# Can AI make policing safer without risking rights?



The debate over artificial intelligence in policing is moving swiftly from science fiction to real-world policy. In the UK and North America, the appeal is clear: use data and machine learning to make communities safer. But researchers, civil-liberties advocates and police leaders agree—such tools must be governed transparently, evaluated rigorously and built around public trust.

At the centre of the debate is a taxonomy of predictive policing methods that separate hype from practical application. RAND’s landmark research defines predictive policing as the use of analytics to identify potential crime locations, offenders and victims. These tools, RAND stresses, are not crystal balls. Their value depends on data quality, how predictions are interpreted and the actions they trigger.

RAND outlines four main approaches: geospatial hot-spot mapping, crime type forecasting, individual risk assessment and victim-focused prediction. These methods align with a four-step operational cycle: collect and analyse data, generate predictions, carry out interventions and assess effects. Success hinges on top-level support, adequate resources and clear governance. Crucially, predictive policing must be viewed as decision support—not a replacement for sound policing or community engagement.

Yet the risks are real. Chicago’s Strategic Subject List (SSL) offers a cautionary case. Designed to predict who might be involved in gun violence, it relied heavily on arrest records and other enforcement data—leading to accusations that it reinforced racial bias and lacked transparency. An ACLU representative described it as “government decision-making turned over to an algorithm without any transparency about it.” RAND’s evaluation found that placement on the SSL did not reduce violence and in some cases increased the risk of arrest. The research underscored that how tools are implemented and governed matters as much as the technology itself.

Legal scrutiny in the US has been sharp. Analysts have raised concerns over potential violations of constitutional protections and civil rights. The University of Chicago Legal Forum argued that the SSL’s lack of transparency and procedural safeguards risks unfair targeting and discriminatory impact.

This is where the UK could lead. Rather than replicating flawed models, UK policymakers can set a global benchmark by embedding four key safeguards: independent bias audits, transparency laws, community oversight and strict limits on when and where predictive tools are used.

Lessons from global experience point to practical steps: – **Independent audits and transparency:** RAND warns that poor data and hidden processes erode trust. Open reporting—balanced with privacy—can help communities understand how these tools work. – **Clear governance and safeguards:** UK pilots should be designed with explicit rules, external reviews and real-time monitoring. RAND’s studies show that predictive tools are only effective when embedded in accountable systems. – **Public trust as a design goal:** Chicago’s experience shows that perceived secrecy undermines legitimacy. UK frameworks should prioritise transparency, human oversight and recourse. – **Rigorous evaluation:** Any deployment must be continuously assessed for outcomes, accuracy and unintended effects. Public dashboards and independent reviews can help ensure accountability.

Looking ahead, the UK has the opportunity to build a predictive policing framework that works—one that supports safer communities while protecting civil liberties. RAND’s structure of method categories and operational steps offers a ready template. With strong governance, community input and transparent oversight, AI can be an asset rather than a liability.

Predictive policing is not doomed to bias or failure. But if deployed without safeguards, it risks repeating the same mistakes seen abroad. The UK now stands at a crossroads. By embedding trust and transparency into every layer of design and oversight, it can show how technology and rights can advance together—turning a controversial tool into a legitimate asset for public safety.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.criminologypost.com/post/predicted-guilty-how-ai-could-reshape-policing-and-the-justice-system> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR233.html> - Predictive policing uses analytical techniques to identify promising targets for police intervention with aim of preventing crime, solving past crimes, and identifying potential offenders and victims. It is not a crystal ball; results depend on data quality and interpretation. The RAND report outlines four primary categories of methods and stresses that visible benefits require proper operational interventions, governance and resources. It highlights data limitations such as censoring, bias, and irrelevance, and warns of civil liberties concerns including privacy and rights. The paper also emphasises the need for audits, community engagement, and transparency to mitigate risks while realising potential gains globally.
3. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9735.html> - Predictive policing, in RAND’s summary, is the application of analytical techniques to identify promising targets for police intervention with aims of reducing crime or solving past incidents. The report outlines a four-stage cycle: collect and analyse data, generate predictions, carry out interventions, and assess effects. It stresses that predictions depend on data quality, including censoring, bias, and irrelevance, and warns that misinterpretation may undermine outcomes. The authors argue that effectiveness hinges on leadership support, adequate resources, automated information flows, and accountable personnel. Civil rights considerations, privacy, and ongoing evaluation are essential, alongside community engagement and transparent governance for public trust.
4. <https://time.com/4966125/police-departments-algorithms-chicago/> - Time magazine reports that Chicago police use a numeric threat score, ranging 1–500, derived from arrests, age, victimisation, and patterns of activity, to guide policing strategies and resource deployment. The measure appears on dashboards, informing decisions about stops, surveillance, and outreach. The article notes the system dates back several years, remains secret and publicly unaccountable, raising concerns about fairness, bias, and due process. Critics point to data inputs shaped by policing practices and to the absence of independent auditing. The piece frames this as part of a broader shift toward data‑driven policing with unresolved civil‑liberties implications for communities across America.
5. <https://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/august-2017/chicago-police-strategic-subject-list/> - Chicago Magazine investigates the Strategic Subjects List (SSL), a predictive tool used by CPD to identify individuals at risk of violence. The piece highlights secrecy around the list, discrepancies between official statements and practice, and the tension between intervention and enforcement. It details how SSL scores influenced police actions, including arrests and targeted outreach, while CPD cites the tool as social‑service oriented. The article also covers the limited independent evaluation and concerns about racial disparities and the accuracy of inputs based on arrests rather than convictions. It calls for transparency and constitutional safeguards to protect rights and rebuild distrust nationwide.
6. <https://legal-forum.uchicago.edu/print-archive/constraining-big-brother-legal-deficiencies-surrounding-chicagos-use-strategic> - Constraining Big Brother examines constitutional and statutory concerns about Chicago's SSL. The essay argues the list raises red flags regarding over-inclusion, racial disparities, and potential discriminatory effects under civil rights law. It discusses transparency gaps, the absence of publicly available algorithms, and possible misuses for enforcement beyond its stated social-services aim. The analysis notes that the CPD’s practice could implicate the Illinois Civil Rights Act, creating disparate impact claims even without intent. It stresses the need for checks, balances, and robust constitutional safeguards, including public auditing, independent oversight, and clear limits on when risk scores can influence policing and accountability.
7. <https://www.wired.com/story/doj-predictive-policing-lawmakers-demand/> - U.S. Congress has pressed the Department of Justice to stop funding predictive policing tools, arguing that grants may finance discriminatory practices and biased data. Seven lawmakers sent a letter warning that inputs from historical crime data risk reproducing harmful policing patterns and racial disparities. They urge an assessment of accuracy and rights implications and demand evidence standards before continued funding. The article cites independent investigations questioning the reliability of such tools, and advocates for transparency, oversight, and clear prohibition on discriminatory use. It frames accountability as essential to ensure civil rights are protected across all jurisdictions and times in practice.