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HITS
Catching Criminals in the Northwest

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I nvestigators in Washington State battle violent crime with the Homicide Investigation and Tracking System (HITS). HITS, an electronic investigation system, stores, collates, and analyzes characteristics of all murders and sexual offenses in Washington State. Investigators statewide can then retrieve information from the system on these violent crimes to help them solve related cases.

The system relies on the voluntary submission of information by law enforcement agencies throughout the State. These agencies submit data on murders, attempted murders, missing persons (when foul play is suspected), unidentified dead persons believed to be murder victims, and predatory sex offenders.

IMPLEMENTATION

The HITS system developed out of a research project funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). Initially, it was designed to record information on homicides in Washington State between 1981 and 1986. As part of the project, HITS operators contacted each of

the State's 273 police and sheriff's departments, as well as each of the 39 county medical examiner/coroner's offices, county prosecuting attorney's offices, the Department of Vital Statistics, and the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Unit of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, to determine the number of murders in the State during this period.

With the cooperation of all law enforcement agencies in the State, researchers eventually entered over 1,300 murder files into the HITS system. All known cases were identified by name, case number, and the jurisdiction responsible for the investigation.

Originally, this data collection instrument used a form that was 54 pages long and contained 467 fields.

This instrument recorded information related to the quality of the murder investigation and its chances of being solved, in addition to the salient characteristics of the murder, the victim(s), and the offender(s). It took investigators nearly 2 1/2 hours to complete each form.

HITS operators now receive data on shorter versions of the original form. The new forms use the same salient characteristics as the original form, but omit the research questions. The homicide form, which is slightly different from the forms used for sexual assault cases and missing/unidentified persons, is the most extensive of the HITS forms and contains 250 fields of information. Investigators need approximately 30 minutes per case to complete each form.

THE HITS COMPUTER SYSTEM

The HITS Program operates from a minicomputer located in the Seattle office of the attorney general's Criminal Division. It allows users to define and manage databases and to write software applications easily and quickly. The most important feature of this system for investigation purposes is the *ad hoc* interactive search capability, which allows HITS analysts to design specific investigation queries, choosing from as many as 250 fields of information. These fields contain information in tabled and free-form text formats. Analysts can ask for single or multiple field information in any order or combination.

For example, detectives investigating the murder of a white female

prostitute, who had been raped and strangled and whose nude body was found in a wooded area, may want to know whether any similar murder occurred within the last 2 years. They could contact the HITS Unit with such a request.

Based on the information provided by the detectives, HITS analysts could query the database for any combination of the victim's gender, race, lifestyle, method and cause of death, geographic location of the crime, the absence or presence of clothing on the body, concealment of the body, and/or the dates of death and body discovery. In this way, analysts could identify other murder cases with common elements.

HITS analysts can then supply the detectives with the names of similarly murdered victims (if known), investigating agencies, case numbers, and the primary investigator's name and telephone

number. Designing the query usually takes only a few minutes, as does the data search.

The HITS staff compiled over 90 formated and indexed queries so that routine inquiries do not have to be redesigned each time analysts attempt similar searches. These include specific name inquiries, list of murders within a certain jurisdiction, information about drug-related murders, murders of elderly females, and offender descriptions, to list a few examples.

HITS FILES

The HITS Program accesses information obtained from at least six different sources. A number of files store data on various violent crimes.

HITS Murder File

The HITS murder file—the initial database—contains victim, offender, and M.O. information for

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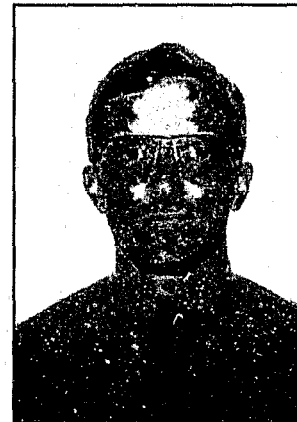
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over 3,400 murder investigations. Law enforcement officers statewide provide this data by completing the HITS homicide form.

