

Crime Prevention, Public Safety, and Individual Freedom

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“Perfect crime prevention” describes technologies or environmental designs that make an offence difficult or impossible before it occurs. The original essay uses the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS) as an example and asks whether prevention protects the public at an unacceptable cost to freedom. The central conflict should be preserved, but one assumption needs correction: people do not possess a protected right to commit crimes. Preventing an intoxicated driver from operating a vehicle does not remove a lawful liberty to drive drunk, because no such liberty exists. The real civil-liberties questions concern privacy, accuracy, due process, autonomy in lawful situations, unequal burdens, data use, and the possibility that preventive systems will be expanded beyond their original purpose. Crime prevention is therefore not objectionable simply because it removes an opportunity to offend. It becomes problematic when the method is disproportionate, unreliable, secret, discriminatory, or capable of restricting lawful conduct without adequate review.

What Is Perfect Crime Prevention?

Perfect prevention seeks to redesign the environment so that prohibited conduct cannot be completed. A locked door, speed governor, ignition interlock, secure payment system, and software permission control all reduce opportunities. The adjective “perfect” is usually theoretical because no system eliminates every offence. People can circumvent controls, technologies can fail, and behavior can move elsewhere. The concept is valuable because it shifts attention from punishment after harm toward prevention before harm. Criminal law traditionally threatens sanctions, while preventive design changes the practical opportunity. Society routinely uses both approaches.

DADSS and Advanced Impaired-Driving Technology

DADSS is a public-private research program involving the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the automobile industry. Its goal is to develop technology that can detect when a driver’s blood alcohol concentration is at or above the legal limit and prevent or limit vehicle operation without requiring an intrusive test each time. Research has included breath-based and touch-based sensing. The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act directed NHTSA to develop a safety standard for advanced drunk and impaired-driving prevention technology if the required conditions can be met. NHTSA’s 2026 report indicates that passive detection remains a complex technical and regulatory challenge rather than a universally deployed final system (NHTSA, 2026).

Ignition Interlocks and Passive Systems

An ignition interlock typically requires a driver convicted of impaired driving to provide a breath sample before starting a vehicle and sometimes during a trip. A passive system aims to operate without a deliberate test by the driver. The distinction matters. Interlocks are targeted measures applied after legal process, while universal passive technology would affect every driver. Targeted systems burden a smaller group but can be circumvented or stigmatizing. Universal systems may prevent more harm but create broader concerns about false positives, maintenance, emergency use, and surveillance. Policy should evaluate each design according to its actual operation rather than treating all alcohol-detection technology as one category.

Public-Safety Justification

Impaired driving creates a substantial risk of death and injury to passengers, pedestrians, other drivers, and the impaired person. The harm is not confined to the person making the choice. This strengthens the case for prevention. A system that reliably stops a driver above the legal alcohol threshold can intervene before a crash, when punishment afterward cannot restore life. Preventive technology is especially attractive because policing cannot detect every impaired driver. The government already regulates vehicle safety through brakes, seat belts, airbags, lighting, and crash standards. Alcohol-detection systems can be viewed as another safety feature if they meet strong reliability and proportionality requirements.

There Is No Right to Drive While Impaired

The original essay argues that conventional crime prevention preserves freedom by allowing a person to commit an offence and punishing the person afterward. This reasoning mistakes opportunity for right. Law does not need to preserve the practical ability to harm others so that moral choice remains meaningful. A bank may use secure authentication without violating a person's freedom to choose theft. A school may lock hazardous chemicals without infringing a student's liberty to misuse them. The relevant question is whether the preventive control also blocks lawful activity or creates another serious harm. Freedom is protected by limiting unnecessary state interference, not by guaranteeing an opportunity to complete every prohibited act.

Autonomy and Paternalism

Preventive technology can still raise autonomy concerns. Adults ordinarily control their vehicles and make decisions about travel. A system that overrides the driver exercises power directly rather than relying on later enforcement. This may be justified when the risk to others is immediate and severe. It becomes more controversial when the system responds to uncertain indicators of fatigue, emotion,

medication, or behavior that may not make driving unlawful. The state should distinguish prevention of a clearly defined offence from broad paternalistic control over every risky choice. Criteria must be transparent and tied to legitimate safety standards.

