TECH b•e•a•t

Fuginet'ing Parole Violators

*I*t is estimated that the Nation's prisons released more than 600,000 inmates in 2001, a marked increase from the 400,000 released in 1996 and the 170,000 released in 1980. Unfortunately, most of these former inmates will not remain crime free. Statistics from a 1989 national recidivism study showed 62 percent were rearrested on serious charges within 3 years and 41 percent were reincarcerated. The study also tracked a group of 68,000 exconvicts, who committed more than 300,000 felonies and misdemeanors in the 3 years after their release.

Although prisons take in about 50,000 more prisoners than they let out, it is expected that by 2005 the ratio of admissions to releases will be 1:1; by 2010, the release rate will top 1.2 million. With recidivism rates and the number of violent offenders increasing, law enforcement faces an enormous challenge in finding and arresting parole violators. In 1998, 140,000 parolees were classified as violent criminals, compared with 75,000 in 1985.

At least one State's prison system is giving its law enforcement officers a helping hand with its new Fugitive Apprehension Program, or Fuginet, a database that can identify and track parole violators. Capt. Robert Guard, a regional supervisor in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's (TDCJ's) Office of the Inspector General, says more than 300 local, State, and Federal agencies in Texas now access Fuginet.

"Fuginet actually had its beginning back in 1995 because we needed to share information about parole violators and had no way to do that," Guard says. "There is a degree of recidivism that demands we know the parolees in our districts because of the likelihood they will commit additional crimes. But local police officers had limited access to information about who the parolees were in their areas. They also had no idea when a warrant was issued for an offender. Therefore, the violator was out there, sometimes for years, unless somebody stumbled across him on a traffic stop or through a parallel investigation."

Guard says that for the first 3 years the program struggled with developmental problems, but recognition of its potential did not waver. In 1998, the initial computer program was abandoned in favor of a more comprehensive, easy-to-use program, which has been deemed successful beyond all expectations. Fuginet can now provide everything from current photos to the addresses of a parolee's friends and relatives. The records are initiated at the prison level when the parolee is released. The information is updated daily by parole officers and, when appropriate, by participating agencies.

State and local law enforcement officers have access to Fuginet via the Internet. By inputting a parolee's identification number and password, they can find out whether the parolee has tattoos or identifying marks, get a map to the parolee's job and home, or retrieve the parolee's prison records. They can find out who lives in their area, breaking their search down by county, ZIP Code, or area of a city. They can query who the sex offenders are in their district. Some agencies also use Fuginet for investigative purposes, plugging in information about a crime and comparing it with information in the database.

"If you put in the address of an incident and ask for everyone in a 5-mile radius who matches a suspect description or who has committed similar crimes, you'll get a list you can use proactively to eliminate suspects," Guard says. "Fuginet has facial recognition software that lets you compare a composite drawing with all of the facial images in the database. Each parolee record can include up to five photos. Fuginet also has a vehicle identification component. Let's say a sex offender is thought to be driving a 1996 Cavalier. You can pull that car up, make it whatever color you want, and even put damaged fenders on it if that's what the car looks like. Then you put the car in the suspect's record to help other officers identify the car and the suspect."

Sgt. Richard Garcia's full-time job is to chase parole violators. He supervises the Dallas Police Department's Fugitive Apprehension Team and makes daily use of the Fuginet database. Garcia credits Fuginet with hundreds of parolee apprehensions in the past year. The system is successful, he says, because the information it contains is up to date and accurate. "You're only as good as your

information," he says. "And these guys are great about putting in new information."

According to Garcia, the Fuginet database contains information on more than 80,000 TDCJ parolees. Approximately 13,000 to 15,000 of those have been paroled to Dallas County. "We get everyone from burglars . . . to rapists and murderers," he says. "We can find out their family history, where they were paroled to, who visited them in prison, who sent them money, who their family members are. If we want, we can even look up who they called and who called them while in prison. It's a great system."

When Fuginet initially came online, TDCJ trained each of the State's 1,500 parole officers, who are still required to provide daily updates to the database. Their active involvement not only keeps Fuginet relevant, it helps to maintain communication and good relationships among prison officials, parole officers, and the law enforcement officers assigned to arrest parole violators.

Figures are based on *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1983,* published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 1989 (NCJ 116261). A second national recidivism study was to be released in November 2001, after this edition of *TechBeat* had gone to press. Additional data were taken from *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1995,* published by BJS in 1997 (NCJ 163916).

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