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Policing, criminal intelligence, and crime science

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It's time for Compstat to change



If we are to promote more thoughtful and evidence-based policing, then Compstat has to change. The Compstat-type crime management meeting has its origins in Bill Bratton's need to extract greater accountability from NYPD precinct commanders in late 1990s New York. It was definitely innovative for policing at the time, and instigated many initiatives that are hugely beneficial to modern policing (such as the growth of crime mapping). And arguably it has been successful in promoting greater reflexivity from middle managers; however these days the flaws are increasingly apparent.

Over my years of watching Compstat-type meetings in a number of departments, I've observed everyone settle into their Compstat role relatively comfortably. Well almost. The mid-level local area commander who has to field questions is often a little uneasy, but these days few careers are destroyed in Compstat. A little preparation, some confidence, and a handful of quick statistics or case details to bullshit through the tough parts will all see a shrewd commander escape unscathed.

In turn, the executives know their role. They stare intently at the map, ask about a crime hot spot or two, perhaps interrogate a little on a case just to check the commander has some specifics on hand, and then volunteer thoughts on a strategy the commander should try—just to demonstrate their experience. It's an easy role because it doesn't require any preparation. In turn, the area commander pledges to increase patrols in the neighborhood and everyone commits to reviewing progress next month, safe in the knowledge that little review will actually take place because by then new dots will have appeared on the map to

absorb everyone's attention. It's a one-trick pony and everyone is comfortable with the trick.

There are some glaring problems with Compstat. The first is that the analysis is weak and often just based on a map of dots or, if the department is adventurous, crime hot spots. Unfortunately, a map of crime hot spots should be the start of an analysis, not the conclusion. It's great for telling us *what* is going on, but this sort of map can't really tell us *why*. We need more information and intelligence to get to why. And why is vital if we are to implement a successful crime reduction strategy.

We never get beyond this basic map because of the second problem: the frequent push to make an operational decision immediately. When command staff have to magic up a response on the spot, the result is often a superficial operational choice. Nobody wants to appear indecisive, but with crime control it can be disastrous. Too few commanders ever request more time to do more analysis, or time to consider the evidence base for their operational strategies. It's as if asking to think more about a complex problem would be seen as weak or too 'clever'. I concede that tackling an emerging crime spike might be valuable (though they often regress to the mean, or as Sir Francis Galton called it in 1886, [regression towards mediocrity](#)). Many Compstat issues however, revolve around chronic, long-term problems where a few days isn't going to make much difference. We should adopt the attitude that it's better to have a thoughtfully considered successful strategy next week than a failing one this week.

Because of the pressure to miracle a working strategy out of thin air, area commanders usually default to a limited set of standard approaches, saturation patrol with uniform resources being the one that I see at least 90 percent of the time. And it's applied to everything, regardless of whether there is any likelihood that it will impact the problem. It is suggested by executives and embraced by local area commanders because it is how we've always escaped from Compstat. Few question saturation patrols, there is some evidence it works in the short term, and it's a non-threatening traditional policing approach that everyone understands. Saturation patrol is like a favorite winter coat, except that we like to wear it all year round.

Third, in the absence of a more thoughtful and evidence-based process, too many decisions and views lack any evidential support and instead are driven by personal views. There is a scene in the movie *Moneyball* where all the old baseball scouts are giving their thoughts on which players the team should buy, based only on the scouts' experience, opinion and personal judgment. They ignore the nerd in the corner who has real data and figures ... and some insight. [They even question if he has to be in the room](#). In the movie, the data analyst is disparaged, even though he doesn't bring an opinion or intuition to the table. He brings data analysis, and the data don't care how long you have been in the business.

Too many Compstat meetings are reminiscent of this scene. The centerpiece of many Compstat meetings is a map of crime that many are viewing for the first time. A room full of people wax lyrical on the crime problem based on their intuitive interpretation of a map of crime on the wall, and then they promote solutions for our beleaguered commander, based too often on opinion and personal judgement and too little on knowledge of the supporting evidence of the tactic's effectiveness. Because everyone knows they have to come back in a month the strategies are inevitably short-term in nature and never evaluated. And without being evaluated, they are never discredited, so they become the go-to tactical choice *ad infinitum*.

So the problems with Compstat are weak analysis, rushed decision-making, and opinion-driven strategies. What might the solutions be?

The U.K.'s [National Intelligence Model](#) is a good starting point for consideration. It has a strategic and a tactical cycle. The strategic meeting attendees determine the main strategic aims and goals for the district. At a recent meeting a senior commander told me "We are usually too busy putting out fires to care about who is throwing matches around." Any process that has some strategic direction to focus the tactical day-to-day management of a district has the capacity to keep at least one eye on the match thrower. A monthly meeting, focused on chronic district problems, can generate two or three strategic priorities.

A more regular tactical meeting is then tasked with implementing these strategic priorities. This might be a weekly meeting that can both deal with the dramas of the day as well as supervise implementation of the goals set at the strategic meeting. It is important that the tactical meeting should spend some time on the implementation of the larger strategic goals. In this way, the strategic goals are not subsumed by day-to-day dramas that often comprise the tyranny of the moment. And the tactical meeting shouldn't set strategic goals—that is the role of the strategic working group.

[I've previously written](#) that Compstat has become a game of "whack-a-mole" policing with no long-term value. Dots appear, and we move the troops to the dots to try and quell the problem. Next month new dots appear somewhere else, and we do the whole thing all over again. If we don't retain a strategic eye on long-term goals, it's not effective policing. It's Groundhog Day policing.