AUTOMATING INEQUALITY

HOW HIGH-TECH TOOLS PROFILE, POLICE AND PUNISH THE POOR

VIRGINIA EUBANKS  @POLTECHWORKS  HTTP://VIRGINIA-EUBANKS.COM
WE'RE BUILDING A DIGITAL POORHOUSE

1819: Containment

Activism from poor people → What is the problem? → Solution: the poorhouse

A: Poverty
B: Pauperism

Imprisonment of poor people

1873: Investigation

Scientific charity → Investigate immediate vulnerability + Law enforcement = Criminalization of poverty

1973: Digital surveillance → Prediction

Integrating digital tools produces data veins → Which are mined to predict future behavior

For 200 years, the U.S. has chosen moral thermometers over universal floors in public services

Are you worthy?
AUTOMATING AUSTERITY

Austerity

The digital poor house assumes austerity therefore creates economic suffering

Indiana fires IBM

cause huge suffering

Indiana files lawsuit

divert access to public funds

spend lots of $ fail to address real problem

1.3 billion welfare automation

1 million benefits denials

IBM files lawsuit
FEEDBACK LOOPS OF INJUSTICE

INVESTIGATE
MONITOR
POLICY

LIMITED DATA SET
POSSIBLE

FAMILIES TARGETED FOR EXTRA SCRUTINY LIVE IN TERROR

DATA WAREHOUSE
1 BILLION RECORDS

PREDICTIONS
FAMILY SCREENING TOOL

PEOPLE WHO REACH OUT FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT
CREATING A SYSTEM THAT OVER-SAMPLES POOR AND WORKING CLASS FAMILIES

PRODUCING THE RESULTS THE MODEL CLAIMS TO HAVE PREDICTED

FEEDBACK LOOP OF INJUSTICE
INEQUALITY IS STRUCTURAL, NOT INTERPERSONAL

The purpose of the tool is to remove human bias from screening intake.

The real problems:

Inequality is systemic and structural.

Problem:

- Intake screener
  - Frontline caseworkers
  - Mostly working class
  - Mostly female
  - Racially diverse
  - Human discretion

Solution (fail):

- Addresses bias as a property of individuals
- Moves discretion from frontline caseworkers to economists and data scientists who build the models
- Hides bias and assumes systems are neutral and objective
- The predictive model fails to address the real problem

Bias enters earlier when people decide to call: Black & racial minorities are reported on 35+ times more.

Assumes poor & working class parents are more dangerous & children.
EMPATHY OVERRIDES

PROBLEM

LOS ANGELES
58,000
UNHOUSED PEOPLE

APPROACH

FOR RESOURCES AND NUMBERS

APPROACH

WE HAVE LIMITED RESOURCES AND EXTRAORDINARY NEED. WE NEED TO MAKE SOME HARD CHOICES.

TRIAGE

OUTSOURCING THE MOST DIFFICULT DECISIONS WE FACE AS A SOCIETY TO COMPUTERS

SOLUTION

HOW DO WE GUARANTEE ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL?

SOLUTION

BUILD UNIVERSAL FLOORS AND EXPAND OUR VISION
GOOD INTENTIONS CAN STILL PRODUCE BAD OUTCOMES AND INJUSTICE

WHAT IF THE PROBLEM IS NOT BROKEN TECHNOLOGY BUT A SYSTEM THAT WORKS TOO WELL?

BUILD FOR EQUITY WITH INTENTION

BUILD A SYSTEM THAT GUARANTEES BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

HEALTH CARE

FOOD

EDUCATION

HOUSING

FAMILY INTEGRITY
1. Change the story about poverty
- 51% of Americans will be below the poverty line at some point in their lives.
- Poverty is a majority issue!
- Poor is a political ID!

2. Shift from diagnosis to universal floors
- Poorometer: Are you poor enough?
- It is a human rights violation
- Build tools for the world of inequality

3. Design less harmful technology

Real lasting solutions are much deeper than tinkering with tech
TOOLKIT FOR MODELING JUSTICE

1. TRANSPARENT MODEL

2. USE OF ANALYTICS

3. MODEL INSPECTION

4. SELF-FULFILLING MODELS

5. SECURE DATA

6. STIGMA

7. CAN WE STOP IT?

8. IS THERE REMEDY?
Build a just future with purpose.