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Police Claim Minority Report-Style Pre-Crime Program Reduces Crime Rate

Officers struggle to shake dystopian sci-fi reputation surrounding crime software

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Police in Modesto, California are attributing a recent crime drop to special software reminiscent of the Hollywood blockbuster "Minority Report."

Predictive policing software, which utilizes mathematical algorithms often used in earthquake prediction, examines several years' worth of crime and sociological data in order to predict where a crime will likely occur down to a 500-square-foot area.

According to Capt. Rick Armendariz, the software has brought crime down to a three-year low, despite less officers patrolling the streets due to budget cuts.

"It looks at our crime history the last 10 years using a mathematical equation and it gives us what we call a high probability of where the next crime is going to occur," Armendariz told CBS Sacramento.

Armendariz believes the software is responsible for a drop in multiple crimes including burglaries, commercial theft and robberies.

"We're trying to get away from rearview policing, looking at crime that has happened," Armendariz said.

Officers rely on a top 10 list produced by the software to give them insight into problem areas around the city.

"Telling our officers this is where you need to be at at those times," Armendariz said.

While police hail the program as an effective crime fighting tool, local residents were not as quick to support the department's findings.

"If you don't take the reports, the crime stats go down," one resident said on social media. "Try reporting a minor theft in Modesto and see what I mean."

"Just like the one gentleman said, if it's not reported of course crime will drop. They don't respond to the lost dog, stuck keys in the car anymore," another added. "No PDs do. So then less reports=less crime. Funny how they're giving the PD credit when all they're doing is less work…"

Despite glowing reviews from departments across the country, others are skeptical of the software's ability to lower crime as well.

"Predictive policing is at the cutting edge of policing today. The problem is that, historically, the cutting edge of policing is dull," Criminology Professor John Eck told the Guardian last June. "[Predictive policing] fosters a whack-a-mole policing mentality. Not that whacking moles doesn't work – but it is unnecessarily intrusive in people's lives, which erodes their limited confidence in the police, and undermines something fundamental to our ideals of democracy."

Others feel the software could begin targeting individuals, leading to false positives and potentially dangerous situations.

"How do you cross-examine a computer?" Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at the University of the District of Columbia, asked. "To stop you and frisk you and search you, a police officer needs reasonable suspicion, so my question is how will this affect reasonable suspicion?"

Just like Modesto, nearly every department in possession of such software was able to obtain it through federal grants.

Earlier this year, two departments in Washington state publicly announced their acquisition of the PredPol predictive policing software.

With big data collection becoming increasingly unpopular due to revelations surrounding the NSA, fewer and fewer Americans are trusting public servants to use the technology responsibly, especially including police given their illegal activities with Stingrays cell phone interceptors.

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