Frederick police identify trends with predictive policing software

Englar, Brian.**McClatchy - Tribune Business News; Washington** [Washington]24 June 2013.

Abstract

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Full Text

June 24--When Frederick Police Chief Thomas Ledwell started his career with the department as a patrol officer, police relied on daily bulletins aimed at helping them focus their efforts during their shifts.

The problem, Ledwell said, was that what little crime trend information there was in the bulletins was sometimes weeks old, frequently leaving police behind the curve and less likely to be in the right places at the right times.

"There might be some information about crimes in the bulletins, but I was basically given a beat to patrol and sent out there," Ledwell said.

But thanks to an integration of computer software packages combined with strategies intended to reduce crime, the department is preparing to enter a new era of policing. Officers on the street will have access to real-time information they hope will allow them not simply to react to crime, but to predict where and when it is most likely to occur and use their presence as a deterrent and catch criminals in the act.

City police, along with the Frederick County Sheriff's Office, had already been using ATAC, which stands for Automated Tactical Analysis of Crime. The software, developed by Bair Analytics, uses statistical analysis to generate up-to-date information about crime trends and hotspots.

But the department hasn't been using technology to its full potential because it wasn't tied in to I/LEADS, the system that officers use on their beat to instantly input or access a wide range of information. With that integration, along with an upgrade called ATAC RAIDS (Regional Analysis and Information Data Sharing), officers will have more information at their fingertips than ever before.

"With ATAC RAIDS, it takes in the geographical component," said department crime analyst Kristen Kowalsky. "It maps it, it gives you a hotspot based on time of day, day of week, the frequency with which those crimes occur in a certain area. It takes all those factors into account and predict where it will happen in the future."

Ledwell said similar predictive policing technology and strategies have a track record of success, including with the Los Angeles Police Department. LAPD ran experiments that showed more success in crime reduction in sectors using the technology to help develop deployment strategies than in the control sectors that did not employ it.

Frederick police have also experienced success with predictive model borrowed from the Tampa Police Department in Florida, Ledwell said. That strategy focuses on four pattern crimes -- robbery, burglary, vehicle theft and theft from vehicles --as indicators of overall crime trends and a source of guidance for deployment decisions.

"There are two basis premises behind it, one that the people who are committing these pattern crimes are also committing the more violent crimes," Ledwell said. "Eight percent of your population is committing approximately 80 percent of your crime. The second premise is that a pattern crime is a crime where someone continually goes to the cookie jar. You can use statistics to make it easier to catch them."

Kowalsky said the software does the compilation and analysis of data that previously fell to the analyst, freeing her up to work more closely with officers and command staff in developing and implementing deployment strategies.

"The algorithms behind the scenes give us alerts and let us know what to look further into, whereas before we had to sift through and do it all by hand," she said.

The county has approved the linking of I/LEADS and ATAC, and Ledwell said he is hoping to have everything online in the near future and start the process of training officers in putting the technology to use.

Predictive policing technology is not meant to replace knowledge accumulated by officers based on their experience on the street and relationships with members of the community, Ledwell said. Rather, it is another tool to supplement that knowledge and help put them in a position to prevent crime, not just make an arrest after it's too late for the victim.

"I've likened it to gambling in the casino," Ledwell said. "We can send our officers out there and tell them to gamble based on instinct, or we can learn how to card count."

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