Online Crime Reporting: Should Law Enforcement Turn to the Internet for Savings?

by Eric Smith

Local governments continue to face difficult financial times, and so do law enforcement agencies, which are confronting budget cutbacks, hiring freezes, military call-ups, and loss of officers through attrition. Some even have had difficulty in recruiting high-quality candidates. These circumstances have led administrators to review the police services provided by the department and to eliminate or reduce such items as community services or school resource officers. Some departments are paying overtime to maintain a minimum number of officers on the street.

Online crime reporting is one solution that offers staffing relief. This article will show how police departments are starting to use the Internet to give citizens the option of filing electronic police reports, without the department's having to assign a patrol officer to a call.

False reporting is a possible concern. None of the departments that the author researched was aware of any situation in which the online system had been used to file false police reports.

Businesses are requiring police reports from their customers for a range of purposes. Cellphone companies are one example. When a user loses a cellphone, he or she is told to file a police report by the cellphone company in order to get a replacement phone. Insurance companies are another example, requiring police reports to support claims, even in incidents when there is no evidence or information about the suspects and little chance of an arrest by a police agency.

The result is an increase in demand for police services, at a time when community resources already are stretched thin by budget cuts. Managers face difficult decisions about which services to drop and about the impact on the community, as well as any potential negative publicity. So, managers might first consider the use of practical technology to help streamline operations.

Using E-Reports

One idea is using the Internet for online crime and incident reports. Online reporting systems permit citizens to file specified types of police reports themselves, over the Internet, 24/7, even on holidays. Law enforcement employees can later download the reports during normal working hours. The system has the added benefit of keeping patrol officers in service for proactive activities, instead of tying them up on routine reports.

Filing a crime or incident report online is a clear-cut process. The citizen who needs to file a report can access the form through the police department's Internet Web site. A set of instructions will precede the report form, explaining what types of

reports can be filed and giving explicit warnings that the system is not for emergency incidents or in-progress crimes but rather for "cold" crimes-those that are no longer in progress.

This form might include required fields for identifying such information as name, address, and date of birth. There may also be a warning that outlines the penalties for filing a false report.

Once the report has been entered online, police personnel can later download the form and check to make sure that the report meets the department's criteria for the types of incidents to report. A case or file number can be assigned the report, and then the form can be printed and filed in the records division of the agency.

In a perfect world, the form could be downloaded directly into the agency's record management system. Most departments using online reporting, however, have not been able to accomplish a direct download. To keep the time spent by employees on the report to a minimum, the complainant's name and date of birth, along with the assigned file number, can be entered by a records employee so that the printed form can later be tracked if needed. Records staff can send the complainant the case number by e-mail or postcard (an e-mail and postal address can be required fields).

An increasing number of localities have begun using online reporting, including San Diego, California; Sacramento, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; Boulder, Colorado; and Aspen, Colorado. Communities in the United Kingdom also are reporting crimes online. These online systems have been effective in helping departments to streamline operations and have been popular with citizens, too.

The process used to set up an online reporting system involves several key steps and may vary somewhat among departments, depending on specific needs and resources. One of the first steps will be to decide the types of reports that will be accepted through the Internet. In part, this decision can be based on current procedures or forms for citizens to use in completing "counter" reports.

Most departments are using Internet reports for documentation purposes only. Normally, any crime in which there is information about a suspect is not accepted online.

In designing the form, it is important to keep in mind that the online report system will be for citizens who do not have police training and who may not be familiar with police terms and jargon. The form's design and instructions will need to clearly explain what information is needed. Much of the form will be self-explanatory, such as "name" and "address," although other areas, including the narrative section and the property section, may be problematic.

Citizens might omit critical information in the property section, like brand, model, and serial numbers of stolen items. One possible solution is to design the property section as a table with separate columns or fields for the required information.

Another problem with the property section is allocating the amount of space to be used, because enough space should be available for the citizen to list all the

property necessary. An alternative to a table format is a free-form section in which the complainant can enter a list of the involved property. This alternative format should provide detailed instructions on which information is important enough to include; otherwise, users might not read or follow the instructions and may leave out needed information.

What Is and Isn't Suitable

Police administrators will need to decide the types of crimes and incidents that will be accepted through the online reporting system. Most departments are using Internet reports for documentation purposes only. Normally, any crime in which there is information about a suspect is not accepted online.

When the victim knows or can identify the suspect, the report should be filed through normal procedures to guarantee that any information needed for an investigation is gathered appropriately. And violent crimes, like assaults, also should not be filed through the Internet, as violent crimes may warrant additional police response or attention.

Property crimes with no suspect information are the most suitable types of reports for online systems. Some departments may limit the types of property crimes to the dollar amount lost or taken or to misdemeanor crimes, while other departments use online reporting only for residential and business burglary reports.

Police managers will have to look at the benefits of online reporting in terms of its convenience to citizens and the department, balancing the savings with the loss of potential physical evidence, such as fingerprints. Administrators should consider the normal evidence collection procedures and the community's needs, including what constitutes the most beneficial use of officers' time and efforts.

Other considerations are a review of how cases are solved and what evidence, if any, in these types of crimes is resulting in arrests. Take the example of break-ins to vehicles. If less than 1 percent of these cases are cleared because of fingerprints collected at the scene, then it may make more sense for this type of crime to be reported online, redirecting officers to other tasks like directed patrols or remaining in service for in-progress calls.

The process of setting up an online report system will vary from one department to another. The Web sites that have been set up for police and sheriff's departments might have a link that directs users to the online form. Frequently, a city or county's information technology (IT) department develops these sites.

