



**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?

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Interesting topic, great question. But here's a scarier one: Who decides what is an "inappropriate" use for a crime map?

As a boy, I grew up where everyone had a crime map. Many were accurate, some were wildly fictional. But the adults generally knew which was which. I grew up in small towns in Wisconsin and Minnesota. In Elmwood, Wisconsin, Officer Wheeler could tell you every break-in and every auto theft there'd been in town for the last 20 years; so could everyone else. There wasn't much crime. But when there was a crime, everyone knew. Everyone had a crime map in his or her head.

Spin the clock ahead 30-40 years, and the city is Washington, D.C. Some analyst at the police department may know where every crime is, most people don't. The exception is when people take action. A few years ago, a friend of mine living in a high-crime D.C. neighborhood started publishing a free neighborhood news letter that included a weekly crime map. He got every offense, mapped it on his Mac, and hand delivered his newsletter to people up and down the street.

That's a public service.

If a company wanting to sell home security systems does the same thing, is it an equal public service? What if a politician does it? What if a newspaper, web site or television station does it? Who makes the determination what is an "appropriate use?"

News organizations, when they publish crime maps, are in the end the ones inherently liable for the information that they publish – and the institutions most suited to judge what is an appropriate use. Every day a news organization places its reputation and its financial assets on the line with what it publishes. It can be sued for libel and sued for invasion of privacy. This fact powerfully motivates the responsible journalist to take

great care with how information is presented and with its accuracy.

What's the source of your information?

Some crime maps simply show how many of this, how many of that. Still, simple errors can be made. Others utilize demographic information to estimate crime-risk. What is critical, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the map, is disclosure. Legitimate news organizations should disclose the source of the information, how it's been compiled and let users, readers and viewers know what statistical analysis has been done and how.

Any published academic report includes the methodology. If the methodology or statistical analysis is flawed, the paper gets shot down through the open air of inspection and review.

It's all the more important that government agencies freely disclose crime information because everything they do is paid for with our tax dollars. Never should government agencies refuse disclosure under the argument that it may reveal "proprietary" information by a third party contractor hired to produce such maps. The audit review process of government is not up to civil servants and elected officials. In this country, all citizens have the right to inspect.

Businesses certainly have the right to develop and enjoy the profits of proprietary methods. In 1999, proprietary often translates to: SOFTWARE. But if such software is utilized, it must be disclosed. Then the business can defend the integrity of its product.

Full disclosure is the only method that provides the oversight demanded by a democracy.

What if the data is misused?

Nobody takes pride in numbers like a first-rate statistician. There's an understandable fear that carefully constructed geocoded maps may be altered, or their findings distorted. To absolutely protect the integrity of the data, there's a simple solution: move to a different planet.

Elvis is Alive!

We're visited daily by aliens!

Hillary Clinton is NOT going to run for the Senate.

Go to the library, your radio, the web, your community and you can find someone spouting the most incredible claims. If their spouts are gushers of libel, there are

adequate laws to respond.

Crime maps are not some piece of sacrosanct secret society form of speech. They are information maps comprised of vitally important public data. They allow citizens to see and understand something that affects us all: crime.

The city of Omaha refused to provide the World Herald crime data. The newspaper sued and got the data and subsequently delivered to the citizens of Omaha a superb piece of reporting. A portion of the World Herald's introduction to that series of reports is worth repeating here:

“We believe people can handle the truth. We believe people want to know what is happening in their community and in their neighborhoods. We believe a democratic society works only when its citizens - not just its politicians and authorities - have all the information on which policy decisions are made.”

APB Online is continually in the process of collecting crime data for mapping purposes from police agencies throughout the country. Many are helpful, some are hostile, one medium sized community said its data for the past year would cost us \$450,000, a rather high impediment to making vital public data available to the public.

I'd urge everyone here to take a look at what can be accomplished when information normally kept by the few is shared with the many. Our senior computer-assisted reporting editor, J. Robert Port, has provided a list of several URL's for crime news reports that both educate and inform. Crime Maps kept locked in a desk or an office can do neither.

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Some Links to Check

Omaha World-Herald: a 10-year overview of the city's crime patterns. <http://www.omaha.com/OWH/CrimeReport/>

Atlanta Journal-Constitution: speeding tickets.
<http://www.accessatlanta.com/ajc/bigstory/052399/index.html>

APB Online: The Graying of America's Prisons
<http://www.apbonline.com/safestreets/oldprisoners/index.html>

The Washington Post's analysis of police shootings that won a Pulitzer Prize for public service this year.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/dcpolice/deadlyforce/police1page1.htm>

Minneapolis Star-Tribune: series 'License to Steal' detailing how the city's car thefts are on the rise, but arrests of car thieves are not.

<http://www.startribune.com/stonline/html/special/cartheft/>

The Philadelphia Daily News, 'Hell on Wheels,' describing the city's traffic and DUI problems, including some online databases.

<http://www.philly.com/packages/hellonwheels/>

Daytona News-Journal: a simple, but effective news story about local concealed weapons permit holders. No maps, but there could have been. <http://www.n-jcenter.com/reprise/conceal.htm>

APB Online, Serial Killer Atlas: a clickable map leading a Web viewer to details on serial murders.

<http://www.apbonline.com/serialkiller/atlas/>