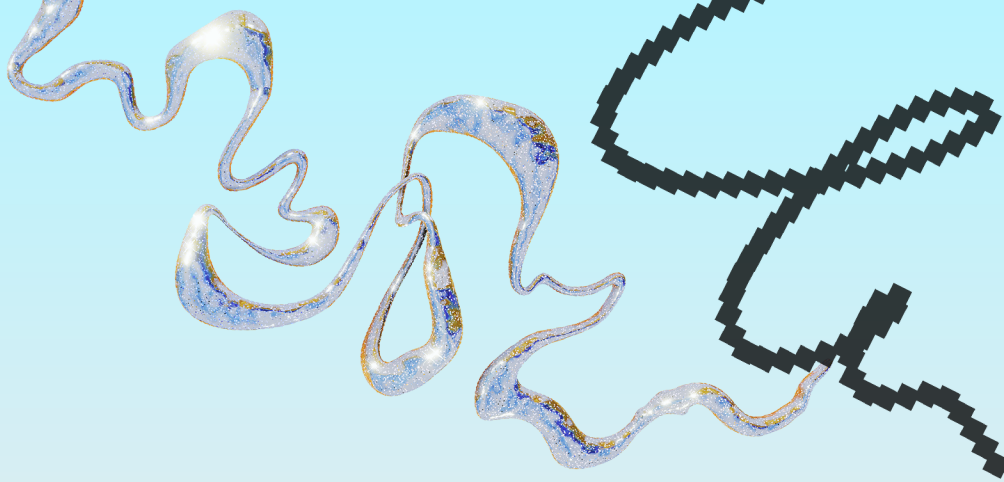


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Architecture of
Surveillance
Website:

join the fight!

Does this make you think about other examples like what we've discussed here? Have you noticed this data fixation in your communities, including from among others who are critical of police?

We would love to hear other stories like this, so reach out & join our fight!

Here are a few places to start:

Stop LAPD Spying Coalition's Academic Complicity Working Group meets on Zoom on the fourth Wednesday of every month. We're community members, students, and faculty at different universities, working together to combat complicity in all the forms. We have many projects in the works, and our meetings are open to anyone. Come join our fight! You can email stoplapdspying@gmail.com to get plugged in.

Print copies of this zine and give them to your friends and community members! You can download a printable version of the zine at <https://stoplapdspying.org>.

what is data fixation?

Data fixation is a term the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition uses to describe **people's faith in data as a solution for oppression**, particularly when it comes to policing. This impulse to turn to data – and the constant hope for bigger, more accessible, more representative, and more transparent data – is nothing new.

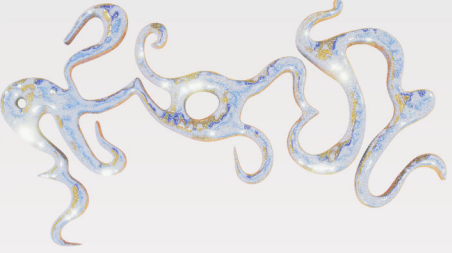
Colonizers, imperialists, and police have long gathered data on the masses that they are subjugating in order to study, monitor, target, control, or eliminate them.

Likewise, data generated by those in power has always been used to evaluate and calibrate oppression, as well as to manage our resistance.

This obsession with using data to optimize racial violence took on "scientific" significance when European and US academics popularized the study of **eugenics** – a set of practices (such as sterilization) designed to weed out undesirable traits from the human population. Though eugenics has been discredited, the discipline's influence on medicine, law, and social policy still looms large today.

