

The Ten Commandments of Crime Analysis

What are the most fundamental principles of the crime analysis profession? What are the lines that a good crime analyst does not cross?

The Ten Commandments—first written for a presentation given by one MACA member to the IACA in 1999—attempt to identify a set of precepts and guidelines for an analyst’s daily work. They derive from interviews with about a dozen American analysts in which the author sought to understand how analysts viewed themselves, their jobs, and their priorities.

As with all rules, analysts may find good excuses for breaking the Ten Commandments, but such transgressions should only be committed after careful consideration.

I. Thy Task is Crime Analysis. Thou Shalt Have No Other Tasks Before It.

Crime analysts can become technological wizards in relatively short time, given the number of computer applications vital to modern crime analysis. This computer proficiency makes a mark on the other members of the analyst’s department, and the analyst eventually finds himself mired in requests to develop a database for the Internal Affairs Unit, to install a new computer in the Traffic Office, and to help an investigator design a flyer for an upcoming housewarming party!

Sometimes, the crime analysis unit simply develops a “reputation for competence,” so that whenever anything important needs doing, the command staff tends to “give it to Crime Analysis.”

The definition of crime analysis has expanded to encompass something more than just the daily analysis of patterns and trends, and many of the tasks brought to an analyst’s desk may legitimately help the police department, but identification and analysis of crime phenomena should be the analyst’s top priority. Neglecting this daily analysis to concentrate on other matters means that patterns of crime go overlooked—and, thus, unaddressed. An analyst should accommodate his department’s needs as best he can, but pattern and trend analysis should remain his top priorities—every day.

II. Thou Shalt Read Thy Agency’s Crime Reports Each Day.

You may have developed sophisticated data mining techniques. Perhaps your Records Management System is the most advanced in the land. Maybe you’ve poured hours into SQL queries that identify potential patterns with a few clicks of the mouse.

You still need to read the crime reports. If you think you don’t have enough time, then either you’re not following the First Commandment, or your agency doesn’t have enough analysts.

Analysts read crime reports for the same reason that archaeologists dig with trowels instead of backhoes: the important things are in the details. Scoop up a bunch of reports with an RMS and you’re liable to miss something vital—some little detail or twist that lets you say, “aha!” and make a connection with some other incident. Reading a narrative imprints the report in your mind, so that when you read a related report—a week, a month, perhaps even a year from now—you’ll remember instantly. No data mining tool works faster than the instant connections made by a good analyst’s neurons.

New analysts need to read crime reports to get an essence of what types of crimes occur in their jurisdictions. Reports also give you a taste for police jargon and terminology.

Most important, though: there's a good chance that you work for an agency that *doesn't* have a good records management process, and if you're like most analysts, you *don't* know sophisticated data mining techniques. If data quality in your system is bad, if your Records Unit is chronically three weeks behind, or if your RMS doesn't capture important information—such as detailed *modus operandi* factors—the physical crime report becomes your *only* source of good, current, accurate information.

III. Thou Shalt Take Responsibility for Thine Own Data.

Crime analysis depends on data—specifically, on timely, accurate, complete data. If you're like 90 percent of analysts, you won't have it on your first day of work. Consequently, good analysis will be impossible because your efforts will be polluted by bad data.

Timely, accurate, and complete—if your data lacks one or more of these qualities, don't whine. Don't "make do." Take charge. Take responsibility. Take the time to develop your *own* data system that meets the needs of a good crime analysis process.

In the best cases, you can link to your agency's RMS or CAD data and work with it with few modifications; in the worst cases, you'll have to design your own database and input information yourself. Either way, it's worth it: timely, accurate, complete data is the foundation on which good crime analysis stands.

IV. Honor Thine Patrol Officers and Investigators.

Crime analysis exists to provide information to make patrol officers and investigators more effective at their jobs. You want them to use the information you offer. They are the primary beneficiaries of your efforts. You also want them to give you intelligence and feedback to make your work more valuable.

These goals require that you develop a certain level of trust with the line officers. (Sworn analysts generally have an easier time in this area than civilian analysts, but not always.) You can develop this trust by:

- Humbling yourself and making it clear that you serve the needs of the officers, not the other way around;
- Interacting with officers on a regular basis, asking intelligent questions, and expressing interest in the intricacies of their jobs;
- Staying out of departmental politics;
- Distancing yourself from any perception that you serve the department's administrators—particularly despised ones—and that your work will be used against the officers.

Crime analysis is most effective when line officers—not administrators—feel positively about it. Analysts that are aloof and hostile to their line officers invariably fail to be effective.

V. Thou Shalt Never Present Statistics (or Maps) by Themselves.

"There are lies, damned lies, and statistics" is a quote variously attributed to Samuel Clemens, Winston Churchill, Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx, and Theodore Roosevelt. In many cases, it is true. Statistics presented alone—with no interpretation, comparison, or context, are like nuclear power: they can be used for good or evil.

Take a look at your job title. You are an *analyst*, not a statistician. You do not present raw data; you interpret data and turn it into analysis. You use data to answer the questions of who, what, when,

where, how, and why. That there were 25 robberies in your city last year and 55 this year is data. That these robberies were concentrated around a new shopping mall, that most of them were unarmed, that they primarily occur on weekends between 20:00 and 02:00, that the victims are usually juveniles, and that most of the offenders are commuting from a nearby metropolis on a subway is all analysis—your department and your community can use this information to prevent further incidents.

