

Predictive Policing

Recently, the Pasco County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) in Florida sent out a letter to some of its residents informing them that they had been selected to be enrolled in the Prolific Offender Program. Here is an excerpt from the opening lines:

This program provides you with an opportunity to receive assistance from the Pasco Sheriff's Office and several community partners who will work with you to identify and overcome barriers that have hindered you in your life's journey. Ultimately, the goal of this program is to empower you to live a lawful, productive and fulfilled life.¹

The program uses various metrics, including, "an evaluation of your recent criminal behavior using an unbiased, evidence-based risk assessment" in order to identify what it called, "prolific offenders in our community." The letter claims that barriers to "successful living" include struggles with mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and employment. Enrollment is based on those criteria. Enrollees who refrain from criminal activity for two years are removed from the program.

PCSO also created a program designed to detect potential crimes and stop them before they happen.² To do this, the office would use a variety of metrics including "arrest histories, social networks, and unspecified intelligence in order to create a list of potential criminals."³ They would then use the list to preemptively investigate these individuals and perform regular checks on them.

PCSO and its supporters claim that these are innovative ways to prevent crime and to conduct policing in a less reactionary manner. By using known metrics that lead to criminal activity, police might be able to intervene before someone even has the opportunity to commit a crime. Part of this prevention might involve providing would-be offenders with the support they need in order to cut down on potential risk factors, including mental health care, support for substance abuse disorders, assistance in finding work or a place to live, and so on.

People who oppose these kinds of programs claim that it is overreaching and authoritarian. It leads to the kind of over-policing witnessed in the case where "deputies gave the mother of one teenage target a \$2,500 fine because she had five chickens in her backyard." Having some risk-factors associated with criminal activity is a far cry from actually committing crimes. Furthermore, regardless of how likely someone is to fall into criminal activity, perhaps no one should be subject to intervention and investigation until they actually commit a crime.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What difference is there between predictive policing tactics that focus on prior offenders and those predictive policing tactics which focus on preventing non-offenders from becoming offenders?
2. Is it responsible for police departments to try to participate in preventative policing by stopping crimes before they happen? Is there a right and a wrong way to go about doing that?
3. Is there ever a time when certain "risk factors" should ever be considered in beginning an investigation?
4. Does something like the Prolific Offender Program run contrary to a notion in our justice system of "innocent until proven guilty?" Does it assume guilt on behalf of those that it enrolls in the program?

¹ https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21015592/pso_letter-1.pdf

² <https://projects.tampabay.com/projects/2020/investigations/police-pasco-sheriff-targeted/intelligence-led-policing/>

³ <https://www.tampabay.com/investigations/2021/07/24/pasco-sheriffs-office-letter-targets-residents-for-increased-accountability/>