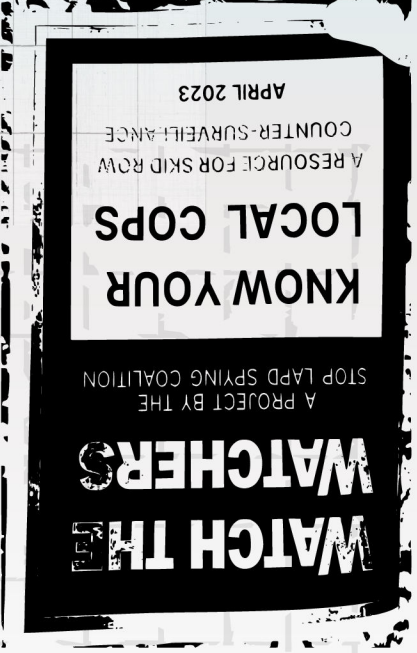
Over the past half-century, the fixation on data has also been propelled by the core **neoliberal tenet of rationality**, which **values quantification and statistics as cures for social and political issues** such as police violence and mass incarceration. The assumed objectivity of numerical data often obscures the subjective frames through which data was collected, creating a false sense of authority about what is true or right. Even graver, we today see data's relationship to state violence and racial terror in the data-driven holocaust of Palestinians by the West's settler colonial outpost in Israel.

On a local level...



Here in Los Angeles we often see this data fixation from police reformers who propose increased collection and analysis of police data to “fix” the problems of policing. While these proposals might not seem as insidious as direct efforts to give police more resources and weaponry, **the bottom line can end up being the same: diverting community money and labor to police narratives.**

And, the ultimate conceptual vision of these reforms is a fully optimized police state that churns out state violence and racial terror in perfectly calibrated doses. **This is not what any communities facing the brunt of policing are fighting for.**



We are showing that people who are oppressed or marginalized by police are not the only ones who will be datified. The dramatic police reactions of self-victimization in response to this project have delivered this political message.

The images of the police look like mugshots and matching each officer's face to salary (some of which are astronomical, including half a million in annual payroll or yearly overtime pay exceeding \$200,000 on top of the regular salary) helps illustrate the enormous looting of public resources that policing entails.

And in addition to these political interventions, the website is a practical tool for community members who monitor and expose everyday police violence. While other projects have shared similar data with a frame of police transparency and accountability, our framing is **deliberately confrontational and explicitly intended to be a tool for community self-defense and cop-**

watching. Our goal is to build a culture of resistance to police. This political agenda and our accountability to our communities are what distinguish Watch the Watchers from uses of police data that serve to expand police legitimacy, power, and resources.

Example 8

Watch The Watchers

Description:

The Stop LAPD Spying Coalition has long used public records released by LAPD as part of our community-based research, collective study, and community self-defense. In March 2023, we published **WatchtheWatchers.net**, a searchable index of LAPD records that the public can use to search for LAPD officers and browse their names, serial numbers, badge numbers, division assignment, age, height, weight, ethnicity, gender, and payroll details. Over time, we also hope to add officer disciplinary records and lawsuits.

The website generated a political crisis, prompting two lawsuits against us by the City of Los Angeles to censor our work as well as several lawsuits by police claiming that our website caused the officers severe emotional distress and physical symptoms.

While this project is an example of how community groups can use the state's data as part of resistance to police, what distinguishes it from reformist data initiatives is our political agenda and political purpose: we are fighting the state's agents rather than asking them to collect or generate more data about us. **The project's entire purpose is to expose and discredit the police.** We are also actively intervening against our datafication by turning the gaze on police, putting immense data on police at people's fingertips just as police can easily access all kinds of data about us.

Importance

This zine is **a warning** against data fixation. It's not that we think data can never be useful, but we argue that there are important technical, social, political, and ideological consequences of treating data as an answer to policing's violence and terror.

We hope this zine will help organizers analyze and critique data-related reforms, especially reforms that appear benign on the surface.



In the following pages, we analyze a series of data-driven reforms related to policing and prosecution, showing how these perform specific political and ideological functions that ultimately **make policing more powerful and more durable**. In the reforms we evaluate, we see this taking shape in various ways outlined on the next page titled "high-level concerns with "data fixation."

three high-level concerns with "data fixation":

1. Operates as a trojan horse for more insidious tech

Any use of algorithms or data in policing (even if in a seemingly benign context or for a benign seeming purpose) helps build the political will and technical infrastructure for later use in other more contexts.

In fact, the police state often introduces harmful new methodologies in a benign context first in order to neutralize opposition before expanding to more dangerous contexts and purposes.

These efforts also normalize concepts like "optimization," "precision," and "force multiplier," which are very dangerous in this context.

