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Public Access to Crime Maps from Police Agencies: Frequency, Agency Characteristics, and Maps Used

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009 President Obama issued a memorandum directing federal agencies to “establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration” to increase public trust and effectiveness. Subsequent communications from the White House advocated for broadening public access to data at all levels of government. One area where these mandates have been particularly impactful is local law enforcement. Recent high profile incidents of police use of force and chronic overrepresentation of minorities in the criminal justice system has negatively impacted police-community relations in many jurisdictions. In response, police departments are moving to expand public access to crime data, an action widely supported by the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The geographic nature of crime along with recent advances in GIS technology and internet access make online maps one of the more efficient mechanisms for sharing law enforcement data with the public. Whether these maps truly benefit the public and increase trust remains to be seen. Critical cartography argues that mapping is never a completely neutral activity, and, as a result, social harms are possible (Crampton & Krygier, 2005; Harley, 1989; Kindynis, 2014). The current study, as a starting point for research in this area, seeks to:

1. document how many agencies provide crime maps to the public,
2. identify the characteristics of these agencies, and
3. detail the maps currently available to the public through police department websites.

METHODS

Data used for this study come from the Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics Survey (LEMAS) conducted every 3 to 5 years by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. The 2013 survey collected information from a nationally representative sample of 2,059 local police departments. Respondents were asked whether their agency provides online access to: “Street-level maps that report the location and nature of a variety of specific crimes” and “Street-level maps with details about the residential location of sex offenders”. Additional data on agencies responding affirmatively to either of these questions was collected via content analysis of the department’s website.

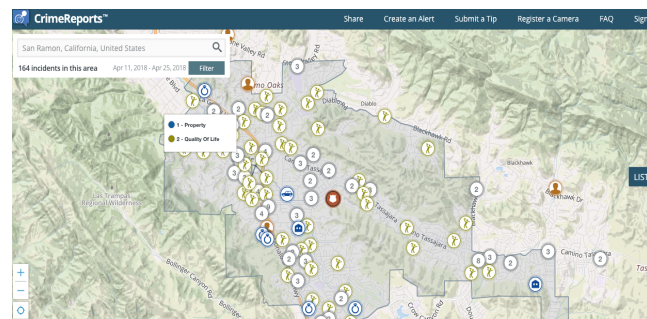
Table 1. Characteristics of Law Enforcement Agencies and Distribution of Online Maps to the Public.

Agency Characteristics	% Agencies With Crime Map(s)	% Agencies With Sex Offender Map(s)
All Agencies (N = 2,035)	26.6%	20.3%
Number of Full-Time Sworn Officers		
1 to 9	2.6%	2.4%
10 to 24	11.5%	12.2%
25 to 49	23.7%	20.6%
50 to 99	38.5%	29.0%
100+	51.6%	35.7%
Proportion of Sworn Officers with 8+ Hours Training in Community Policing		
None	21.5%	15.5%
Less Than 1/2	29.8%	19.8%
1/2 or More	33.5%	24.7%
All Officers	28.1%	24.6%
Agency Use of Social Media		
None	13.4%	10.5%
Facebook Only	23.2%	20.7%
Twitter Only	40.0%	34.5%
Both	49.5%	33.7%

*Max sample size = 2,035, actual sample size varies by analysis due to missing data

Table 2. Third Party Agencies Used for Public Crime Maps

Mapping Company Used	Percent
CrimeReports	38.7%
RAIDS/LexisNexis	24.3%
Crimemapping.com	19.6%
Other/In-House	17.4%
Agencies with Crime Maps (N=320)	71.9%



RESULTS

Of the 2,035 police agencies that responded to the LEMAS survey, 30.9% reported providing crime and/or sex offender maps to the public. Agencies were more likely to provide both crime maps and sex offender maps, instead of providing one over the other.

The characteristics of police departments who presented maps to the public typically were of medium to larger size. Agency size is an important factor, which could coincide with budget allocation, as well as priority levels to providing transparency. The agencies that reported having staff members conducting statistical analysis with computerized data, as well as departments who utilized Facebook and Twitter to interact with their communities were more likely to provide maps.

Additional analysis was performed on 320 police agencies that indicated they provided both sex offender and crime maps to the public. 71.9% of these agencies provided crime and sex offender maps on their websites. Most police agencies use different companies to deliver the maps to the public. The most common companies used are CrimeReports, RAIDS/LexisNexis, and Crimemapping.com. Some agencies use other companies, or even create in-house systems to provide the information.

CONCLUSION

26.6% of the 2,035 police agencies in 2013 provide crime maps to the public, and 20.3% reported providing sex offender maps. Larger agencies and those who utilize Facebook and Twitter to connect with their communities were most likely to provide crime and sex offender maps. In 2018, 71.9% of the agencies that reported providing both sex offender and crime maps had them available to the public, and 82.6% of them used external vendors to do so. Police agencies are using the ability to provide public access to crime maps to potentially increase transparency; however there is concern about the impact providing crime and/or sex offender maps has on public perception of the community. Agencies are using a small number of companies to provide maps to the public, but this raises concerns about how well the companies provide the information given to them on the maps.

Further research will be done to understand how the mapping companies work, and the problems that come along with how each website functions. There is little research on how public perception is influenced by using crime and/or sex offender maps, and future studies will focus on what implications providing public access to maps has.