

[More like this >](#)

Memphis Police's Blue CRUSH program gives IBM company a boost

Sullivan, Bartholomew. **McClatchy - Tribune Business News; Washington** [Washington] 19 Sep 2010.

[Full text](#)[Abstract/Details](#)

Abstract

MPD operates on a \$255.9 million annual budget. Since the IBM SPSS press release on July 21 noting Memphis was using its predictive analytics software with stellar results, "the interest level has been unbelievable," company spokesman Bob Rezcek says.

Full Text

Sept. 19--Police from as far away as Hong Kong are coming to the Memphis Police Department to see its much-touted Blue CRUSH predictive analytics-driven crime-fighting effort that officials say has reduced serious crime by 15 percent in four years.

The department is fielding calls and expecting visits from police in Boston, Richmond, Baltimore -- even Estonia. Chattanooga police just spent two days looking at it. A Chilean diplomat has inquired.

"I'm not pumping this up," said MPD crime analyst John F. Williams. "This actually works. It's working and it can work anywhere across the country, and it can work for any agency across the nation. ... We don't have to promote this."

Instead, SPSS, an IBM company, is promoting it, and its role in providing Memphis the software that lets precinct commanders target crime hot spots with added resources based on previously unseen patterns in incident report data. "The Memphis Police Department is changing the face of law enforcement," a recent IBM press release says.

IBM is also circulating a June case study that says Memphis made an 863 percent return on its investment, calculated using the percentage decline in crime and the number and cost of additional cops that would be needed to match the declining rate.

The study by Nucleus Research said Memphis has paid on average \$395,249 a year on the initiative, including personnel costs, for a \$7.2 million return. MPD operates on a \$255.9 million annual budget.

Since the IBM SPSS press release on July 21 noting Memphis was using its predictive analytics software with stellar results, "the interest level has been unbelievable," company spokesman Bob Rezcek says.

Memphis has paid IBM SPSS or the independent company SPSS Inc. (before IBM acquired it) \$50,558 in the past four years, records show.

Williams, who works in the new Real Time Crime Center, explained how past criminal event statistics are used to create maps with crosstabs to create "focus areas" in which police resources -- from organized crime and special ops units to the mounted patrol, K-9, traffic and DUI enforcement -- can be deployed.

Williams noted crime in 12 Blue CRUSH categories for the first eight months of the year, compared to the same period last year, has declined 13.3 percent.

"That's over 5,000 fewer victims of crime," he said.

But is it? While the decline in the number of offenses reported is considered good news, is there reason to believe Blue CRUSH is largely or even partly responsible? The Justice Department reported last week that violent crime nationwide declined in 2009 by 5.3 percent, the third straight yearly decline, and property crime is down for the seventh year in a row.

A decline in reported offenses is not necessarily the result of software predicting where crime is likely to occur or any other police strategy. Law enforcement experts say it could reflect a growing unwillingness on the part of the public to call for police assistance, demographic shifts, already-bulging prison populations keeping criminals off the streets or even the recession.

Beyond that, they say, some policing is common sense and carried out every day, without computer assistance, by attentive patrol officers and their supervisors. Much police work is artful and intuitive and will never be replaced by science.

J.D. Sewell, president of the Memphis Police Association, the union that represents most Memphis officers, said he believes Blue CRUSH is working, "but I don't believe it's to the extent they're proposing."

"To get the true effect of Blue CRUSH, subtract all the other cities' crime rates, and take away the national trend, then you'll get a more accurate figure.

"Of course you want to fight crime and you're willing to spend money, but how much are you willing to spend especially during a financial crisis when they're talking about laying off police officers?" Sewell asked.

Williams acknowledged that Blue CRUSH assignments are often done on overtime, and Sewell said his members like the overtime. But he said it's another factor.

"Look at peer cities and if they increase their overtime -- does it reduce their crime rate without calling it Blue CRUSH?" Sewell asked.

Despite all the acclaim Memphis is getting in journals like last month's Police Chief Magazine, some civil libertarians question whether initiatives like Blue CRUSH (Crime Reduction Using Statistical History) are high-tech smokescreens to justify concentrating crime-fighting in minority communities -- perhaps just another name for racial profiling.

At a two-day symposium on "predictive policing" held in Los Angeles last November, participants acknowledged that the concept "raises fears that police might engage in illicit tactics -- that they will overstep their bounds and potentially use information and intelligence in a way that abridges the Constitution," according to a paper by Craig D. Uchida, president of Justice and Security Strategies and a former University of Maryland criminology professor.