On a material level, these data initiatives also generate the technical infrastructure as well as a political economy for the development and adoption of more surveillance technologies.

The problems:

Project Lavender highlights the most sinister and violent uses of AI and data. How did we get to a place where all we are is a list of quantitative attributes that may or may not designate us a target or within the "margin of error"? **How does it shape our understanding of who is worthy of life?** We don't have to grapple with any of what makes someone a human being with Lavender. With data, the task of killing a human being is entirely dehumanized: the killer does not have to make the decision of who to kill.

It is true that Lavender seems extreme. We might convince ourselves that such technology would never find its way out of the context of war, but the truth is that every other technology we've introduced into policing has normalized the idea that we can and should optimize policing the way Lavender has optimized warfare. Ultimately, once we have agreed that optimization is our objective, policing—or war—is inevitable.



Example 7

Optimized Killing: Project Lavender and the AI-Driven War Against Palestinians

Project Lavender is an algorithmic technology developed by the Israeli Defense Forces. The technology is designed to process massive amounts of data to generate thousands of potential “targets” for military strikes. In late 2023—when Israel began its assault on Gaza—Lavender was heavily relied upon to determine who to target.



As even the Israeli media has written, “This was despite knowing that the system makes what are regarded as “errors” in approximately 10 percent of cases, and is known to occasionally mark individuals who have merely a loose connection to militant groups, or no connection at all.” But the errors were of no consequence to Israel. The army decided during the first few weeks of the war that, for every junior Hamas operative that Lavender marked, **it was permissible to kill up to 15-20 civilians.**

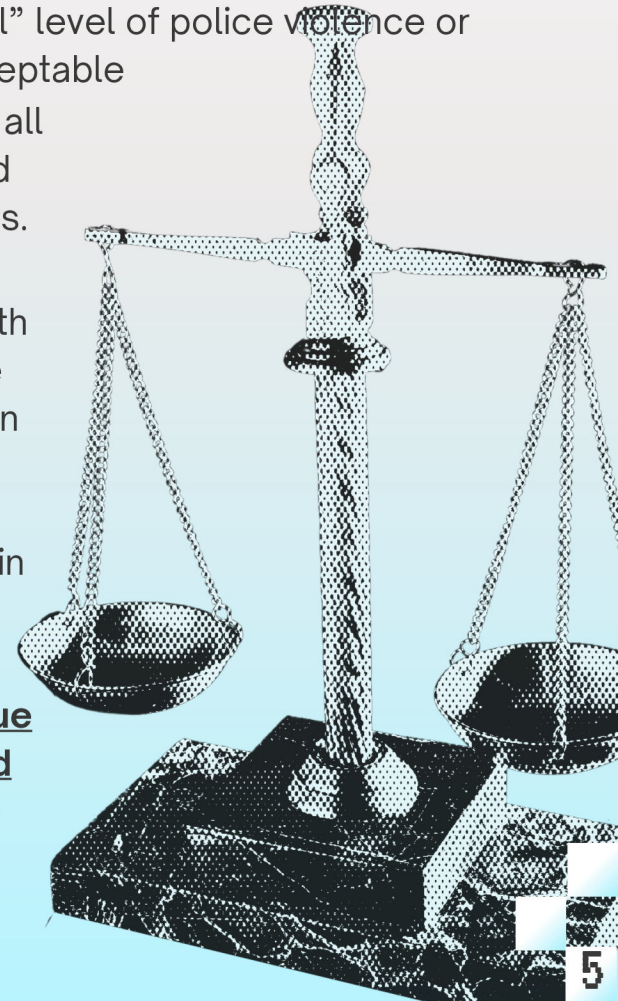
2. Centers racial bias instead of systemic issues

Many data-based reforms are centered around racial bias and discrimination. This creates a **false conception that deeply rooted structural and political issues can be fixed by addressing individual-level biases.**

But **the police state’s predation and racial terror are products of political and structural choices**, not just a biased cop or prosecutor. Focusing on superficial racial disparities also entrenches the assumption that there is some “ideal” or “optimal” level of police violence or incarceration that is acceptable when equally applied to all groups or when adjusted based on enough proxies.

