



**Crime Mapping and  
Data Confidentiality Roundtable  
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***When information passes from one agency to another, who is liable or accountable for the inappropriate use of crime maps or the sharing of inaccurate geocoded data? What kind of statements should be made (i.e. disclaimers)?***

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Crime mapping is a vital law enforcement tool which has been used since the first Police Department put a map with colored push pins on the wall to show the pattern of crime in a municipality. Since those early days crime mapping has become exceedingly more complicated; with the rise of computers and the internet, information which was once available only after a request process is being posted and accessed with the click of the mouse. This raises new liability concerns; the information once used primarily by law enforcement to assist with investigations, target trouble spots and designate patrol areas is now more widely available to the public than ever before.

Increased public awareness of crime has advantages and drawbacks. While the available information can assist with community policing efforts it has the potential to be misused by business and community officials to redline an area of a municipality. This possibility is complicated by the actual appearance of computerized crime maps. Crime maps are usually broken into areas (i.e. zip codes, police districts, etc.) which are shaded or delineated as having particular crime rates even if it is only the northwest part of the region in which the crimes have occurred. A second problem with crime map appearance is raised when a map associates the nearest street address with a crime whether the crime actually occurred on the property or not.

This raises great concerns for homeowners, realtors, and landlords.

Liability issues occur not only with the release of information, but also with the withholding of such information. Many states have public record requirements and not releasing crime mapping data collected by law enforcement could hold far greater liability risks than releasing it. If data is collected and used for law enforcement purposes the liability risks should be minimal. Crime mapping data should be kept accurate and up to date. If data is manipulated to show regions rather than specific locations of crime a disclaimer to that effect should be included. There should also be a caveat disclaimer on all crime maps stating that they are intended for law enforcement purposes only.

Although a disclaimer decreases risk municipalities and law enforcement agencies should be aware of the risks. There are situations which could arise in which a municipality, a law enforcement agency, or a business could be held liable for their use of crime mapping information. If a municipality bases changes its zoning practices in a manner that amounts to redlining and discriminatory zoning practices it is possible that they could be found liable under the Fair Housing Act.

Another question rises with the liability concerns regarding racial profiling. Crime mapping may tell you more than any other profiling tool in existence. It is of tantamount importance that crime mapping information is not used to support improper profiling procedures such as racial profiling. That type of misuse would leave law enforcement agencies vulnerable to all sorts of legal action.

In conclusion, computerized crime mapping is a legitimate and proper law enforcement tool. Great care needs to be taken however when the data is published or distributed. Guidelines for crime mapping use would inevitably assist law enforcement agencies with their use of crime mapping and sharing data. To properly release the data it must be reasonably clear, accurate and not unfairly manipulated.

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