Big Data is forever changing the way we manage, market, and move information. In Maryland, it is also changing the way we govern—with better choices and for better results.

When I was elected mayor of Baltimore in 1999, the city had become the most addicted and violent in America. So we looked at some of the newest success stories that were coming from our friends up north in New York.

New York was in the headlines for driving down crime rates with a system called CompStat. It was among the first municipal governments to collect timely, accurate information, shared by all, which was used to rapidly deploy resources, develop effective tactics and strategies, and follow up relentlessly.

We borrowed their best ideas in public safety and implemented them in Baltimore—and we kept at it, year after year. From 2000 to 2009, we went on to achieve the biggest reductions in Part 1 crime of any major city in America. But at the same time, we thought, why should an innovation like this only apply to one type of city service? The old way of thinking across city government was to focus on inputs: how much money or which resources could we scrape together to throw at any given problem. This way of thinking made too many people in government content with calling nearly every problem a budgetary one. So we expanded our new performance measurement system enterprise-wide and called it CitiStat. We made it the new way of driving every department and agency. And then we started using mapping, adding geographic information systems (GIS) for a bird’s-eye view of each independent action and city service. Soon it became easy to find natural collaborations, missed connections, and new opportunities for progress and growth.

Then, to centralize all the requests we got from citizens every day on the front end, we borrowed from Chicago—establishing 311, a simple phone number for citizens to call for any and all city services. Just as 911 allows the police to respond and deploy to public safety emergencies, 311 gave us the ability to better respond to every other customer service request. Hit a pothole? Call 311. Give us the location, and my administration guarantees a crew will fix it within 48 hours. Illegal dumping in your neighborhood? Give us the address. This is our grid, every block of it. We’ll fix it, we’ll tell you when, and you can hold us accountable to the commitment.

This approach brought about a sea change in Baltimore.

Suddenly, we could tackle municipal challenges like trash in the streets, crime, homelessness, or lead poisoning in children with accountability, with measurable approaches. We publicly identified our problems and crowdsourced the solutions with open access to data.

Over time we developed better solutions.

With this rapid collection and sharing of data, we were able to shift from an input-centric approach to an approach that measured outputs and outcomes. We set public goals, relentlessly measuring government performance on a weekly basis, broadly sharing information, and putting our results on the Internet for all to see.

Most important, we moved away from ideological, hierarchical, bureaucratic governing, and we moved toward information age governing—an administrative approach that is fundamentally entrepreneurial, collaborative, interactive, and performance driven. We moved away from a spoils-based system of patronage politics to a results-based system of performance politics.

Baltimore was the first, but not the last. Today, of the 25 most populous cities in America, all but two use a
centralized 311 or equivalent number for city services. All are using GIS and the Internet to better serve their citizens in more accountable and visible ways. Most are measuring performance and better deploying resources in real time and real fast ways to make their cities better, safer, and healthier places.

This is the same approach I brought with me when I was elected governor of Maryland. Once again, we’re making better choices and getting better results, and we’re doing it on a bigger scale. Maryland has StateStat—a publicly available resource to track and share every bit of data we collect and all of the progress we’ve made on 16 strategic goals, from jobs and education, to driving down crime, to making our environment more sustainable and our people healthier.

Senator Henry Clay once said, “statistics are no substitute for judgment.” And he was right. In the modern age of Big Data, technology is promising, but, as we saw in Baltimore and as we’re seeing now in Maryland, tracking inputs is not enough. Where we’ve been successful, it has been because we took steps to first collect data and then respond, quickly, transparently, and aggressively, with good judgment.

In Maryland, we’re using Big Data to elucidate rather than to obfuscate. We use Big Data to give the people a government that is theirs—where we fail, we are accountable; where we succeed, that success is honest and unassailable.

To see for yourself and track Maryland’s progress on our strategic goals, go to data.maryland.gov.

If you are working on a rigorous review that critically assesses a body of theory and empirical research, articulates what is known about a phenomenon and ways to advance research about it, and identifies influential variables and effect sizes associated with an existing body of empirical research, please contact Michael McGuire, the Research Synthesis Editor, at mcguirem@indiana.edu.