It also socializes the myth that racial justice can be quantified, so a reduction in racial bias or an increase in algorithmic accuracy is an increase in justice.

But **racial justice and true liberation for oppressed communities cannot be reduced to numbers.**



3. Authorizes police violence through technical

concepts

Data and algorithms authorize and justify aggressive policing or mass killing through technical and

mathematical concepts such as “risk assessment”, “predictive policing,” or “margin of error.” This is

dehumanizing because it **removes the value of human life from the equation**. It also **restores legitimacy to police and the state** by pretending there is a gap

between them and the outcomes of racial violence.



These are just a few dimensions of data fixation.

To facilitate analysis around these issues or others we have not addressed, we suggest asking the following questions when evaluating data or technology-based police reforms:

1. What is the social problem we are trying to address?

2. Is data the answer for this problem? Is this even the right problem to solve/focus on?

3. Who or what generates the data at issue? Who controls the data? Whose stories does this data tell?

4. How does this reform legitimize or delegitimize the target institution? How does it build community power?

The problems:

Cancel ShotSpotter activists in cities across the U.S. have done incredible work to raise the alarm around ShotSpotter and other police technologies. Their work has led to the cancellation of several contracts with SoundThinking over the last few years, including in Chicago, Dayton, San Diego, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Portland. One of the chief criticisms activists have raised against ShotSpotter is its ineffectiveness. Activists have argued that ShotSpotter's microphones pick up sounds other than gunshots, including voices, fireworks, and other loud noises. In other words, the technology is “inaccurate.” Likewise, others have argued that it costs too much or that the microphones can infringe on privacy by picking up conversations that should not be recorded.

But would we want ShotSpotter in our communities if it were more accurate, affordable, or respectful of privacy? Our answer is of course no. The danger of ShotSpotter—and many other surveillance technologies—goes far beyond these factors. Consider the police

killing of 13-year-old Adam Toledo in Chicago in 2021. Within thirty minutes of an automated ShotSpotter alert summoning police to Toledo's neighborhood, a police officer shot the teenager to death. Does it matter whether or not the ShotSpotter alert was accurate? The point is that it sent police officers to a location eager to kill—primed to see a threat and to eliminate it—and they did. This is how ShotSpotter killed a 13-year-old, and refining the technology would not have changed that.

Example 6

“Optimized Surveillance Doesn’t Free Us”: Critiques of Surveillance Tech Focused on Transparency, Accuracy, Privacy, or Cost

ShotSpotter is a gunshot-detection technology actively used by police departments in 100 cities across the U.S. When cities contract with ShotSpotter—whose parent company renamed to SoundThinking Inc. in 2023—the company places a network of microphones in neighborhoods around the city that triangulate loud and unexpected noises to alert police on whether or not they are gunshots. When the microphones pick up a loud sound, an alert is sent to a ShotSpotter technician to determine whether or not it was a gunshot. If it is deemed a gunshot, then the local police department is notified and dispatched.

SoundThinking argues that ShotSpotter helps improve community-police relations, reduces gun violence, and improves policing and prosecution of gun crimes. Activists disagree and have been fighting ShotSpotter contracts in their cities for years. They argue that ShotSpotter increases police contact in Black and Latino neighborhoods (and the risk of police violence) with nothing to show for it: no reduction in crime and no reduction in gun-related homicides. They emphasize that ShotSpotter is imprecise, leading officers to be dispatched when there is no gun crime.

