— Neuroscience, Law and the Brain – ch. 4

Transcription of the interview with David Eagleman[1]

4. The Criminal Record Database (CDR)

About the Criminal Records Database (CRD) for large-scale analysis of policy and behavior, developed by Professor Eagleman and his team from the Center for Science and Law, Houston, TX, USA.

One of the things I'm very excited about is we have collected tens of millions of crime records from all around the United States. Now the way we did this, this has taken us five years of work now to do this, but the way we did it is we used what's called the Freedom of information Act, which is a law that was passed some years ago that says look public crime is public record, so you should be able to access it.

So we called up counties and states all over the place and said we would like all of your prison records, all of your crime records. And they all had excuses and they said well you're gonna have to pay for the database program or style work so we did, we paid for all that stuff, we finally got the records from every different place that we got 'em, it's in a totally different format, just a database, tables dumped and so on.

So what we've did, the reason we've taken five years on this, is because we have a team of lawyers and computer programmers, and we took all of that, translated it into a common currency, both in terms of the computer using it, but also in terms of 30 general crime categories and 150 specific crime categories.

So what this has allowed us to do is have records from all over the United States where we can say look we wanna know about a particular type of crime, let's say murder or rape or computer crimes or whatever. We wanna be able to look at that across the States from 1977 to present. '77 is essentially when the first database has got started, when all this stuff got computerized.

So this is why we have these millions and millions of records. The point is so that we can asses the efficacy of different pieces of legislation for starters. We can say look, in 1989 this rule was passed, this law was passed. Did that drive crime down in that category or did it drive it up or did it have no effect or did it shift crime into a different category? It allows us, for the first time, to be able to really quantify which laws make sense, the reason being that so many laws are passed in a moment of emotion, some terrible crime happens, usually against a child, and there's a big push to pass some crime, usually the new law gets the child's name attached to it.

> **"And the question is, is it actually a good law? And sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't, but it's hard to know that. So this gives us the tools to be able to do it"**

What we have done is set this up with a public interface so that anybody can access this and look at these tens of millions of crime records in a very easy way so that reporters can look at this easily, lawmakers can look at this, academics can look at this. Everyone has access to the same data, you can plot it any which way you want just by clicking. It's super easy. And what that allows us to do is take all these records that were essentially hidden away from the public and expose it to the light.

> **"And that means that when laws get passed from now on, it'll be based on data instead of based on whatever the local emotions are of the moment"**