Prior to official implementation of HITS, local police agencies participated only in the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (VICAP), a national violent crime tracking program. Now, approximately 350 of the State's murder cases entered in the VICAP system before the creation of HITS have also been merged into the HITS murder file.

HITS Sexual Assault Data File

The HITS sexual assault data file maintains victim, offender, and M.O. information for over 1,500 rape investigations. The information from this file focuses on predatory sex offenders, nonacquaintance rapists, and serial rapists. Source information comes from HITS sexual assault forms submitted by investigators.

Preliminary Information File

The preliminary information file records data regarding crime classification, chronology, victim(s), offender(s), the M.O., geographic locations, weapons, vehicles, and any other pertinent information regarding violent crimes. As the name implies, this file stores preliminary information until the investigating agency submits completed HITS reports. Information sources for this file include teletypes, newspapers, crime bulletins, sex offender registration files, and investigator's requests.

HITS computer operators automatically enter information about any violent crime transmitted via teletype through the Washington State Patrol's system into the preliminary information file. No other State system records this type of data for use in investigations.

Staff members also enter murder and rape information reported in any newspaper in Washington State. A clipping service provides newspaper articles weekly. The newspaper and teletype data are valuable and timely because they are, typically, the first notification to HITS that a violent crime has occurred in the State.

> **❝**
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> ### The HITS Program significantly improves violent crime investigations in the State of Washington.
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> **❞**

The preliminary information file also includes investigators' requests for information. The file maintains each inquiry from a police investigator, whether staff members locate information concerning the crime or not. This allows investigators to preserve their inquiries in case additional information becomes available to answer the request. As investigators submit HITS forms for murder and sexual assault cases, HITS personnel purge the initial information on these crimes from the preliminary information file.

Department of Corrections File

Another database stores information contained in over 145,000 records from the Department of Corrections (DOC). This file gives HITS immediate access to the identification of present and former inmates with murder and sexual assault convictions. Their physical descriptions can be checked against the physical descriptions of unidentified suspects in recent sexual assault investigations. DOC staff members update this file bimonthly.

Additional Files and Records

The HITS system maintains a special data file with over 54,000 records relating to the Green River murders investigation. Staff members frequently analyze records against current incoming violent crime information. Analysts pass any "hits" on to the investigators in the King County, Washington, Police Department.

HITS also maintains a separate data file for gang-related crimes. This file contains over 74,000 records received from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and from police agencies within Washington State. Analysts requested the data from Los Angeles after intelligence determined that numerous gang members had migrated from California to Washington and committed crimes. HITS staff members routinely use this file to search for aliases or monikers and for physical descriptions of suspected offenders.

"Time Line" File

The final data file used for analysis is a "time line" file that records the chronological activities of known violent offenders. This data file includes information about times and places of the offenders'

movements, which is gathered from employment, arrest, and banking records, traffic tickets, and any other lead collected during a murder investigation that reveals a possible location of an offender. These times and places can be cross-referenced against the dates and locations of violent crimes. The file serves as another means to determine if a known offender could have been the perpetrator of other violent crimes.

Due to the diversity of information sources, programmers constructed three master data files. These separate data files match the person, vehicle, and address information from all the other databases. This allows any one query to search for this information from all the databases at the same time. The fields available for analysis of the characteristics range from as few as 20 to as many as 250 in the murder file.

SERVICES TO LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

HITS provides four major services to law enforcement agencies. In addition to supplying information about murders, attempted murders, predatory sexual assaults, unidentified dead persons, and missing persons, the system also tracks information concerning evidence, victimology, offender characteristics, offender's method of operation, associates, geographic locations, weapons, and vehicles related to murder and sexual assault cases and known murderers and sex offenders living in the community.

Further, HITS analysts collate information concerning murder cases to determine factors that may solve a particular homicide. This information can be used to

determine case, victim, or offender relationships to other violent offenses. HITS also provides investigators with resource information about experts available to assist with aspects of murder and sexual assault investigations and provides technical assistance and advice on how to proceed through the various steps in murder and sexual assault investigations.