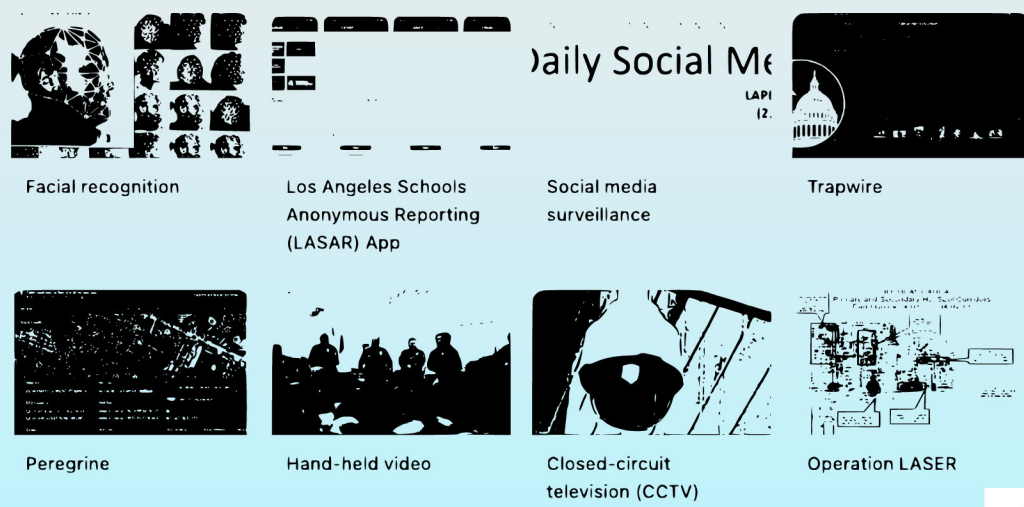
case studies



Below are a few case studies that illustrate the potential pitfalls or unintended consequences (material, political, and ideological) of fixating on data as a solution to issues in policing and prosecution.

Each of these examples involves a data-driven or technology-driven reform intended to address a “problem” related to law enforcement, such as racial discrimination or police violence.

We chose these examples because they help us think through the general questions outlined below but are distinct enough to generate new questions, demonstrating that there are no “hard-and-fast” rules for evaluating the political impact and consequences of data-based reforms.



visit stoplapdspying.org/aos to learn more about LAPD’s vast Architecture of Surveillance

Quantifying Police Killings: A Database of Factors in Police Killings

In March 2022, University of Southern California (USC) researchers announced a new tool called the *National Officer-Involved Homicide Database (NOIHD)*. The database aggregates dozens of data sources, including police, FBI, and census data, which researchers believe could help determine the “factors” related to police killings. NOIHD data includes information such as the education and training requirements of officers, as well as information regarding the homicide victim, including whether or not the individual was armed.

The problems:

NOIHD developers believe that aggregating disparate administrative data could help researchers understand the predictors of police killings, presumably with the objective of reducing them. **But is this a problem that data can actually solve?**

We see a few problems with that assumption. First and foremost, reforms like NOIHD **sanitize the racial terror of policing** and generate a burden of proof for communities regarding violence they already know and understand intimately. In this way, **it delegitimizes lived experience**, community knowledge, and historical memory. Second, NOIHD results are more likely to help legitimize the institution of policing rather than render any meaningful police reform.

While access to this aggregated data may help validate the experiences of Black immigrants by offering “proof” of unequal treatment or overrepresentation in both migration patterns and immigration enforcement, it also **uplifts the state’s evidence as more legitimate than the community’s lived experience**. We know that the turn to data and “statistical proof” comes from a long history of subjugated communities’ lived experiences being invalidated by the state. It is the same reason that Ida B. Wells used statistical data to galvanize support for her anti-lynching campaign in the late 1890s. But the power of statistical data that documents racial discrimination is not the same as it was when in the 1890s.

Today, statistics of racial discrimination are everywhere —our media landscape is inundated with them—but what change have they wrought? In BAJ’s letter, they

reference RIPA and similar legislation in other states, citing it as precedent for their demand for race and ethnicity data collection in immigration enforcement. The problem is, RIPA hasn’t yielded better outcomes for Black and brown people. To the contrary, as we

explained in the previous example, racial discrimination in policing in California has remained consistent since RIPA was enacted, if not more normal or “justifiable” (to the state and its defenders) using this data. Moreover, RIPA has created new problems to address, including rampant data manipulation by officers who want to avoid discipline for racially biased policing, as well as an expansion of the political economy of policing through new technologies designed to support police data collection.

Example 5

The Proof of Prejudice Trap: Grassroots Demands for Data Transparency

In February 2024, the immigrant justice organization Black Alliance For Just Immigration (BAJI) sent a **statement** to President Biden with the email subject: “**DHS must collect Race and Ethnicity data.**” The letter urged President Biden to mandate that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) align on a “robust data collection regime” to systematically collect race and ethnicity data of people detained by ICE. In the letter, BAJI argues that data collection is the fundamental “first step to promoting racial equity in Government action.”