Hedy M. Weinberg, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee, said an "integrative approach" to placing police where they're needed is a good idea and that a stronger relationship between the community and police often creates safer streets.

"That said, there is always the potential for abuse when it is assumed that race, ethnicity or economic status are indicators of criminal activity," Weinberg said. "That is not acceptable policing." Weinberg said she was a bit skeptical of claims that Blue CRUSH is behind the crime rate reduction.

"There are so many things that go into crime rates. There are a number of factors that affect both the increase and decrease in crime," she said.

Memphis lawyer and ACLU board member Bruce S. Kramer said he's concerned with the surveillance aspect of the effort, particularly with cameras. "Are they reacting to crime, or are they monitoring based on demographics and profiling? One's OK; one's not."

Richard Janikowski of the University of Memphis Center for Community Criminology and Research helped bring Memphis Police Director Larry Godwin and predictive analytics together. Janikowski had long used SPSS as a research tool but has no financial relationship with the company.

"We all know crime is not equally distributed in any area," Janikowski said. "We know poor, minority communities are where crime tends to be concentrated for a whole slew of historical reasons, which means the majority of victims of crimes in the country are poor and minority.

"I think sometimes civil libertarians -- and I would classify myself as one; I teach constitutional law -- forget about the victims. I'm all in favor of ... getting community members involved, doing re-entry support, all those things that can make long-term changes in a community, and I think they're important. What I'm unwilling to do is simply write off the current victims and just say, 'Too bad. You're just going to have to run the significantly higher risk of becoming a victim of crime.' I think that's wrong. That's a civil liberties issue, too."

Janikowski said the technology is only one element in a "multidimensional, overall strategy adopted by MPD" that includes new police tactics, refocusing police units, creating new units, community mobilization and outreach efforts.

"The much larger piece was organizational change and cultural change within the department," Janikowski said.

The U of M received a \$2.4 million congressional earmark in 2008 to work on the Blue CRUSH project.

MPD Col. Jim E. Harvey, the department's technology expert, underlined the sense that Blue CRUSH is as much philosophical as technological.

"If you're not actively looking at these reports that we get generated, then it's not going to do you any good," he said. "That's where I guess we excel."

Chicago announced last month that it is working with the Rand Corp. on an analytics initiative. San Jose, Calif., Jackson, Tenn., and others are working with software called Command Central from the company CrimeReports. Asked how essential it is to use proprietary software, with its attendant fees, to do the analytics, Harvey said the software is critical.

"If we just ran reports, it would show us, sure enough, that we had crimes happening, but it's harder to show that over a year's period of time, or even over a seven-day period, what time of day and what day of the week that the crimes are happening," Harvey said. "That's what SPSS does for us."

How valuable is knowing when and where crimes occurred in the past?

"We're able to put our resources where they need to be," said Harvey, repeating the foregone-conclusion rationale. "If we didn't have that, we'd just be pretty much taking a shot in the dark."

Harvey noted that all police officers fill out incident reports on handheld devices that make them available to detectives and others within minutes, rather than days. All suspects -- and even victims and witnesses -- are automatically run through the National Crime Information Center database and checked for local and national outstanding warrants, he said.

Other departments like New York City and Baltimore -- and Memphis, too -- have experimented with so-called CompStat (Computer Statistics) accountability measures in the past. But Williams, who studied the New York model, says Blue CRUSH is more than the typical monthly meeting where a precinct commander gets grilled.

The reports generated at 3 a.m. on Mondays are constantly updated, and Thursday morning meetings to go over progress with PowerPoint presentations are attended by all precinct commanders plus Godwin and other top brass. Every focus area in each of the nine precincts gets attention.

"Since the inception of Blue CRUSH, it has been more successful than any saturation or zero-tolerance operation in the history of the Memphis Police Department," Williams said.

-- Bartholomew Sullivan: (202) 408-2726

Credit: The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn.

Word count: **1616**

To see more of The Commercial Appeal or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.commercialappeal.com>. Copyright (c) 2010, The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tenn. Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services. For more information about the content services offered by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services (MCT), visit www.mctinfoservices.com, e-mail services@mctinfoservices.com, or call 866-280-5210 (outside the United States, call +1 312-222-4544).

More like this



Cite



Email



Save

☐ Add to Selected items

Related items