

Algorithms and Automating Decision Making

Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor
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Background: The Poorhouse

- Historical Institution where poor, disabled, and ill were placed into by the government
- Lived in incredibly inhumane conditions and were made to work for low wages
 - “In 1857, a legislative investigation found that the House of Industry confined the mentally ill to 4½-by-7-foot cells for as long as six months at a time. Because they had only straw to sleep on and no sanitary facilities, a mixture of straw and urine froze onto their bodies in the winter “and was removed only by thawing it off,” (Eubanks 15)
- While the institution may not exist in the present, Eubanks argues that the systems we use to manage the poor and less fortunate carry on it’s legacy to this day



Source: <https://www.history.com/articles/in-the-19th-century-the-last-place-you-wanted-to-go-was-the-poorhouse>

“Our new digital tools spring from punitive, moralistic views of poverty and create a system of high-tech containment and investigation. The digital poorhouse deters the poor from accessing public resources; polices their labor, spending, sexuality, and parenting; tries to predict their future behavior; and punishes and criminalizes those who do not comply with its dictates...” (Eubanks 15)





Case 1: Welfare Eligibility

- In 2006 Indiana privatized and automated its welfare eligibility system
 - Governor Mitch Daniels at the time argued the system as it was was “irretrievably broken,’ wasteful, fraudulent, and ‘America’s worst welfare system.’ “ (Eubanks 48).
 - Goal was to, “ reduce fraud, curtail spending, and move clients off the welfare rolls.”(Eubanks 49)
- System replaced interviews and in person interactions with online applications and phone centers
- Phone system was a disaster with operators ill trained to both handle the caseload and the actual welfare system itself
- Important documents faxed over were constantly lost and unprocessed leading to loss of benefits
- Automated systems incentivized rejecting applicants and inviting them to reapply later to meet performance metrics
- Between 2006-2008 more than a million applications for welfare were denied, a 54% increase from 3 year prior

Case 2: Homeless Databases

Los Angeles' Coordinated Entry System was built to streamline homelessness services by assigning vulnerability scores and matching individuals to housing. It compiles deeply personal data across agencies to build a centralized digital profile of unhoused people.

Problems & Concerns

Surveillance Replaces Care: data is gathered without full consent or understanding

Scores Conveniently Reflect Systemic Bias: people with frequent system contact score higher, while others in crisis go unseen.

Utilitarian Logic Dominates: the “greater good” justifies exclusion, reducing people to risk variables and efficiency metrics, and is often used by elites to attribute peoples suffering from these systems as a result of their actions

“At its worst, it was a system that rewarded the most functional people with housing that was not always an appropriate fit for their needs.”

Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality* (p. 75)



Case 3: Allegheny Algorithm

Problems & Concerns

Allegheny County's predictive risk model was designed to help child welfare workers assess the likelihood of child abuse or neglect. It analyzes **extensive public data** to generate a **"risk score"** for every child screened by the hotline—even if no case is opened. The goal is to improve fairness and consistency, but it exposes families to surveillance without consent and **can automate harm while trying to protect**

Invisible Scrutiny: Families may never know they've been assessed or flagged. The system operates silently in the background.

Data Doubles as Judgement: Uses poverty-linked indicators (like past use of services) to infer future risk, **punishing the poor for seeking help.**

Algorithmic Overreach: Risk scores can **override** human discretion, leading to unnecessary investigations or removals.

Chilling Effect: Families avoid public services out of fear that **seeking help will trigger child welfare scrutiny.**

"The AFST, like all risk models, offers only probabilities, not perfect prediction. Though it might be able to identify patterns and trends, it is routinely wrong about individual cases."

Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality* (p. 114)





Analysis

Existentialism

- Offloading decision making onto machines and trying to abdicate responsibility for that machine's decisions is acting in bad faith

Utilitarianism:

- Even ignoring the negative consequences of being denied welfare or other forms of aid by these systems they often just offload the same amount of work handled before by state employees onto everyday people instead, leading to no real difference in “Global Happiness”, thus violating the GHP

Contractualism:

These systems violate the moral requirement of mutual justification—the risks of the algorithms are imposed more harshly on poor population and those manufacturing these algorithms are not affected at all

If under fair terms by the people these systems target, it is extremely likely not be agreed to, especially if they knew the potential consequences if the systems misjudges or flags them with incomplete or bias data.

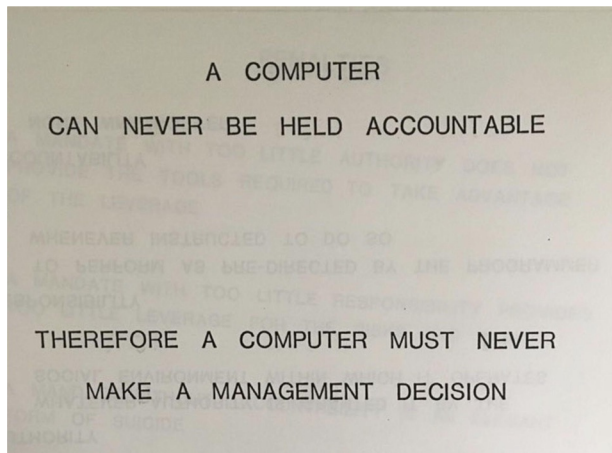
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So What?

“Does the tool increase the self-determination and agency of the poor?”

Would the tool be tolerated if it was targeted at non-poor people? “ (Eubanks 213).



- Eubanks constantly connects these new systems with those of the old like the poorhouse
- Our treatment of the poor is rooted in beliefs that being poor is a moral failing
- Algorithms and machines are not objective standalone existences, and can and will reflect the biases of those that make them