Digital, Data and Technology-Driven Police Reform, and the Problem of Hyperreality

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Introduction

This commentary piece examines recent developments in UK police reform, in which a digital, data and technology (DDaT) driven approach is being installed as the foundation for organisational transformation (NPCC, 2025). It argues that DDaT-driven policing risks prioritising digital proxies of crime over lived realities. As data and dashboards increasingly become operative, policing will optimise a simulation (what I call '*crimulation'*) that governs deployments, priorities, and accountability, sidelining context, judgment, and democratic scrutiny. The analysis applies Baudrillard's concept of 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard, 1994) to this form of policing: the ways in which digital representations of crime and data-driven methods are not merely tools and applications but actively shape how policing is constructed and executed. The discussion focuses on the implications of this latest strategic shift, particularly how digital 'signs' (*crimulacra*), and a representational system and practices (*crimulation*) come to define and map the 'reality' of policing. Together, these two mechanisms generate a 'hyperreality,' wherein digital constructs supplant and redefine the experience and understanding of crime, public safety, and the functions and practice of policing.

DDaT in Policing

DDaT-driven policing encompasses the systems, personnel, processes, and governance structures that enable the creation, management, security, and use of digital tools and data to support and deliver police services (NPCC, 2025). Within this framework, models, dashboards, and performance metrics shape the definition of effective and efficient policing. While this emphasis offers potential, it also carries risks, particularly when digital representations diverge from or fail to fully reflect the lived experiences and social realities of the communities affected by the predictions and outputs of DDaT tools and applications.

Critically, DDaT-driven policing does not simply add a suite of new tools to face an objective reality; it also shapes and reinforces a particular way of understanding the world. Within this framing, social life and events are recognised only insofar as they can be translated into data, and the future is imagined as a predictable extension of past patterns. As a result, metrics come to define 'truth': whatever the dashboard measures and displays becomes what the organisation knows, acknowledges, and prioritises. The success then of DDaT-driven policing turns on this constructed ontology, a social reality organised as data, which determines what is visible, actionable, and justifiable. Recognising this helps to explain why well-intentioned programmes encounter recurring issues: they excel at optimising within the boundaries of the model but overlook what the model cannot capture. The important questions are not whether DDaT-driven policing is efficient and effective, but rather, *for which version of reality does it*

make sense? In which world does it work? The act of defining that reality is a prerequisite for developing technologies and for how police organisations use them.

DDaT-driven policing is rooted in a distinctly positivist approach, assuming empirical data such as crime statistics, codified surveillance footage, and risk scores represent objective truths. This data-centric orthodoxy is built on a narrow view: crime and disorder as a series of observable, measurable events that, with enough data, can be quantified, categorised, and predicted. From this perspective, data become social reality, and all knowledge about crime or disorder and people is merely reduced to data points. This epistemological orientation also presumes that outputs generated by predictive models, such as the designation of 'high-risk' individuals, public events, or locations, constitute actionable truths. Consequently, algorithmic determinations can prompt operational responses without examination or nuanced understanding of the underlying causal mechanisms or contextual factors that might otherwise inform mere correlations (see Rouvroy, 2020).

DDaT-driven policing is underpinned by a technocratic optimism: the conviction that sophisticated data analytics can resolve fundamentally social problems. This outlook reflects what Morozov (2014) describes as 'technological solutionism', whereby complex societal issues are reimagined as technical dilemmas. In the context of policing, this manifests as an eagerness to pursue and implement new digital tools and applications driven by the belief that more advanced technology will automatically produce better outcomes. At its core, this assumes human behaviour and social dynamics to be made fully legible and controllable through data, provided the 'right' application or algorithm can be found. Such enthusiasm verges on the utopian or even dystopian, a future of 'precision policing' in which resources and services are allocated according to ever larger and 'better' data insights. However, this form of policing lacks context and qualitative depth. Criminologists, sociologists, and police professionals have long recognised that crime and incident statistics offer only a partial view (the so-called 'dark figure' of crime) and that such data are inherently incomplete. As Pearson et al. (2024) report, crime data used in predictive analytics often lack social and contextual grounding, leading to the under-representation of certain crime categories, victims, and offenders. Moreover, in the UK, while the situation may have improved, there is a history of persistent issues with data integrity and completeness (see McDaniel and Pease, 2021), which further complicates reliance on official datasets. Yet the prevailing DDaT approach tends to overlook these nuances, risking skewing priorities toward what can be readily quantified while neglecting less visible forms of harm. There are other wider implications, as Rouvroy (2020) notes, automation in this area diminishes opportunities for critique or democratic oversight: if decisions are driven entirely by correlations, where is the space for questioning or doubt? Consequently, this results in governance without discourse: algorithms operate without explanation or publicly visible reasoning, acting on aggregated data to produce policing outcomes. This technocratic worldview demands trust in the 'machine,' a stance that conflicts with the liberal-democratic principles of transparency and contestation that should underpin our criminal justice system.

