

REFORM

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Policing after the pandemic: harnessing the power of data

Policy roundtable



Policing after the pandemic: harnessing the power of data

Reform was delighted to host a policy roundtable on how policing can harness the power of data in July 2021, in partnership with BT and Cisco. The discussion was introduced by Sir Dave Thompson QPM, Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, and Dave Matthews, Data Director, CTIO Enterprise at BT.

Measures taken to tackle the pandemic have led to some significant changes in criminal activity. While certain crime types, such as violence and acquisitive crime declined during lockdown, others increased, such as domestic abuse and cybercrime.

As restrictions have been lifted, some of that crime has returned, but it is unclear exactly what the 'new normal' will be. It is very possible that the geography of crime will shift as people's working and living patterns remain altered.

The pandemic has also reinforced the importance of data-driven insight in public services – from health to benefit applications, the smart use of data has enabled real-time decision making. Citizens have become much more accustomed to interacting with services online.

In addition, the pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated inequalities. The people and places suffering the highest levels of deprivation have been hardest hit by the health, social and economic fallout from COVID, and will take the longest to recover. These are also communities disproportionately impacted by crime – which the long tail of economic impacts may also aggravate.

There is therefore a huge opportunity for policing to harness the power of data both to understand the changing crime landscape, and to better prevent and solve crime. This must be done in a way that enhances legitimacy and benefits high-crime communities. That means turning multi-source data into actionable insights, within a smart and transparent governance framework, to be used by forces equipped with the right skills and technologies.



Charlotte Pickles
Director
Reform

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Insights into action

Forces have a wealth of data that, used intelligently, can enable more efficient and effective policing. However, the insights gleaned from data are only ever as good as the quality of the data they are based on, and the comprehensiveness of the sources used. Data standards must therefore be clear and enforced.

This must be accompanied by a shift across local and national agencies to ensure the appropriate sharing of data, underpinned by a cross-agency data strategy. There should be a presumption towards sharing where the end goal is safer communities, particularly in instances of complex, high-risk crime such as county lines drug dealing. Appropriate data sharing between, for example, children's services, schools and the police can ensure that early action is taken to prevent crime.

Data rich, analytically poor

The right capabilities are then needed to transform high-quality, multi-source data into actionable insights. Currently, too many forces are data rich but analytically poor. A combination of the right skills, plus the right platforms, is needed to overcome this.

In short, forces need data science capabilities to process the mass of information and extract the right insights. Well trained analysts, and line managers and police leaders comfortable with the use of data, are key. This is all the more important given the rapidly increasing levels of cyber-enabled crime, where a highly skilled analyst may be more valuable than a uniformed officer in preventing and resolving online crime.

Developing a data doctrine

Police leaders must develop a clear doctrine to ensure data is consistently used to innovate practice.

Even where good data analytics capabilities are in place, forces can find it hard to change long-ingrained working practices. Senior leaders must put in place the right processes to translate insights into new ways of working. Emphasising the continuing importance of professional judgement is key to securing frontline buy in.

Data insights should be seen as an enabler of, not a replacement for, officer decision-making. The smart use of data can provide rich insights for officers, enabling resources to be deployed to best effect. Police leaders must establish a culture in which data-enabled policing is the norm.

The challenge of legitimacy

There are clear ethical considerations concerning the use of data to direct police activities, notably with regards to predictive or pre-emptive policing. If the data being used to build predictive models has in-built biases, the outputs from that analysis will be similarly biased. This could lead to over-policing of certain areas or groups. The need to build legitimacy among communities is clear. These risks require careful consideration and intelligent management – again reinforcing the need for professional judgement to be applied, as well as proactive engagement with local communities.

Notwithstanding this, the potential for predictive analytics to help build safer communities and thereby reduce victimisation are significant. Big data analysis, especially where it draws on multiple sources, can create new insights which in turn can be used by public services to better support individuals and families in greatest need. Intervening early can prevent a young person from entering a life of crime, for example, or protect a vulnerable person from abuse. It is also worth noting that data can also challenge preconceptions by providing neutral insights.

Policy roundtable summary

Providing clear and compelling use cases will be key to gaining public buy-in; both for predictive analysis and action, and for the use of new technologies such as facial recognition.

Communities need to understand the parameters within which technology is being used, and the benefits to them of doing so.

Good governance, smart regulation

Weak national capability and governance is acting as a barrier to progress. Digital leadership is required that focuses on setting standards, managing complex programmes, and understanding the opportunities and limits of technology, as well as the evolving landscape.

Establishing the right structures for digital policing, with clarity over what should be done at a national level versus a force level is essential.

Not all forces are able to build their own expertise and capabilities, and more needs to be done at a national level to overcome this. Purchasing should also be done at a national level, and policing needs to better understand the value of purchasing not just hardware but services that can ensure the benefits of technology are actually realised.

A smart approach to regulation is needed to ensure policing can keep pace with advancing technology. Relying on primary legislation is not practical, which means robust but flexible regulation is required. This in turn means that the use case for any given technology must be clear.

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info@reform.uk



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