The problems:

How does our analysis change when the demand for data transparency comes from our communities? We understand why BAJI wants ICE to collect race and ethnicity data of detained immigrants: they want the state to validate what they know to be true from the experiences of their community members as well as to publicize the scale of discrimination and neglect. With access to this data, they might be able to build a broader coalition with more support from the public and state representatives or even use the data as evidence in litigation. But there still might be political and ideological costs that outweigh these benefits.

What if, for example, NOIHD researchers found that white officers were more likely to kill people than Black officers? Rather than firing a bunch of white officers, we should expect the state to institute a slate of implicit bias trainings for police. Not only have these not worked, but they give the false impression that the state is taking steps to address racism in policing.

In another scenario, what if NOIHD researchers found that police killings are more likely when the victim is armed? It seems plausible and likely that in this scenario, the results would be leveraged to justify police use of force rather than to meaningfully reduce police violence, again lending legitimacy to police.

Example 2

Reform Stories: AI, Body Cameras, and the Myth of “Polite” Policing

In September 2023, USC researchers announced a forthcoming research project that would test whether the use of artificial intelligence to analyze LAPD body camera footage could help improve police interactions with civilians. As indicated by the press release, the study aims “to provide clarity and actionable insights” that would help improve officer training and “promote accountability.” The data used to power the AI technology includes factors such as the location of the stop, the driver’s race, and information about the officer.

The problems:

This example is similar to the NOIHD database example above in that it leverages data to identify factors that correlate with positive and negative police-civilian interactions. Beyond the same issues outlined in the previous example, it is worth asking the question: **Whose stories are told through the data used to power this technology?** Most importantly, who determines what constitutes positive and negative police interactions? Should anyone other than the individual who experienced the police interaction get to decide whether the interaction was positive or negative?

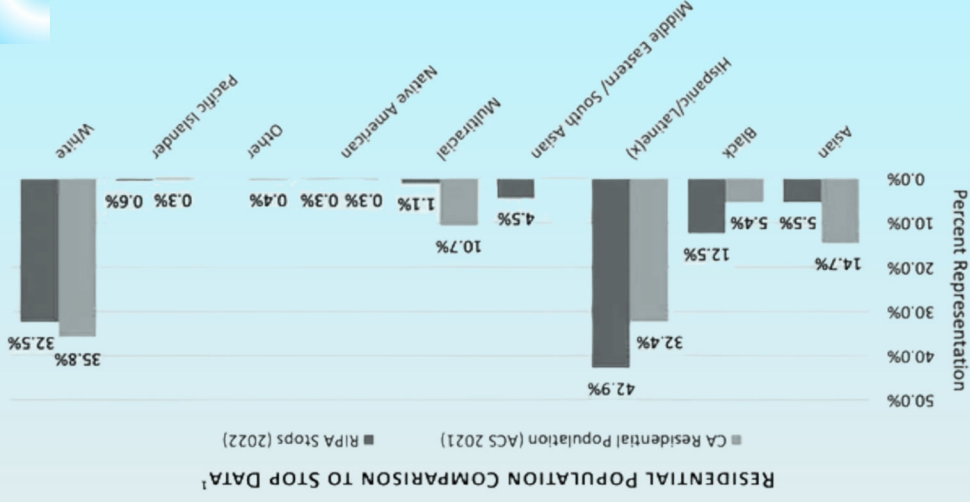
These experiences are subjective and unquantifiable. Treating them as anything otherwise is reductionist and dehumanizing and should make us question who these reforms are actually designed to help if they undermine lived experiences at every turn. At a higher level, body-worn cameras are a technology-based solution designed to address the issue of police accountability.

