Earlier in November, Mayor Bill De Blasio announced that NYPD Commissioner, James O’Neill, would retire after having supported community policing initiatives contributing to the lowest violent crime and murder rates in the city since the 1950s. Replacing him is Dermot Shea, who instead privileges the use of artificial intelligence and big data in policing, based on algorithms determining where or when a crime might occur in a targeted neighborhood, rather than who has committed a crime based on the forensic evidence. Joining NYC are a growing number of cities in the US and worldwide investing in predictive policing software and gunshot detection systems for use in neighborhoods with high crime rates. This includes the city of Columbia, South Carolina, where I have conducted ethnographic research on verbal and non-verbal escalation and de-escalation in police-civilian interactions. The shift from preventive community policing to big data predictive policing highlights key differences in types of evidence, practices of oversight, models of individual and group behavior, and criteria for evaluating policing effectiveness. On the one hand, community policing valorizes frequent and face-to-face interactions between residents and a team of police officers assigned to a high-crime neighborhood. Studies suggest that familiar police-civilian relations prevent crimes in the long term, although this assessment has been hard to quantify. Community policing’s effectiveness is instead measured in terms of improvements in the quality of life of mid-sized cities such as Columbia and large cities such as New York. On the other hand, big data policing relying on the use of algorithms privileges the decontextualized knowledge of corporate technocrats working for private companies such as PredPol, CrimeScan, and ShotSpotter. Their analyses generate proxy indicators of future crimes in the case of predictive policing, or possible ongoing crimes by gunshot detection systems. In Columbia, where I have observed
police decision-making in response to gunshot detection systems, officers may arrest residents with prior criminal records for being in proximity to the projected crime scene. No independent studies have confirmed any statistical correlation between arrest rates and convictions involving big data. Instead, criminal justice scholars and civil rights groups have argued that inputting big data based on crime rates localizable to racial minority neighborhoods generate feedback loops perpetuating the permanent patrolling of these neighborhoods, especially when expensive acoustic monitors are installed. The lack of government oversight in the corporate analysis of indicators and the protection of algorithms by intellectual property law exacerbate the judicial system’s inability to adjudicate the ethical problems presented by big data. These issues underscore the need for ethnographic research that assesses AI’s impact on community policing across diverse contexts.

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