Crimulacra* and *Crimulation

Jean Baudrillard observed that we live in a world with 'more and more information, and less and less meaning' (Baudrillard, 1994, pg.79). He is perhaps best known for arguing that late-modern societies are saturated with signs, models, and metrics that no longer reflect reality

so much as produce it. He proposed the idea of 'hyperreality': constructed worlds where dashboards, narratives, and simulations become 'realer than real,' guiding what we see, value, and do, and shaping official practices, structures, budgets, and behaviours until the indicators *become* the reality being managed. In short, the map precedes the terrain.

This commentary piece applies two neologisms, *crimulacra* and *crimulation*, in a style and vocabulary deliberately reminiscent of Baudrillard's terms in his theoretical monograph *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). *Crimulacra* (plural) are the signs of crime and criminality, scores, alerts, visual hotspots, and 'hits,' which circulate as if they were crime and criminality. *Crimulation* (the operating reality made from those crimulacra) follows from those signs, facilitating the 'doing' of policing. In this formulation, *crimulation* is simultaneously a system, a practice, and a method of operation: it uses models, categories, and interfaces to define what can be acted upon; it establishes routines and actions that respond to those definitions; and it forms feedback loops in which each action reinforces and generates data that shape future responses. While these concepts may seem abstract philosophical posturing, they have tangible and significant effects on individuals and society. Referring to *crimulacra* and *crimulation* is not about dismissing DDaT-driven policing as mere fakery; rather, these representations shape very real outcomes and consequences for people and communities.

Police work has always been mediated in some way, but DDaT puts that to work at machine speed and in highly particular ways. As Neocleous (2000) noted, policing does not merely maintain order in society; it reinforces a particular type of order, a tendency intensified by the affordances of DDaT. For example, a police operations room is lit up with representations: hotspots that glow, graphical user interfaces, app icon badges and touch targets, risk assessments and registers, statuses and performance metrics that drive activities and reassure managerial and governance boards. They are more than indicators. These *crimulacra* are operative, wired into the business of police response, tasking, and activities; the *crimulation* at work, reflected in a world it has constructed.

To illustrate further how this plays out, consider the 'data double' of a person: a composite of digital identity, markers, flags, and antecedents that DDaT weaves together. In the queue at a front desk, at the edge of a cordon, or in a police stop and search, it is often this composite that arrives first: the Police National Computer (PNC) markers and antecedents; address and incident histories; safeguarding notes, and biometric hits and records. The living person is measured against their 'data double.' Any divergences, name spellings, address anomalies, a marker, a record entered in error or one that should have been spent or expunged, appear as anomalies. The *crimulacra* stand in for the person, and the physical person must explain themselves to the *crimulation*.

Now shift the lens to place. 'Problem neighbourhoods' consist of, *inter alia*, hotspots derived from crime reports and incident logs, police stop-and-search returns, intelligence reports and assessments, call volumes, gang matrices, and social deprivation indices. The created interactive map (albeit a filtered, selective one) looks like the actual terrain, but not only does it describe; it *does work*, because patrols are scheduled, surveillance directed, attention rationed accordingly, partnerships convened or not, according to the hues of RGB, pop-ups and tooltips on a screen. Because recorded crime and incidents are also functions of patrol presence and reporting habits and rules, the places most read by this 'map' contribute more data that validate its next iteration. This *crimulation* becomes locked in a loop: collect, record,

represent, predict, deploy, encounter, then collect, record, represent, predict, deploy, encounter *ad infinitum.*

Conclusion

To summarise, DDaT-driven policing encounters the problem of 'hyperreality.' The *crimulation* created by *crimulacra* achieves primacy, but it is not a precise copy of social reality, merely a version of it. DDaT, as advanced within current reforms, rests on the surface appeal of objectivity, suggesting that data will form the most reliable foundation for shaping the future of policing. However, as demonstrated, this premise is fraught with ontological and epistemological inconsistencies. DDaT-driven policing presupposes a reality that is fully quantifiable and assumes a specific kind of police knowledge, yet these assumptions often fail under empirical and critical investigation. The dominant worldview behind DDaT-driven policing prioritises administrative efficiency and predictability, frequently at the expense of the complex and unpredictable realities inherent in street crime and everyday police work. Furthermore, despite good intentions, much of what is labelled as 'responsible and ethical' AI and technology perhaps functions less as a genuine check on power and more as an aesthetic: multiplying legislations, frameworks, policies, playbooks, toolkits, and guidelines that give the appearance of oversight and governance. Such measures may offer comfort as symbols of reassurance, while inadvertently contributing to the very simulation they are meant to disrupt and restrain.

The takeaway message is that DDaT-driven policing may provide *a solution*, but for the self-referential world it constructs, treating that construction as a precise rendering of the external world. It may deliver *efficiency*, but chiefly for that constructed world, not necessarily the diverse social realities in which communities live.

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