

Police Technology and the Danger of Reform

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SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

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Whether a technology is “just” depends primarily on who is using it. No example makes this more apparent than police technology. Few of us typically see water hoses and dogs as harmful. But both became instruments of police terror during the Black freedom movement of the 1960s. Data-mining tools and algorithms are also technologies that become unjust in the hands of police. Often referred to as instruments of “data-driven policing,” these technologies are promoted in the name of reforms that will make policing more fair, transparent, and accountable. These technologies are the latest example of a long tradition of police using the concept of reform to experiment with new resources and secure political cover for violence.

The relationship of data to police reform raises the question: Why try to reform an institution that has always been used for racial domination? The history of policing in the United States is inextricably tied to policing’s origins in racial domination, including enforcing colonization (helping settlers control, clear, and occupy land), enslavement (terrorizing enslaved people and capturing those who escaped), and poverty (criminalizing the poor, crushing organized labor, and protecting capitalist exploitation). The continuity of those origins today is apparent in policing’s ongoing banishment, slaughter, and domination of predominantly Black, Indigenous, migrant, and poor people. Rather than reducing that violence, technology is helping to automate it.



Vehicle Blue Emergency Light Turned on

Historically, efforts to reform policing have expanded the institution's harm. This is as true of water hoses and dogs in the past as it is of algorithms today. In the 1960s, outrage about "graphic violence of police dogs and fire hoses accelerated liberal development of the civil rights carceral state" ([Murakawa 2014, 150](#)), including through federal legislation to modernize policing. These laws helped secure federal funding, equipment, and standards for the heavily militarized tactics that police now use. Though intended to reduce police violence, this reformist effort to modernize and expand investment in policing ultimately made the institution more lethal. These same dynamics are playing out today with the proliferation of data-driven policing.

Data-Driven Policing

Data-driven policing refers to the collection and mining of mass data to determine which people and places police should target. This practice draws from a vast web of surveillance sources, data brokers, state agencies, and open-source information, putting this data at police fingertips as well as running it through algorithms that police claim can predict crime. Police use these sources to generate predictive profiles of suspects, develop hotspot maps, and create secret hit lists of who to target. Not only do these practices automate the racialized and oppressive logics that have always driven policing, data lends this violence a veneer of scientific objectivity.

As a lawyer and community organizer with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, a community group building power to abolish police surveillance, I have been working closely with people targeted by police data

systems. In 2021, I began meeting with individuals targeted through a Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) predictive policing program named Operation LASER (Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration). Built using the Palantir data platform, LASER generated lists of both people and places that police should target as sources of future crime^[1]. In just one six-month period in 2016, LAPD killed at least six people in these predictive policing zones. All of them were Black or Latino, four were teenagers, and four were shot in the back. Mary Williams, the grandmother of one of the men killed, pointedly articulated what the technology's "objectivity" means in light of who used it: "The computer doesn't just go out and pick up data," she explained. "It's police that put the data into the computer; the racism and the injustice comes from a person"^[2].

LASER's purpose was explicit in its name: Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration. Nearly half the people placed on LAPD target lists for "extraction" were Black, a rate around five times the city's Black population share ([Stop LAPD Spying Coalition 2021, 15](#)). LASER's architects likened these community members to "tumors" and called the program "analogous to laser surgery" in that police were "extracting offenders surgically" ([Uchida et al. 2012, 6](#)). Although the LAPD claimed that every person on these lists was a "chronic offender," a fifth of the people targeted had zero past arrests ([Los Angeles Police Commission, Office of the Inspector General 2019, 15](#)).

The idea that the state should "surgically" neutralize individuals due to their future danger recalls the work of eugenicists, who similarly voiced medical rationales for eliminating unwanted racial groups. When designing LASER, the program's architects analyzed demographic data to propose more targeted policing in "areas where there is a higher percentage of African-American residents" and "areas with lower owner-occupied housing and higher female-head of households" ([Wooditch and Uchida 2016, 5](#)). In effect, LASER helped to automate racial profiling, justifying new forms of data-driven injustice. Yet when LASER launched, police reformers promoted it as a predictive policing strategy that police "throughout the country can replicate to improve efficiency and effectiveness" ([Matthies and Chiu 2014, 2](#)).

The Danger of Reform

Efforts to reform policing by scientifically calibrating its harm share direct lineage with eugenics. Consider August Vollmer, who was appointed LAPD chief in 1923 and is "hailed by many in law enforcement as the father of modern American policing" ([Newitz 2021](#)). Vollmer was an early proponent of police professionalization, the reformist notion that police need better training, equipment, and science to refine their work. Vollmer was the first police chief in the US to require formal police training, and he created the University of California's first criminal justice program. He was also a white supremacist, with his police training curriculum covering topics like "eugenics," "the origin of races," and "race degeneration" ([Newitz 2021](#)). Vollmer's devotion to both eugenics and police reform aren't necessarily a contradiction: both pursuits begin with the idea that structures of racial domination can be fine-tuned using data and experimentation.

Data and policing are increasingly becoming inseparable, with police multiplying the data they generate and mine.

Today, police efforts to experiment with new technologies and reform strategies continue to expand policing's harm. When the LAPD ended Operation LASER in April 2019, the police chief admitted that the program was an "experiment" ([Los Angeles Police Commission 2019](#)). Exactly one year later, in April 2020, LAPD announced Data-Informed Community-Focused Policing, a new framework that reframes predictive policing as using data to "measure results, improve efficiency, and provide overall accountability" ([Los Angeles Police Department 2020, 6](#)). However, this reformist spin has not changed the community's experience of data-driven policing. Reform hasn't made police technology more just. On the contrary—it's expanded the violence and made it more durable ([Bhuiyan 2021](#)).

The rise of data-driven policing confirms the need for police abolition. Data and policing are increasingly becoming inseparable, with police multiplying the data they generate and mine. If you agree this is dangerous, the question becomes: What should police use instead of data? Without a commitment to abolition, what's left besides the subjective racism that data was supposed to replace? This is one reason communities are organizing to end policing rather than reform it with technology.

Footnotes

- 1 See <https://stoplapdspying.org/before-the-bullet-hits-the-body-dismantling-predictive-policing-in-los-angeles/>
- 2 See Stop LAPD Spying interview <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbLojeQj18b/>

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