



# Police tap technology to compensate for fewer officers

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By **Kevin Johnson**, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Police agencies increasingly rely on controversial technology and social media to make up for the loss of thousands of officers and other resources to deep budget cuts, law enforcement officials and criminal justice analysts say.



By Mel Evans, AP Some police agencies have taken the unusual step of sharing real-time investigative information with private business groups on interactive websites to help stop

crime. [Enlarge](#)

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Some, including the city of Albuquerque, have taken the unusual step of sharing real-

time investigative information with private business groups on interactive websites to help stop theft rings, locate violent crime suspects and track fugitives.

The Albuquerque model, which is being replicated by agencies in Georgia, Minnesota, Washington and California, represents a significant break with law enforcement's long tradition of walling off the public from information about developing investigations, Albuquerque Police Chief Raymond Schultz said. He said the networks help to make up for the loss of about 60 positions in the past 2½ years.

That is only part of a emerging movement in law enforcement's attempt to hold its ground with fewer cops, detectives and analysts on the job.

"Technology can never fully replace an officer," said Camden, N.J., Police Chief Scott Thomson, whose 250-officer department has been nearly cut in half since 2006. "We're just trying to leverage technology ... to appear bigger than we are."

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Camden uses a combination of global positioning systems, gunshot detectors placed in elevated areas throughout the city and closed-circuit cameras to identify problem areas and dispatch officers to those locations more efficiently instead of waiting for calls from the public, which sometimes never come.

After installing the shot-spotter technology last fall, the department learned that residents, many of whom had become conditioned to gunshots, were not reporting incidents of gunfire at least 30% of the time.

In especially troubled neighborhoods, a computerized patrol program ensures that police vehicles pass through designated areas several times a day or even by the hour. If a trip is missed, an e-mail alert goes to the area commander.

"It's all about establishing a presence," Thomson said.

In Austin, Police Chief Art Acevedo is confronting a different kind of problem: Officers are not waiting for "lagging" public funding to purchase their own miniature video cameras concealed in writing pens.

About 50 officers use the devices, which cost as little as \$50 each, to guard against false allegations of misconduct or abuse. Acevedo supports the technology, but this month, his staff scrambled to develop guidelines for the cameras' use to address potential privacy concerns and other issues.

"Sometimes the (public) funding stream just doesn't catch up with the available technology," Acevedo said.

This month, a survey of 70 large police

agencies by the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington law enforcement think-tank, found that 90% planned to increase their use of various technologies, primarily aimed at deterring crime by adopting more efficient surveillance, patrol and response strategies.

"Departments are looking to technology as a force multiplier," said Chuck Wexler, the forum's executive director. "They are using this technology to better manage fewer resources, because just saying, 'We don't have enough officers' isn't cutting it with the public."

The forum's survey found that 86% of agencies used some form of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and Nixle to monitor or follow up on leads and potential threats, despite reports that some police employees misuse the sites.

At least 57% of agencies reported dealing with some problem related to employees' possible misuse of social media sites, according to the forum's survey.

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The abuses include posting inappropriate messages and photographs.

“These are still emerging technologies,” said Nancy Kolb, who oversees the International Association of Chiefs of Police Center for Social Media. “It’s a struggle for law enforcement to know how they can be used in a beneficial way.”

In Albuquerque, Schultz said the department’s information-sharing partnerships with the retail, banking, construction, hotel and housing industries produced some early successes.

The interactive websites, which allow industry security officers to immediately post security camera photographs of suspects involved in theft and other offenses, have factored in the 18% decline in property crimes in 2010.

Police use the information to identify the suspects quicker and to warn other member businesses that could be future targets of the offenders.

Schultz said the victimized members can track the progress of police investigations on the websites. They also receive regular updates on the status of prosecutions.

“We’re leveraging the technology (networks of security cameras) that private industry already has,” Schultz said, adding that up to 200 businesses participate. “It has really taken off.”

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