

Cops scan social media to assess 'threat rating'

By Brent Skorup, Reuters

A national spotlight is now focused on aggressive law enforcement tactics and the justice system. Today's professional police forces – where officers in even one-stoplight towns might have body armor and mine-resistant vehicles – already raise concerns.

Yet new data-mining technologies can now provide police with vast amounts of surveillance information and could radically increase police power. Policing can be increasingly targeted at specific people and neighborhoods – with potentially serious inequitable effects.

One speaker at a recent national law enforcement conference compared future police work to "Minority Report", the Tom Cruise film set in 2054 Washington, where a "PreCrime" unit has been set up to stop murders before they happen.

While PreCrime remains science-fiction, many technology advances are already involved with predictive policing – identifying risks and threats with the help of online information, powerful computers and Big Data.

New World Systems, for example, now offers software that allows dispatchers to enter in a person's name to see if they've had contact with the police before. Provided crime data, PredPol claims on its website that its software "forecasts highest risk times and places for future crimes." These and other technologies are supplanting and enhancing traditional police work.

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