Accuracy and False Positives

A safety system must identify impairment accurately under varied temperatures, humidity, passengers, cleaning products, medical conditions, and vehicle environments. A false negative allows an impaired driver to proceed. A false positive may strand a sober person, prevent emergency transport, or create danger in an unsafe location. Accuracy therefore involves more than an average laboratory rate. Regulators need performance requirements, field testing, diagnostics, maintenance standards, and fail-safe procedures. Drivers need a way to understand why operation was limited and to obtain rapid assistance. A preventive system without correction procedures can impose punishment without adjudication.

Emergency Situations

Designers must consider emergencies in which a person needs to move a vehicle to escape danger or transport someone for urgent care. Allowing an unrestricted override would weaken prevention, while refusing every override could increase harm. Possible safeguards include limited movement, emergency-service contact, verification, or carefully logged override procedures. No design will resolve every scenario perfectly. The policy should acknowledge tradeoffs and avoid claiming that a general rule creates zero risk.

Privacy and Data Collection

A system may detect alcohol at one moment without storing identifiable information. It may also record sensor readings, driver images, behavior, location, override attempts, and vehicle status. The privacy impact depends on architecture. Data minimization should be a core principle: collect only what is necessary to prevent impaired operation, retain it only as long as needed, protect it from unauthorized access, and restrict secondary uses. Manufacturers, insurers, employers, police, and advertisers should not receive sensitive driving or health inferences automatically. A safety feature can become a surveillance system if governance is weak.

Due Process

Criminal punishment generally requires accusation, evidence, and legal process. A vehicle prevention system acts before an offence is completed and may not constitute criminal punishment. Nevertheless, recurring restrictions can affect livelihood and mobility. Drivers should have notice of

the standard, access to repair or review, and a method to challenge persistent malfunction. If data are used for prosecution, insurance, employment, or licensing, stronger due-process protections are required. Preventing a vehicle from moving is one function; creating an evidentiary record for unrelated consequences is another.

Equity and Cost

Vehicle technology can burden low-income drivers if repair, calibration, or replacement is expensive. A false positive may cause a worker to miss a shift, while a wealthier person has alternative transportation. Rural communities may have limited service centers. Regulation should address warranties, maintenance, accessibility, and consumer remedies. Safety should not depend on the ability to purchase a premium system. Universal standards can spread costs broadly, but they also require attention to older vehicles and the possibility of creating unequal safety between fleets.

Cybersecurity

Any system capable of limiting vehicle operation is a cybersecurity target. Attackers could disable protection, prevent lawful starting, extort owners, or access stored data. Safety standards must include secure software, authentication, updates, vulnerability reporting, and recovery. Remote control should be minimized and carefully governed. A prevention system that creates a new pathway for malicious immobilization may exchange one risk for another. Cybersecurity is therefore part of civil liberty as well as engineering.

Function Creep

Technology introduced for a narrow purpose may later be used for other forms of monitoring. Alcohol detection could be combined with facial recognition, driver scoring, location tracking, or police access. The original purpose should be written into law and technical design. Expansion should require separate democratic authorization, evidence, and public debate. Convenience is not sufficient justification for secondary use. Function creep is particularly likely when collected data have commercial value.

Vehicle-to-Infrastructure Speed Control

The original essay also mentions communication between vehicles and traffic systems to prevent speeding. Intelligent speed assistance can warn drivers or limit speed according to road data. Advisory systems preserve more driver control but may be ignored. Mandatory limiters may reduce severe crashes but face problems with inaccurate maps, temporary road conditions, passing maneuvers, and emergency response. Again, the issue is not a right to speed unlawfully. It is whether

the technology identifies the lawful limit accurately, allows necessary exceptions, protects data, and distributes responsibility fairly between driver, manufacturer, and government.

Situational Crime Prevention

Environmental criminology emphasizes reducing opportunity by increasing effort, increasing risk of detection, reducing rewards, and removing excuses. Improved lighting, secure design, fraud controls, and property marking are examples. Such measures can prevent harm without broad surveillance. They can also displace crime to another place or target certain communities unfairly. A gated public space may reduce one problem while excluding lawful users. Prevention should therefore be evaluated for displacement, accessibility, and social impact rather than only the number of recorded incidents.

