Using data to help police departments police themselves

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A researcher and police insider for many years, Mark Iris has a unique perspective on what ails law enforcement agencies. He believes answers to the real policing problems often lie in the massive amounts of data law enforcement agencies collect on every aspect of their operations.

Mark Iris is arming police departments around the country with a novel crime-fighting tool—advanced data analyses and potentially life-saving intelligence derived by a group of Northwestern University

undergraduates.

Currently an adjunct lecturer at Northwestern, Iris served from 1984 until 2004 as the executive director of the Chicago Police Board, a quasi-judicial entity made up of civilians whose job is to hear cases of alleged police misconduct. The cases included that of former Chicago Police Cmdr. Jon Burge, accused of making torture a regular part of interrogations at the Chicago Police Department and sentenced to prison for lying about it.

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The problem, Iris said, is not that police-involved shootings are on the rise, as many Americans have come to believe in the wake of incidents in Ferguson, Cleveland and North Charleston. In fact, the vast majority of officers never fire their gun at a suspect over the course of their career, he said.

Iris believes answers to the real policing problems often lie in the massive amounts of data law enforcement agencies collect on every aspect of their operations. Data, he said, too often fail to inform policy and operations because departments lack staff with the advanced statistical skills or resources to analyze it.

A growing number of police departments are using advanced data collection systems that enable them to identify problem officers earlier, for example. Early Intervention Systems track everything from absences from work to the number of times an officer is named in a lawsuit.

Iris harnesses the talents of Northwestern students who do have such skills work with police departments around the country as part of an undergraduate research opportunity.

"I decided to play matchmaker," said Iris, who sat down recently to discuss the research projects he arranges as an advisor for the Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences (MMSS) program. "This is a remarkable opportunity for a 22-year-old college student."

How does the "matchmaking" work?

I recruit the students in their junior year. Since many of them know little about policing besides what they've seen on "Law & Order," I assign them background readings pertinent to their research topic.

The police department proposes the research question. We visit the host city at the onset of the project to clarify the research goals and ensure the necessary data are available. Then, we return after the data analysis is complete, and the students give a formal presentation to the police chief and top command staff. They come across as poised, articulate young professionals.

How many students have participated?

The first police-related MMSS project was in Chicago during the 1997-98 academic year. It extended from there to New York, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Houston, Long Beach and Philadelphia. In total, I've advised or supervised 86 students on a total of 41 projects.

How do the students benefit?

How often does an undergrad have the opportunity to make a presentation and have an hour's undivided attention from the CEO and top management of a billion-dollar organization with thousands of employees?

The findings of one recent MMSS project, which examined crime by location in Houston according to an analysis of "micro hotspots," were published in the June 2014 issue of The Police Chief, the lead publication of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Not a bad takeaway for a senior thesis.

Also, as I tell the students, it's likely that the improved police operations that result from their findings have resulted in crimes being prevented. It's also possible that their work has saved lives.

How might data help reduce incidence of excessive force and prevent police misconduct?

Many police departments have adopted systems generally known as Early Intervention Systems. The EIS collects data about the officer performance—absences from work, traffic accidents in police cars, how many times the officer has been named as a defendant in a lawsuit, how often the officer uses force in making an arrest. The EIS uses that information to identify potential problems. The idea is to take action, be it through counseling, training or some other form of intervention, before the officer's career implodes.

Some agencies do creative things with EIS. For example, one department tracks the number of times charges resulting from a particular officer's arrest are dismissed by a judge due to no probable cause. Another department tracks use of force reports, not just at the officer level, but the total number of arrests and complaints for all the officers under a particular sergeant's supervision. That is to hold supervisors accountable when there is trouble in the ranks.

How might data help improve the public's perception of some police departments?

We have a lot of misconceptions about policing that data can illuminate. In light of all the controversies in the last year, you might not guess the average number of times a police officer will be involved in a shooting incident over the course of a 25-year career. It's less than one, closer to zero. The use of deadly force by police has declined tremendously over the last 30 years.

One recently completed MMSS research project, an analyses of police involved shootings commissioned by the Houston Police Department, was made public last summer when the Houston police chief took the commendable step—in the name of transparency—of posting online information on officer-involved shootings for all to see.

Compare the relationship between America and its law enforcement agencies during the 1980s and 1990s to the present. What has changed, and what remains the same?

We are undergoing a tremendous change at this time. Increasingly, police officers are wearing body cameras and with fixed surveillance cameras omnipresent and mobile video cameras in everyone's pockets, the police narrative as to what happened in a questionable incident is sometimes challenged big time, especially when you have video that absolutely contradicts the police version of what happened. It causes a tremendous degree of skepticism. Simultaneously, in the last couple years we've seen a major policy shift. Since the 1960s, no politician could go wrong for coming down hard on crime. We enacted ever-harsher punishments and vastly increased our incarcerated population. But in the last few years we have seen politicians from both sides of the aisle questioning that logic.

More information: Police Implications Associated with Identifying

Micro-Hotspots. www.policechiefmagazine.org/ma …=3388&issue_id=62014

Provided by Northwestern University