TITLE:

Predictive policing through crime risk assessment: the case of Italy

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Abstract

In the face of concerns over safety in urban areas, predictive policing algorithms have been presented as an innovative, efficient and scientific solution to prevent crime by assessing risks. Even today, three decades after their appearance, their performance and their efficiency in terms of economic cost reduction are the main issues under discussion. However, as many social scientists have long warned, predictive algorithms are much more than mere technical and instrumental innovations. They must be recognized both as artifacts and as generative processes that interact in complex ways with surrounding social systems. Predictive policing tools are thus sociotechnical objects which, as such, exhibit their double nature by structuring that social world by which they themselves are modeled. They constitute a codification of a social way of life that they contribute to reproduce, by guiding human decisions and reifying practices and visions of the world.

Against this background, this paper discusses the results of a research on two predictive tools developed in Italy in the last few years: KeyCrime and XLaw. Through the analysis of available documents (media articles and interviews, implementation briefs, websites, promotional materials, etc.) and in-depth interviews to the actors who created and developed the two models, we reconstruct their genesis and their implementation process.

While a proper impact evaluation of predictive policing in the Italian context goes far beyond this study, our aim is to unveil the visions on urban safety and crime prevention that inform and sustain these models. We will argue that such artifacts may be better understood as a part of a broader trend towards actuarial risk assessment, leading to a new penal logic and a culture of control and surveillance. But also, we claim that social science research should more actively engage in prying open the black-boxes that govern algorithms and our lives in the cities.