Actus Reus and Mens Rea

The original essay correctly distinguishes action from thought. Criminal liability commonly requires an unlawful act, or *actus reus*, and a culpable mental state, or *mens rea*, defined by the relevant offence. Thoughts alone are not crimes. Law may punish attempts when a person has the required intent and takes a substantial step beyond mere preparation. Preventive technology does not need to read thoughts. It can block a prohibited condition, such as operating a vehicle above a specified alcohol threshold, without claiming to determine moral character. This is one reason it is more suitable for clearly measurable conduct than for offences such as murder, which cannot be predicted reliably from mental state.

Strict Liability

Some regulatory offences impose liability without proof of the same mental state required for traditional crimes. However, impaired-driving law is more complex than the original essay suggests and varies by jurisdiction. Per se laws define an offence according to alcohol concentration, while other provisions address impairment and operation. The classification of an offence as strict liability does not by itself justify any preventive measure. The technology must still be accurate, lawful, proportionate, and related to the prohibited conduct. Due process remains relevant even when the prosecution need not prove intent.

Prediction Versus Prevention

Blocking an intoxicated vehicle is different from predicting that a person will commit a violent crime. The first relies on a present measurable condition connected directly with a regulated activity. Predictive policing or risk-scoring may infer future conduct from location, associations, history, or

demographic proxies. Such systems can reproduce bias and restrict people who have done nothing unlawful. The more uncertain the prediction and the more severe the restriction, the stronger the objection. Preventive policy should favor direct, observable risk over speculative forecasts about character.

Conventional Enforcement Still Matters

Technology cannot replace personal responsibility, education, treatment, transportation alternatives, licensing, and law enforcement. Drivers may use older vehicles, disable systems, or become impaired by drugs not detected by alcohol sensors. Communities need safe public transport, designated-driver practices, treatment for substance-use disorders, and fair enforcement. Prevention is strongest as a layered system. The existence of technology should not encourage governments to neglect social and behavioral interventions.

Proportionality

A useful ethical test asks whether the harm is serious, the intervention is likely to reduce it, less restrictive alternatives are inadequate, and safeguards limit unnecessary burdens. Impaired driving satisfies the seriousness requirement. The remaining questions depend on actual system performance and design. A reliable passive sensor that stores no personal data and provides a safe correction process may be proportionate. A vague behavior monitor that reports drivers to third parties and immobilizes vehicles unpredictably may not be. Technology should be evaluated as implemented, not according to its most optimistic description.

Transparency and Public Oversight

Standards should be developed through public rulemaking, independent testing, consumer input, disability review, privacy analysis, and cybersecurity assessment. Manufacturers should disclose system limitations and recall defective technology. Aggregate performance data should be public. Secret thresholds or proprietary claims cannot be the sole basis for restricting mobility. Oversight builds legitimacy and helps distinguish safety engineering from a “kill switch” narrative. Drivers deserve accurate information about what the system can and cannot do.

A Balanced Policy

A balanced approach would require high accuracy, passive operation where feasible, minimal data collection, strong cybersecurity, safe emergency procedures, warranties, accessible repair, and a clear appeal process. The system should prevent operation only when defined safety criteria are met and should not transmit information for unrelated purposes without legal authority. Independent

evaluation should continue after deployment. If evidence shows disproportionate malfunction or inequity, the standard should be revised rather than defended because of sunk cost.

Conclusion

Perfect crime prevention is impossible, but preventive design can reduce serious harm. DADSS and advanced impaired-driving technology illustrate both the promise and the danger. Society does not violate a right to commit crime when it blocks intoxicated driving. The legitimate concerns are whether the system also restricts lawful conduct, collects unnecessary data, makes unreviewable errors, creates inequity, or expands into surveillance. Criminal law should preserve the distinction between thought and action, and preventive policy should prefer direct measurable risks over speculative prediction. Properly governed technology can complement responsibility and enforcement. It should not be accepted merely because safety is a worthy goal, nor rejected merely because it removes an opportunity to offend. Its legitimacy depends on evidence, proportionality, transparency, and respect for lawful freedom.

Works Cited

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