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Kansas City Shares the Crime

A witness to a convenience store robbery gives police a physical description of the perpetrator. That description includes a small scar over the right eyebrow. A few weeks later a witness to another convenience store holdup a few blocks away gives police a similar physical description but does not report any scar. That witness, however, does see the make and model of the perpetrator's car.

In a perfect world detectives would be able to connect these crimes and issue one description that includes both the facial mark and the vehicle. But in the real world they can't.

Why? When crimes take place in different jurisdictions, investigators often do not have access to each other's case information.

In the Kansas City metropolitan area more than 85 agencies have banded together to do something about the problem of information sharing by employing the Internet, a "super database," and geographic information system (GIS) crime-mapping technologies.

A steering committee representing these 85 agencies and the 10 counties and 2 States they serve is driving the development of the Kansas City Regional Crime Analysis GIS (KCRCAGIS), with assistance from the National Institute of Justice's National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)–Rocky Mountain. KCRCAGIS will give these agencies a chance to develop broader pictures of crime trends and share resource costs effectively.

"Criminals commit crimes close to where they work and live," says Noah Fritz, deputy director of NLECTC–Rocky Mountain and director of its Crime Mapping and Analysis Program (CMAP), which provides technology assistance and introductory and advanced training to State and local agencies. "They also base their choices on their routine activities. People drive to work the same way every day, put on their right shoe before their left, or whatever. Criminals often have similar reasons for picking certain places. They do what has succeeded before."

Jurisdictions often try to share information about ongoing investigations through monthly task force meetings

and through more frequent e-mail alerts, Fritz says. But the creation of a regional information sharing system like KCRCAGIS may improve their ability to collaborate and solve cases sooner. "We're trying to identify serial crime: murder, rape, robberies. This tool will allow investigators to make sense of trends and identify interesting leads," he says.

The KCRCAGIS project was launched in August 1999 as the first regional crime-mapping project to include jurisdictions from multiple States. Doug Weishar, a captain with the Kansas City (Missouri) Police Department and deputy director of the Midwest High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area's (HIDTA) Investigative Support Center, is co-chair of the project. He has been with the project since its inception. Dave Burger, a captain with the Lenexa (Kansas) Police Department, serves as the other co-chair.

"A bunch of us started to talk about it. Here we were, with 80 to 100 separate agencies spanning 2 States and 10 counties, and nothing linked even our pin maps," Weishar recalls. "A lot of analysts were taking advantage of Federal dollars to take crime-mapping training. They started bringing copies of the maps they were making to monthly meetings and sharing them. This helped us realize it would be even more valuable if we could get on our computers and see what others were working on."

The original committee, which Weishar describes as "a ragtag bunch of volunteers," expanded its efforts, moving from discussions about needs, to a needs assessment survey, to development of a concept paper and other work often done by consultants. The committee sent the concept paper to every chief and sheriff in the Kansas City metropolitan area and asked them to allow the committee to make decisions for their agencies and for the area. Support, according to Weishar, was overwhelming.

"We heard about this program called RCAGIS, used in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area. It was designed by the University of Maryland and allowed regional sharing of crime-mapping data," he says. "We started figuring, okay, this is something that we could use. We thought maybe there was something we could

just plug in. We got our commanders and the technical support people involved and found that we could use something like this, but not exactly like this. We learned that you have to find a way to make it work with your equipment."

To make it work, the committee called on NLECTC–Rocky Mountain and CMAP. "Noah [Fritz] came over, listened to our concept, and was very excited about helping," Weishar says. "He applied for and got permission to use NIJ funds to support us for a year. He and his staff of professionals have helped us tremendously. They have been fantastic in developing policies and procedures on how to extract the data."

Fritz says that the Greater Kansas City law enforcement community had been looking into crime mapping for about a year before CMAP got involved: "They had already drawn in the agencies and had the MOUs in place. They did an outstanding job of getting agreements together."

NLECTC–Rocky Mountain and CMAP signed on to provide 12 months of technology assistance and recently started a second 6- to 12-month support phase. "Our job is to facilitate the technology decisions. We don't make decisions for them, we get them to ask themselves the right questions," Fritz says. That technical assistance included locating a designer for the KCRCAGIS application, hosting the test database, assessing the capabilities of the agencies participating in the initial data collection and testing, and helping devise a plan to bring in more agencies and speed up data submission.

"Our goal is to have each of the nine agencies involved in the first stage adopt another agency and teach them what they need to know to come on board," Weishar says. "When their first student is on board, they'll move on to a second. We hope that some of the second-generation agencies will also adopt other agencies, but we understand that small departments may not be able to do so."

"These agencies will basically train the trainers," Fritz adds. "We will step back after the system becomes operational, and they will keep bringing in partners."

Even using this ripple effect, Weishar says he expects full implementation will take approximately 3 years. His move to HIDTA made him realize the extent of the connectivity issues, and that, although the technology exists, coordination is needed.

Weishar also realized that HIDTA would make the perfect host for the KCRCAGIS database. "The highway is already set up. This saves us even more, because we don't have to purchase the server." He adds that Midwest HIDTA Director Dave Barton agrees that KCRCAGIS fits perfectly into HIDTA's information sharing mission. (HIDTA offices nationwide represent a cooperative effort among Federal, State, and local law enforcement agencies across jurisdictions.)

Using the Midwest HIDTA's server represents just one of several money-saving ideas implemented by the committee. Weishar says the members will continue to search out alternative funding sources.

"We're pretty excited about it," he says. "We've absolutely saved a ton of money on the front end. We know that right now, money is pretty tight with the Federal Government due to homeland security, so we're not going to wait for Federal funding. We're exploring other avenues of financing."

For more information on the Kansas City Regional Crime Analysis GIS project, contact Capt. Doug Weishar, Midwest HIDTA, at 816–746–4962, ext. 264; e-mail dweishar@midwest.hidta.net. Or, contact Noah Fritz, National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center–Rocky Mountain, 800–416–8086; e-mail nfritz@du.edu.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HIDTA

The High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program enhances and coordinates drug control efforts among local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies. The program provides agencies with coordination, equipment, technology, and additional resources to combat drug trafficking and its harmful consequences in critical regions of the United States. To learn more about HIDTA, log on to www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/hidta/.

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