

Open Data, the Criminal Justice System, and the Police Data Initiative

Public calls for data and transparency about police actions have increased in light of widely publicized incidents and patterns of police violence. Opening more data to the public about police actions is one reform recommended by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. It also has become a key component of the Police Data Initiative (PDI), a pilot program launched by President Obama in May 2015 that brings together federal government agencies, local police departments, community organizers, and industry stakeholders to increase transparency in policing and improve trust between communities and police departments. As of fall 2015, 26 police departments, a tiny fraction of the 18,000 state and local law enforcement agencies operating across the country, have signed on to participate in the PDI by pledging to release more than 100 previously unshared data sets on police-citizen interactions.

- Open data is digital information that is machine-readable and made freely available to the public in a manner amenable to reuse, modification, and sharing for any purpose.
- Advocates call for more releases of data on use of force, police pedestrian and vehicle stops, officer-involved shootings, and more. While obtaining data on use of force and officer-involved shootings is the expressed goal of the PDI, very little has been released so far.
- The lack of open data on police violence and deaths in custody is not necessarily due to a lack of openness and transparency, but due to a lack of data collection. Though many laws and programs have been instituted in the past to report data to federal agencies, most of these programs have been voluntary, leading to significant reporting gaps and inconsistencies in the data being provided by local police departments and state agencies.
- A growing ecosystem of third-party intermediaries, including businesses, nonprofits, and news agencies are making use of open criminal justice data, investing time, money, and resources into processing data before use, prepping data through cleaning, standardizing and organizing, and linking and aggregating different data sets together.
- To encourage such reuse, data should be machine-readable and structured for interoperability. Most data currently available requires significant investments of time and human resources to render useful.

Critical Questions

- What are the barriers that currently exist to greater open police data?
- How can open data programs serve social justice concerns? Do open data programs raise privacy concerns?
- How can we ensure that communities most affected by policing will benefit from open criminal justice data?
- How should we balance the increasing pressure to restrict non-police data like citizen video alongside pushes for greater transparency in policing?
- Without centralized, mandatory disclosure of particular criminal justice data, how can we incentivize police departments to release high quality data voluntarily and consistently?
- How can we facilitate the collection and release of data on sensitive issues – such as use of force – across police departments? How can we coordinate these datasets between all 18,000 police departments?