



**Crime Mapping and
Data Confidentiality Roundtable
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***A "Proposal" for How Partnerships Between Police Agencies and
Researchers On Geocoded Data Sharing***

by

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The arrival of GIS as a tool for problem solving within policing and, more broadly, government services has brought both opportunities and concerns. Among the concerns are that the enhanced ability to integrate data from multiple sources poses threats to citizen and victim privacy, exposes cooperating police agencies to criticism of practices evaluated by use of GIS data. This concern is raised in many forums. Media access to police reports and other criminal justice agencies' information has been and will be argued between police managers and newsmen. Private, for profit businesses such as law firms, alarm companies and real estate sales companies routinely seek access to GIS compatible data. Researchers of policing and social issues are also extremely interested in GIS crime data.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department is nationally recognized as one of the pioneers in the use of GIS to enhance its problem solving effectiveness. In the relatively short period of five years, the department migrated from manual pin map analysis to a GIS analytical capacity that integrates data from such diverse sources as police reports, probation records, public and private utilities, public housing data, schools, county social services, and block face observations. For the most part, this data is being analyzed in support of problem solving, crime prevention and criminal apprehension. However, The CMPD has been open to cooperating with research endeavors.

The CMPD has cooperated with researchers from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Southern Illinois University, John C. Smith University, and Rutgers University who have been given access to GIS files containing some, if not all of the data mentioned above. Some of the research projects were conceived of and designed solely by the researchers. Other research was the result of collaboration between the police department and a university to respond to a need for knowledge identified by the department. To date, the CMPD has experienced no controversy over the sharing of the data with the researchers.

My approach to cooperation in research has been influenced by years of experience with the academic community. Early in my career I witnessed conflicts between police managers and

researchers who mutually refused to work together cooperatively. I recall one researcher who had developed a sharp skill at reading text upside down. While the police manager was viewing a “confidential” report for information to selectively respond to the researcher’s questions, the researcher was making verbatim notes from the report that he was reading upside down. I participated in other research that appeared from the outset to be cooperative in nature only to see the department “ambushed” with controversial research findings when the final report was issued. As a young sergeant I also assisted in research by a person who was totally incompetent as revealed by the poor quality of the final report. I have learned from my experiences. I am reluctant to label my suggestions for partnerships between law enforcement agencies and researchers with regard to data sharing a “model.” It is, rather, a proposal influenced by my years of experience with the academic community.

The first criterion I recommend is that the research add value to the policing profession, to the community, or to society generally. I think it is inappropriate, even unethical, to engage in research that does not provide such value using police department resources. Participating in research taxes the resources of the department. Staff must take on additional tasks to assist in the data gathering, whether that be participating in focus groups, responded to surveys, reviewed reports, or gathering data from other means.

Next it is important that I know the researcher. I do not mean that I know him or her personally. Rather, it is important that I feel comfortable with the capabilities and integrity of the principal researcher. If I do not know him or her from prior contact, I will talk with references whom I know and respect. I will also review prior publications by the principal researcher and speak with members of organizations that have cooperated with him or her in earlier research. If I find that academic peers or prior cooperating agencies are reluctant to recommend the researcher, I won’t work with him.

A third requirement is that the department not be ambushed with the findings of the research. In one experience with a well know police practices researcher, we debated quite intensely over the requirement that a condition of cooperation was that the department is given frequent, periodic feedback on what the evaluation was showing. He eventually conceded to our demands and now travels around the country preaching the value of “formative evaluation.” Feedback throughout the data gathering stage is an essential requirement, without which I will not agree to cooperate. If this condition is violated, I will never cooperate with the researcher again.

A fourth requirement is that the shared data can only be used for the research purpose agreed to. If the researcher wishes to use the data in a manner that is beyond the original and agreed upon scope of the project, he has to obtain additional approval from the department. The identities of any individuals that the data might include, of course, need to be kept confidential. Any revelation of individuals can be done only with the consent of the individuals. It is also a requirement that the department be allowed to review a draft of the final report and be allowed to give the researcher comments on the data presented and on the findings.

My reluctance to label my comments as a model is, I am sure, more understandable now that you have read them. Nevertheless, I hope these suggestions generate discussion at the round table.