



**Crime Mapping and  
Data Confidentiality Roundtable  
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***Should Professional Standards or Guidelines be Developed for Crime Mapping as it  
Pertains to Privacy and Freedom of Information Issues? If So, What Should These  
Standards Look Like and Who Should Promote Them?***

by

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First, I would like to clarify the two terms - standards and guidelines. I believe the intent of this discussion is to use them interchangeably. I would like to put that issue on the table first - are we setting guidelines to promote and encourage the distribution of crime-related maps to the public? Or, are we saying, if criminal justice agencies make crime-related data and maps available to the public, such as on the Internet, will they be required to do so in a uniformed manner? I think there is some truth and some misperception about the Federal government's past experience with issuing "standards."

Some standards, such as UCR and NIBRS reporting, are requirements while others are considered more recommended guidelines. I know of very few local law enforcement agencies who like to be told what to do by the federal government. On the other hand, many, especially those getting started in this new field of Internet crime mapping would like some assistance with what to do, how to do it, and what to expect.

In thinking about and planning for this paper and meeting, I discussed the issue with a variety of colleagues. I eventually came to the determination that I was not going to be able to strongly take one side or the other. With that disclaimer out of the way, we can move on and examine both the advantages and disadvantages of standards or guidelines.

Some reasons for standards:

People new to Internet crime mapping (and other means of public distribution) can have a guide as to where to begin, how to do it and what to expect

Guidelines could help with keeping outdated, inaccurate, or difficult to interpret maps from being distributed

Analysts/agencies could use guidelines to convince reluctant or even opposing managers and politicians that it is a "standard" practice

The public (including researchers) would be better able to compare maps and data

across jurisdictions

“Official” (i.e. government produced or at least coordinated) guidelines would allow the data and maps (and in turn the agencies) to better stand up to public and legal scrutiny

Some reasons against standards:

States have differing privacy laws that would affect the type of data being released

Every agency is unique and should be able to do what they want, how they want to do it

Communities have different expectations and needs of data and maps depending on how involved they are with their local law enforcement agency

Standards could stem creativity and innovation by analysts and agencies (and we wouldn't want that!)

Standards could be used as an excuse by agencies as a reason not to put crime maps on the Internet because they might have to do extra work or go out of their way to fulfill the standards

Before answering the second question about what would the standards look like and who would promote them, I think we need to first ask who would create them. To start, we would anticipate needing standards to cover the fields of geography, cartography, criminal justice, and the Internet. If that is the case, we would need representatives from all of those fields to be involved. Let's select the criminal justice field as an example (since that is my primary experience); you can break the needs down further between law enforcement, courts and corrections as well as geographically (the northeast does things differently than the west), by size, urban versus rural, and mission (if you want to get picky). I included the last point because a true community policing agency is going to have a different view of what and how maps and data should be distributed than a traditional, “we police you” mentality. And even within each agency, an analyst, an officer and a commander may all have different interpretations of the Chief's and agency's perspective. Finally, you would want the ACLU involved to respond to the privacy rights issues.

So do we give up on creating guidelines because the process is anticipated to be rather difficult? I hope not. If standards or guidelines are to be created, I believe that an agency such as the Crime Mapping Research Center is in an excellent place to guide the process. The CMRC is nationally and internationally recognized, has a wide variety of knowledge and resources, and has already been in the position of locals looking to them for assistance. As for what the standards should look like, there is not room in this short paper or discussion to go into detail. Standards should be wide-ranging and cover all the different fields mentioned above. Some of the issues that would need to be handled within the guidelines include: accuracy of data; types of crime and relational (non-crime) data; point versus aggregate mapping; geocoding and address portrayal (exact versus mid block or intersection); timeliness of updates; interactive versus static mapping; disclaimers and definitions for interpretation; cartographic principles (such as symbology, scale and vicinity map); victim rights; freedom of information; and agency liability.

This paper and discussion only touches on some of the many points surrounding this issue. Law enforcement already has a variety of laws and policies regarding the distribution of information. It is easy to say that the same legal and ethical guidelines for giving out existing police information should apply to mapping as well. On the other hand, one can also say that crime maps bring in new factors that might necessitate new guidelines. The idea of one individual making the effort and paying a fee to obtain one police report should be considered differently than the mass public easily accessing large amounts of crime data. In summary, I believe that there is a role for guidelines – helpful, standardized, recommended directions. But actually having formalized, required national standards is unnecessary.