HITS STAFF

The chief investigator of the Criminal Division of the attorney general's office supervises the HITS Unit. Besides the chief investigator, the unit also employs a HITS manager, five investigator/analysts, a violent crime analyst, two computer

programmers, a secretary, and a data entry operator.

The HITS manager develops the procedures and maintains the operations of the HITS Unit for police agencies throughout the State. The manager also coordinates HITS activities, which include training, collection of data, and analyses for police investigators statewide.

LOCAL AGENCY FINANCIAL PARTICIPATION

Implementation of the HITS Program involved no expense for local law enforcement agencies because the U.S. Department of Justice and the Washington State attorney general's office funded the entire project. In addition, the State attorney general's office bears the cost for ongoing operations.

Local agency participation in the FBI's VICAP Program became systematic in the State of Washington, which conserves investigators' time. Because the VICAP fields are collected within HITS forms, departments receive the benefits of participating simultaneously in both programs without duplicating efforts. The HITS staff performs the routine verification of murder information, telephone contacts, and lead checks required with participation in the VICAP Program, further conserving investigators' time.

REGIONAL EXPANSION EFFORTS

In October 1991, the Washington State attorney general and the

superintendent of the Oregon State Police (OSP) signed an agreement linking the two law enforcement agencies in their efforts to fight violent crime. A component of this agreement allows Oregon access to the HITS system.

In fact, members of the OSP have monitored the development and implementation of the HITS program in Washington over the past several years. Investigators from both States understand that the natural geographical barriers between Washington and Oregon do not deter the mobile violent offender.

The Oregon State Police can now transfer their violent crime information into the HITS computer database. Through remote access, analysts in the OSP can coordinate violent crime information pertinent to investigations in Oregon. Data from over 700 murders committed in Oregon during the last 6 years are now stored in the HITS computer. As a result, police and sheriff's investigators from Washington and Oregon have ready access to violent crime information.

In addition to Oregon, law enforcement agencies from Canada, California, Idaho, and Kansas submit data on selected violent crimes to the HITS Unit for analysis. These relatively small steps represent a concerted move toward regionalization of the HITS system.

BENEFITS

The HITS Program significantly improves violent crime investigations in the State of Washington. Through the HITS system, analysts discovered that different types of murder cases, for example, reflect critical solvability factors unique to each murder. This information proves very useful to detectives, many of whom investigate murders and sexual assaults on a daily basis. The HITS Program also provides police managers with information necessary to allocate investigative resources

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> *...HITS saves investigators incalculable hours of time when seeking information.*
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more efficiently and strategically by helping to focus violent crime investigations.

HITS underscores the importance of open lines of communication and coordination among all components of the criminal justice system in investigations of common interest. The HITS Unit functions as the central location and repository where every police investigator in Washington State can readily find information about murder and sexual assault cases. Its implementation demonstrates that the timely coordination of comprehensive information provides the key to successful violent crime investigations.

The HITS Program also improves criminal justice training curricula for law enforcement investigators. The identification and prioritization of solvability factors assist investigators in identifying avenues of proper and logical followup. In fact, one police department used HITS procedures and forms to provide the framework for establishing its followup guidelines in murder investigations.

In addition, HITS saves investigators incalculable hours of time when seeking information. Prior to HITS, much of this information could be accessed only through time-consuming, labor-intensive personal visits, interviews, telephone calls, teletypes, and letters.

The HITS Program also benefits small law enforcement agencies with investigators inexperienced in specialized violent crime investigation techniques. Not only do they have ready access to information not recorded anywhere in their department's files, but HITS investigators can provide guidance, based upon years of experience, about how to conduct violent crime investigations.

CONCLUSION

The HITS system offers law enforcement agencies in the State of Washington high-tech assistance to solve homicides and other violent crimes. Investigators find that a small investment in time can benefit the law enforcement effort throughout the entire State.

And, as HITS develops a more regional approach, its impact could prove significant throughout the northwest. However, the success of HITS and similar systems rests with the participation by member agencies. HITS can provide valuable leads to investigators because the raw data are voluntarily submitted to the system by all law enforcement agencies in Washington. The cooperation fostered by the HITS Program represents an essential element to its success. ✦