We should be wary of introducing new technology-based solutions to address the failures of previous ones. It not only wastes precious resources, but it performs the trojan horse function we outline above: **using AI to analyze body-worn camera footage to improve police “courtesy” normalizes its use for other and potentially more lethal police operations.**

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Data transparency is so difficult to obtain and the data is so often contentious that we eventually normalize transparency as the end goal. In a way, it's reminiscent of a type of politics of recognition—the idea that acknowledgment or recognition of harm is in and of itself a source of freedom for oppressed people. Finally, though RIPA is not the most harmful of the reforms we address in this zine, we believe it's important to note how it foreshadows a perfectly optimized system of policing. Data collection regimes like RIPA attempt to standardize police stops and ultimately discern the “optimal level” of disproportionality. **But what is the baseline? What are we optimizing for?**

At the end of the day, optimized police violence is still police violence. We must keep this central to our analysis as **technosolutionism** increasingly becomes the norm in policing.



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The problems:

On the surface level, RIPA is a seemingly innocuous transparency initiative. Again, **the assumption behind transparency initiatives is that the data will provide irrefutable proof** of a problem such that the state has no other choice but to address it. Unfortunately, history has shown us that this can be a flawed assumption:

evidence of a problem does not always lead to redress or reparation. But top-down police data transparency programs are worse than innocuous and ineffectual.

First, the data once again centers police perception of the interaction—police officers make a judgment about the individual's race, age, gender, sexuality, disability status, ESL status, and the reason for the stop, and codify that in data. **Not only is this process dehumanizing and invalidating for individuals stopped, but it is easy to manipulate.** Indeed there have been many instances documented of California officers manipulating RIPA data to appear less racist or otherwise discriminatory.

Still, a more significant problem with top-down police data transparency initiatives is that they **co-opt social justice language and frameworks in order to shift the terms of debate around policing.** Instead of centering critiques of state power or community demands for accountability, everyone from state officials to the public fixates on what the data shows, its accuracy, and whether it is sufficient to warrant different policies or protocols.

Example 3

Racial Redaction and Hidden Structures: Obscuring Racial Proxies to Uphold Caging Our Communities

In 2022, **Arnold Ventures-backed researchers** began piloting and evaluating a technology in California that automatically redacts race-related information from crime reports to reduce the chance that race will influence prosecutors' charging decisions. The objective of the technology is to enhance fairness for criminal defendants.

The problems:

In addition to the overarching concerns outlined in the introduction, this initiative has political and technical implications. Politically, it normalizes the incorrect assumption that racial disparities in policing and prosecution are simply the product of individual biases rather than **political consequences stemming from the system's design and purpose.**

This is consequential because this assumption directs significant attention and resources toward undoing individual bias rather than addressing broader systemic issues such as prosecutorial discretion or, even more generally, the political choice to use policing and punishment to address social challenges.

Example 4

RIPA and the Problem of State-Controlled Police Data Transparency Initiatives

In 2015, California passed the *Racial and Identity Profiling Act (RIPA)*. RIPA requires law enforcement agencies across the state to submit detailed data on every police stop made by its officers to the California Department of Justice, including the perceived race, gender, and disability status of the person stopped. The law also created the RIPA board, which comprises academics, activists, law enforcement officials, and other political figures.

The RIPA board publicizes an annual report that analyzes the data from all agencies, summarizes key findings, and issues recommendations for policy changes. Each year since RIPA was passed, the annual reports have indicated that Black and Latino drivers are disproportionately stopped and more likely to be victims of police violence compared to white drivers.

Each year, the Peace Officers Research Association of California, an organization representing 82,000 police officers across California, has denied or challenged the board's findings.

Of course, Arnold Ventures, funded by two billionaires, has a material interest in centralizing racial bias in its criminal justice reform efforts—focusing on racial bias shifts attention away from the root causes of crime and violence, which would inevitably implicate capitalism.

On a technical level, the redaction of race might seem benign. But it leaves open the possibility that a prosecutor consciously or unconsciously weights proxies for race, such as neighborhood, income level, or previous convictions more heavily in their decision-making. **You can redact race from a document but you can't redact it from a person's life.**



We could see how this may render even worse outcomes for Black and brown defendants and further reifies the social construction of race

Despite these issues, reforms like automatic race redaction allow prosecutors like George Gascon to burnish their progressive credentials and claim to be making strides toward fairness in criminal sentencing. Again, we should ask ourselves: **Does this reform ultimately offer legitimacy to prosecutors and the criminal legal system?**