
‘Applying a Criminological Imagination to the Problem of Techno-Solutionism in Policing’

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Introduction

Techno-solutionism in policing relies on technological innovations, such as surveillance systems, predictive policing algorithms, facial recognition, and big data analytics as primary tools to prevent and control crime. These innovations are presented as straightforward solutions to what are complex social issues. In contrast, the concept of the criminological imagination (Young, 2011), inspired by Wright Mills' sociological imagination (1959), encourages us to view crime within its broader social, historical, and structural contexts, rather than as simplistic incidents of individual wrongdoing. Applying this criminological perspective to policing allows a critical examination of techno-solutionism's impact on local communities. While technology may appear efficient and effective, it often overlooks deeper social contributors to crime, such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. This omission highlights how policing premised on techno-solutionism may not only reinforce existing power imbalances and social inequalities but also create new ones. By focusing exclusively on technology, policing risks addressing only a single layer of crime and misses opportunities for more meaningful, long-term interventions and community relationships.

Techno-Solutionism in Policing

Techno-solutionism has increasingly shaped contemporary policing strategies, particularly in pursuit of greater efficiency and effectiveness (see NPCC, 2023). This heavy reliance on technology impacts the structure and delivery of policing. One major consequence is the centralisation of policing efforts, which distances decision-making from the communities being policed. Rooted in positivism and empiricism, techno-solutionism exemplifies Young's (2011) critique of the 'datasaur,' who believes data alone can fully capture social complexities and provide all the answers to societal issues. This model, however, introduces new power dynamics. The constant accumulation, processing, and centralised storage of data give authorities immense power and control, contributing to a modern-day 'panopticon,' where data controllers hold extensive influence over local communities and the policing they receive.

Power Shifts and the New Panopticon

Though technology in policing is often guided by overarching governmental policies and regulatory frameworks, police forces adapt and implement technology in ways that can blur the boundaries of legality and proportionality (see McDaniel & Pease, 2021). This ambiguity can lead to increased surveillance and unregulated policing, particularly in historically over-policed communities or those that feel 'occupied' by law enforcement (Lewis et al., 2011).

Deploying live facial recognition in specific areas, for instance, may represent a new form of digital 'occupation.'

Centralisation and Its Consequences

Technological determinism suggests that technology shapes our social structures and cultural values. As Weber (1978) noted, complex organisations become increasingly governed by formal rules and procedures. In this context, techno-solutionism brings rigid central systems of control, reducing the discretionary power of local agencies. Centralised systems like national databases and predictive algorithms enforce standardised protocols for data entry and analysis, resulting in a homogenised policing approach. A stark move toward greater centralisation in England and Wales has occurred with the introduction of the Orwellian sounding *National Centre for Police Productivity*, hosted by the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council, funded to the tune of £230 million of public money (Home Office, 2024). Although, it remains to be seen if the initiative continues in its proposed guise, under the new Labour government elected in July 2024. Centralisation not only shifts authority away from local police but also diminishes their accountability, since they become mere 'consumers' and 'users' of data products. When distant authorities or opaque algorithms drive decision-making, communities have few, if any opportunities to observe and influence local policing practices, which alienates them from the process, creating a model of 'policing of,' rather than 'policing with' communities.

Impact on Community Policing

As policing increasingly relies on technology, direct interaction between police officers and communities is reduced. Surveillance cameras, drones, and other tools often replace traditional foot patrols and face-to-face engagement, weakening relationships crucial to effective community policing. Officers with local knowledge and insights may be sidelined by central systems that dictate their priorities and tactics. This disconnect can lead communities to experience technology-driven policing as impersonal, intrusive, or unresponsive to their needs. Reduced direct engagement also erodes the trust essential for consensual policing. When communities feel policing is imposed on them rather than conducted with them, cooperation diminishes, undermining public safety since police legitimacy depends on trust and community support.

The Role of the Private Sector

A growing concern is the increasing involvement of private industry in public policing through technology partnerships and provision. Commercial interests facilitate digital occupation, with police agencies increasingly relying on private companies for the tools of techno-solutionism. This collaboration raises crucial questions about accountability and transparency. The profit motives of private companies may conflict with community interests, and the influence these entities wield over policing tools, tactics and strategies complicates efforts to ensure public oversight. Moreover, the commercial sector's role in policing science and technology creates potential for private entities to have considerable power over the development of policing in the longer term. This imbalance further distances consensual policing from local communities, as decisions are made in boardrooms rather than public forums: intensifying concerns about the fairness and legitimacy of techno-solutionism as a panacea for crime in society.

Centralised systems apply a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, often insensitive to cultural diversity. These systems struggle to acknowledge and respond to the varied social, cultural, and economic contexts within and across communities. Consequently, they may unintentionally reinforce existing biases and inequalities, particularly when the datasets they rely on reflect these biases. Without scrutiny, predictive policing algorithms and other technologies can disproportionately impact marginalised groups, exacerbating social inequalities and further eroding public trust in law enforcement.

Towards a Balanced Approach

To counter techno-solutionism's negative consequences, a balanced approach is required. This approach should integrate technological innovations with community-driven policing strategies. Involving community members in decisions about technology development and adoption would help toward addressing local concerns and may provide some acceptability to those most affected, at least allowing communities a greater voice in shaping the future of policing. Police services need the flexibility to interpret data and apply technology sensitively to each community's unique needs. Training and supporting local officers in the technology they use can keep them engaged with their communities, rather than relying solely on centralised systems. This decentralised approach enables technology to complement, not replace, traditional community policing. Policies allowing such local variations in technology use can ensure that policing remains adaptable to community needs. A more balanced approach combining innovative technology with strong and transparent community engagement harnesses the benefits while avoiding the pitfalls of centralisation and an over-reliance on the 'datasaur.'

Concluding comment

Applying a criminological imagination to techno-solutionism in policing, helps us to recognise that crime data reflects not only incidents but social dynamics, challenging the assumption of data neutrality and the biases inherent in current data collection. This approach disrupts the 'techno-solutionist' mindset by promoting community-based interventions over quick-fix solutions and encourages a shift from surveillance and control to concern for community wellness, public trust, and empathy. Ultimately, integrating accountability for data collection and use and wholehearted transparency into data-driven policing, should help to better align policing practices with important social goals and public goods.

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