

# The Post and Courier

## Gadgets give police crime-fighting edge

By Glenn Smith  
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For years, Charleston police officers depended on whatever random information crackled over their radios to alert them to the people and perils they might encounter when rolling to a call.

Now, officers are being equipped with cutting-edge technology to help them size up suspects and situations on the fly, see crime scenes unfold in real-time video and tap a vast warehouse of criminal intelligence in the field.



Melissa Haneline  
The Post and Courier

Charleston police Sgt. Chito Walker updates his location Thursday using the mobile computer in his squad car.

All this from a police department that didn't even have voice mail three years ago.

Since taking the helm in late 2006, Police Chief Greg Mullen has steadily pushed the department into the 21st century, adding new gadgets and upgrading computers, records systems and intelligence gathering to better equip officers to combat crime. "If it doesn't help us reduce crime or the fear of crime, we don't do it," Mullen said. "That is the filter we are using."

Charleston police have spent around \$2.4 million on the initiative, with more improvements on the way. The city has funded most of the upgrades to date, but police have applied for a variety of federal grants to keep the ball rolling.

"This is very important," Charleston Mayor Joe Riley said. "This new technology is quite a powerful leveraging agent that can substantially increase the ability of police to solve and reduce crime."

For several years, the Charleston Police Department lagged behind some other area agencies in incorporating new technology into its arsenal. North Charleston police were using computers to track reports, analyze data and map crime trends six years ago. Mount Pleasant police followed suit soon thereafter. Charleston officers, on the other hand, wrote reports in longhand on carbon paper and tracked homicide cases in a vintage ledger book. Crime analysis could take weeks on an antiquated computer system.

That has changed under Mullen, a techno-savvy leader prone to jargon-laden terms like "information accelerators," "analytics" and "force multipliers." His goal is to improve efficiency and effectiveness by targeting resources where they are needed most, freeing officers from mundane tasks that keep them off the street and making sure they get information they need to do their jobs in a timely fashion.

To that end, police have:

- Outfitted 75 cruisers with mobile laptops that allow officers to file reports, run criminal background checks, monitor recent calls and receive instant alerts and photos in the field. They are seeking federal grants for 50 more portable computers for cruisers and 25 mini-laptops for officers on horses, bikes, boats and Segways.
- Upgraded computer and record systems to allow police — from commanders to patrol officers — to better identify and target crime links, trends and hot spots. Officers can log on at the start of a shift, view where crimes occurred in their beat areas while they were off and view reports from those incidents with a few keystrokes.
- Compiled an intelligence database that stores a wealth of information on dozens of career criminals and other dangerous offenders, from their street names, addresses and cars to gang ties, past offenses and known associates.
- Equipped two cruisers with cameras that read license plates of passing cars and instantly identify if the vehicle is wanted or stolen. Police are mounting a third camera on a fixed, undisclosed location downtown to enhance port security.
- Applied for federal grant money to buy as many as 15 video-surveillance cameras to monitor public spaces for signs of trouble, track offenders and collect evidence. The cameras would be placed in high-crime areas, homeland security zones such as the port, and places that attract crowds and tourists, such as Marion Square.

Police said they already have seen dividends. The license plate reader has led to the recovery of several stolen vehicles, and the intelligence database helped detectives identify a burglary suspect through his street name, police said.

After a recent bank robbery in West Ashley, police were able to beam within minutes actual surveillance photos of the suspect to street officers hunting for the man. North Charleston police later captured the suspect.

Other changes are in the works, including buying mobile fingerprint readers, providing public access to crime reports on the Internet and electronically linking the department's crime labs for more efficient evidence tracking, Maj. Tony Elder said. Police also are

discussing using satellite monitoring bracelets to track problem offenders on probation or parole. The details would have to be worked out with prosecutors and the courts, he said.

Police also have been talking with the College of Charleston, the Medical University of South Carolina, the Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority, the port and others about tapping into their video cameras to bolster coverage in emergencies, Elder said.

Not everyone is thrilled with the idea of video surveillance. Victoria Middleton, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in South Carolina, said she appreciates the police efforts to reduce crime, but thinks more public discussion on the plan is needed to safeguard against invading people's privacy, racial profiling and other abuse. "Do we really need cameras around Marion Square, where there are probably more sunbathers than violent criminals?" she asked.

Elder said police don't see the cameras as a surveillance system, but a "safety and security" system. The idea, he said, is simply to get a jump on crime. Officers responding to incidents would be able view footage on their computers, see what they are heading into or track a suspect's getaway, he said.

Elder said the cameras are just another tool, another innovation, not unlike police radios and cruisers when they first arrived on the scene. "These are mechanical innovations that have enhanced our abilities," he said. "The core is still the officers."

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