Like raw numbers, crime maps—whether pin maps or thematic maps—are usually just data—though it has been rearranged, geocoded, and printed in color.

Always accompany statistics and maps with some paragraphs of qualitative, textual analysis that puts the data in context and explains what it all means.

VI. Thou Shalt Know Thy Jurisdiction from One End Unto the Other.

Crime does not exist in a vacuum. It is inextricably intertwined with the other characteristics of your jurisdiction—its economics, sociology, politics, geography, topography, physical development, demographics, business characteristics, institutions, climate, and several dozen other factors, from the obvious to the obscure. When you take a job as a crime analyst, you must strive to understand all of these factors—to understand, in short, what makes crime and disorder tick in your city or town.

Officers who become analysts begin with this benefit. Having worked the very streets they now analyze, they already have their finger on the pulse of the crime dynamic. New civilian analysts must make learning their jurisdictions their first priority.

Your learning will start with geography: where are the major commercial centers, the residential areas, the slums, the mansions, the shopping malls, the vacant buildings, the major thoroughfares, the parks, the public housing projects, the shelters, the schools, the liquor stores, and the restaurants? What paths do people take when they commute? Where do the kids hang out after school? In short, where do people live, work, and play in your town?

Your quest for knowledge should take you to demographic tables, real estate listings, job postings, local newspapers, community bulletin boards, employers' web sites, and assessor's databases. Shop in the malls, dine at the restaurants, visit the schools, attend city council meetings, ride along with your officers, and spend an occasional Friday night in a mosh pit. Become a part of your jurisdiction—study it until you know instinctively what causes certain patterns and trends. Your knowledge will allow you to help your department understand and craft solutions to crime problems, and your effectiveness will benefit greatly from your efforts.

VII. Thou Shalt Not Stop Crime Analysis at Thy Jurisdiction's Borders.

Criminals don't care about borders; only police departments do. This statement has become an axiom among police agencies. Many crimes lend themselves easily to cross-jurisdictional patterns and trends—commercial robbery, auto theft, and fraud are among the most common. But recognition of these facts has not led to the development of very many meaningful cross-jurisdictional information-sharing programs. In many ways, America's 18,000 police agencies (and this is a problem fairly unique to the United States of America—other nations undoubtedly laugh at our inefficiency) are as isolated as they've ever been.

Whether the barriers to information sharing are technological or political, do your best to break them down. Maybe you don't have a multi-jurisdictional database in which you pool your crime reports, but that shouldn't stop you from calling your counterparts in your neighboring cities once or twice a week to compare notes. Don't overlook notices from the NLETS teletype system, and don't discount local newspapers as sources of information on cross-jurisdictional crime patterns. You may not catch

everything, but until you have a true multi-jurisdictional information-sharing network, do the best you can.

VIII. Thou Shalt Focus Equal Attention on the Six Ws

Who?	Offenders, victims/targets
What?	Type of crime, type of property
When?	Time, day of week, month, year
Where?	Geographic location, environment
How? ¹	<i>Modus Operandi</i>
Why?	Cause, motivation

These are the six questions that reporters ask about every story, and they are the six questions that crime analysts must ask about every pattern, trend, series, hot spot, or other phenomenon that they analyze.

GIS technology has given us the ability to focus an enormous amount of time on the question of *where*, and to answer it with vivid, colorful, complex visual aids printed on 36" x 44" paper. That doesn't mean that this question is necessarily more important than the others, though. Your analysis needs to include *all* of these factors, or it's not complete.

IX. Remember Thy Community, and Keep it Holy

Ultimately, a crime analyst works not for his immediate supervisor, nor his division commander, nor his chief, nor the mayor or city manager—the crime analyst works for the safety and quality of life of the people who live, work, and play in his city or town. A crime analyst should try to keep their best interests in mind.

This commandment takes on three facets:

1. **Prioritize** your activities so that those most likely to have a positive impact on the safety and quality of life of your community (whether through effective patrol operations, successful investigation, intelligent crime prevent, or some other intermediate means) come first.
2. **Prove as much information** to your community as you can without compromising the privacy or safety of a victim or witness, and without thwarting an ongoing investigation. If your department has restrictive policies on providing information, work to change them.
3. **Remember** that, though you may not be able to see the direct impact of your work, there *is* an impact. No one ever comes to the police department to report that they were *not* victimized, but certainly dozens—perhaps hundreds—of people have avoided victimization because of your work.

X. Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Neural Network

If you're a new crime analyst, sooner or later you're going to attend a regional or national conference on crime analysis, where you'll here phrases like this:

"Our department is developing a neural network."

"But the scope of the problem became much more complex once I aggressively mined the data."

"It took me two hours to properly register that raster image."

"My RMS is a SQL database with a VB application."

¹Don't nitpick.

You'll question whether you belong in this profession—you don't even know what these terms *mean*.

Stop the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority before they start. 80% of the benefit of crime analysis is achieved through the basic tasks of reading police reports, scanning, looking for patterns and trends, analyzing them for the six Ws, and disseminating information to your department. Through the years, analysts without computers have still performed this work brilliantly.

Certainly, there are technologies worth pursuing. A good 21st century analyst needs to know how to use a computerized GIS program, and many facets of crime analysis are near-impossible without the ability to query and manipulate large data sets. We're not giving analysts an excuse to be technophobes—we're just saying that the difference between an adequate crime analyst and an excellent crime analyst is *within* the analyst, not on his or her desk.