Predictive technologies for public safety

Place-based Predictive Policing

These tools attempt to predict the location and time of future crimes. These predictions are often used to deploy police forces with the hopes of improving efficiency and objectivity in policing.

Use in ATL: A tool named Predpol (now Geolitica) was used by APD from 2013-2016.

Inequitable effect example: The success rate of Predpol in Plainfield, New Jersey was less than half a percent[1]. Predpol predicted 1940 crimes and 11 crimes in two neighborhoods in Plainfield that are less than a mile apart. These neighborhoods had 0% and 63% white residents respectively[2].

Gunshot detectors

These tools attempt to identify the sound of gunshots. The detection is then used to dispatch police officers rapidly and with more accuracy than traditional 911 calls.

Use in ATL: A tool named Shotspotter was used in Atlanta once in 2018 for a year and another time in 2022 for 3 months.

Inequitable effect example: Michael Williams was wrongfully arrested and he spent a year in jail because a Shotspotter analyst changed the classification of a sound from firecracker to gunshot. This classification was the only piece of evidence presented against Michael Williams[3].

Video Surveillance and Facial Recognition

Surveillance cameras are placed around a city to record and detect people that match specific criteria. They are supported by facial recognition tools that can identify individuals by searching a database of 30+ billion images.

Use in ATL: In 2019, Atlanta bought three 1-year licenses of facial recognition tool called Clearview AI. Atlanta has an active initiative called ‘Connect ATL’ through which it has access to over 18,000 surveillance cameras.

Inequitable effect example: Randal Reid was wrongfully identified by a facial recognition system and spent nearly a week in jail because he bore resemblance to a suspect who had been recorded by a surveillance camera[4].

License Plate Readers

These tools consist of computer-controlled camera systems, that read the tags on a car, and checks if there are any previous issues associated with it.

Use in ATL: The Atlanta Police Department scanned 405,815,610 license plates using automated license plate readers in 2019. The number of readers continue to grow.

Inequitable effect example: Brian Hofer’s rental car that was previously stolen and recovered was identified by a license plate reader and led to a guns-drawn confrontation with the police[5].

1. https://www.wired.com/story/plainfield-geolitica-crime-predictions/
2. https://themarkup.org/prediction-bias/2021/12/02/crime-prediction-software-promised-to-be-free-of-biases-new-data-shows-it-perpetuates-them
3. https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-algorithm-technology-police-crime-7e3345485aa668c97606d4b54f9b6220
4. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/31/technology/facial-recognition-false-arrests.html
5. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/opinion/when-license-plate-surveillance-goes-horribly-wrong.html