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How Durham, N.C. fights crime with data – and wins

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When crime rates skyrocket, cities may be tempted to dramatically increase police patrols or surveillance efforts. Durham, North Carolina, however, decided to fight crime with data. And the city appears to be winning the fight.

The city launched **Operation Bull's Eye** seven years ago using analytics technology from **Council Lead Partner IBM**. Since then, violent crime has dropped 39%. Violent gun crime plunged 46%. Gunfire calls are **down by more than half**, and prostitution is down by nearly two-thirds.

The project works by using data to pinpoint true trouble spots, and then using targeted policing and community outreach to address the root causes.

One of Operation Bull's Eye's first targets was a relatively small area of the city where **gun violence occurred frequently**. The city picked the area by analyzing "shots fired" reports. Even though the area accounted for only about 2% of the city's total area, about 20% of the calls came from it.

After analyzing more data, police discovered about the same percentage of gun violence calls came from that very same area. And continuing the analysis, they also learned it was where more than 20% of its prostitution, drug and stolen goods arrests were made.

Targeted policing

Knowing that one small area was responsible for a large share of the crime, Durham police were able to concentrate their resources.

"We couldn't simply throw out cops everywhere and expect to see results," said Jason Schiess, the police department's analytical services manager. "We didn't have the resources to do that and, more importantly, using heavy-handed tactics would just turn the community against us."

The department increased patrols and crime prevention efforts in that area, and also went door-to-door with information for the community.

It also concentrated its data analysis efforts on that area, bringing a variety of records from incident and arrest reports to lists of known gang members into a single database that could be analyzed. It used the **IBM i2 Analyst's Notebook**, which it says was instrumental in helping it figure out who the biggest troublemakers were.

"This has allowed us to uncover links that we had no way of seeing before," Schiess said. "The data was there, but we just didn't have a way to visualize it."

Public feels safer

Beyond the actual reductions in crime, Durham residents say they feel safer. Just four years into the program, a survey found nearly 70% of **residents felt safe** or very safe, and nearly 90% said they felt safe walking alone in their neighborhoods during the day. When the program launched, only 30% felt safe.

The surveys also show that people feel the police department is more engaged in the community. Beyond the traditional crime-fighting efforts, Durham police partnered with the Salvation Army and the local Boys and Girls Clubs to develop more programs for children. They also conducted site surveys to find areas where street lighting could be more effective.

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