Internal IT employees may represent one source of the needed technical knowledge to set up a reporting system, but community IT departments are working to meet a wide variety of demands and may have limited time and resources to dedicate to the process. At least one police department that this author knows was developing an online system faced a yearlong delay with the IT department.

One way to help keep the process moving will be to make preparations in the department before involving the IT staff. The police agency, for example, can plan the format that will be used for the online report, along with making decisions as to

what types of incidents and crimes will be allowed online. The police department can also outline how the form will be printed. The printout should be similar in layout to existing police report forms, to be consistent and thus to make it easier for employees to review and locate particular information or fields.

Security of the online reports, once they have been downloaded, will be one area of concern for most departments. Security issues, however, are not actually as crucial as they may seem at first. Police reports are generally considered public information, especially for the types of reports submitted through the Internet. These reports are typically property crimes with no suspect information for follow-up, or lost-property reports. A Web certificate could be purchased to protect the information submitted online as it is transmitted by the Internet, but this measure will increase the cost while offering little benefit and will require that the certificate be kept up to date.

A secure link only protects the report during the actual transmission from the user to the agency's server. Many communities and private organizations use internal servers to share information within the entity. These internal webs or intranets can be accessed only from within the network.

Information stored or shared within the network may include such personal information as employees' home addresses, social security numbers, and bank account information for direct deposit. IT departments should already have various protections in place to keep information secure, including firewalls. The online reports can be stored within the network servers as well to ensure proper protection and security.

Access Needed

Access to the reports by employees is another concern to be addressed. Some communities already have an internal system, called an interweb, that was set up by the IT department for internal or private information. In Boulder, Colorado, an intraweb system, which is available to city employees through the city's network, allows employees to access and even change such personal information as addresses and direct-deposit information.

In Boulder, the online reports are downloaded directly to this intraweb, helping to maintain report security. Police employees can then access the reports from within the city's network. A password and user name have been set up to limit access by unauthorized employees. Users can navigate through the reports with a menu and also can access new reports.

The report can be reviewed and assigned a case number, which is then e-mailed back to the complainant. It is printed for the records division, and the complainant's name and date of birth, along with the case number, are entered into the records management system for future tracking.

One area of concern, usually from within law enforcement agencies, is the potential loss of face-to-face contact with the community. Departments want to be able to provide the best level of service possible to the community and some feel that the use of online reporting reduces the services provided. However, there are several

factors to consider. The first is that offering online reporting increases police services to the community and is an additional way for citizens to contact the police. The choice is with the citizen as the complainant can still call and request a more traditional response in lieu of filing a report online.

Second, it is important to consider the value of an officer's time. While there may be some value to an individual to have an officer respond to a routine call with no suspect information, there is little else accomplished while the officer writes a report documenting the incident. The officer's time could be redirected to more proactive work like crime prevention patrols or positive interactions with community members. Community policing involves focusing officers' activities on problem-solving activities with community members rather than tying up officers on reactive responses.

The third consideration is the benefit to the citizens. Citizens will spend less time waiting for an officer to respond and will have the option of filing police reports from their own home or office, at their convenience. In January 2005, the newspaper in Boulder, Colorado, reported on the ease and availability of the online reporting system and followed the story of a citizen who lost a cell phone and was worried about the potential hassle involved in filing a report that he needed only in order to get a replacement phone.

Another potential concern has to do with the accessibility of the Internet by those who may have more need to file reports, such as residents of high-crime areas. One way to resolve this concern is to place computers in the police department and substations as well as annexes or any other locations where citizens may go to file police reports. In addition, a recent study by the U.S. Department of Commerce indicates that Internet access by lower-income persons is one of the fastest growing sectors to obtain Internet access. Furthermore, access between urban and rural areas is nearly even.

Possible Problems

Online reporting has elicited few complaints either from citizens or from the agencies using the technology, though there are some possible problem areas. One point is a concern over jurisdiction. Citizens may file reports with one agency's online system, despite the incident's occurring elsewhere. Carefully worded instructions may help alleviate some of these problems but will not eliminate them completely.

Another way of dealing with this kind of problem is to contact the complainant and let them know that the report needs to be filed in the appropriate jurisdiction. This could cause some frustration, so the department could also inform the user that the report will be filed as an outside agency assist.

Another problem could occur if the agency becomes concerned with correcting the narrative section submitted by the citizen. One department initially had employees contacting the complainants and asking further questions in order to rewrite the narrative sections to their satisfaction. Keep in mind that the citizens using the online system are not trained as police officers and may not include all the details that a police officer's report would contain.

Figure 1. Online Reports vs. Reports Filed via Other Means

Nearly 1 out of 5 Theft and Vandalism Reports Is Filed via the Internet
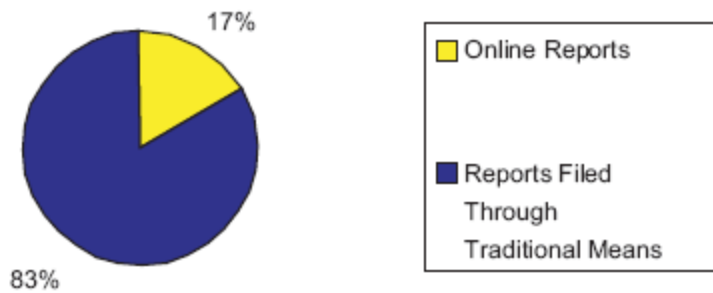
17%

☐ Online Reports

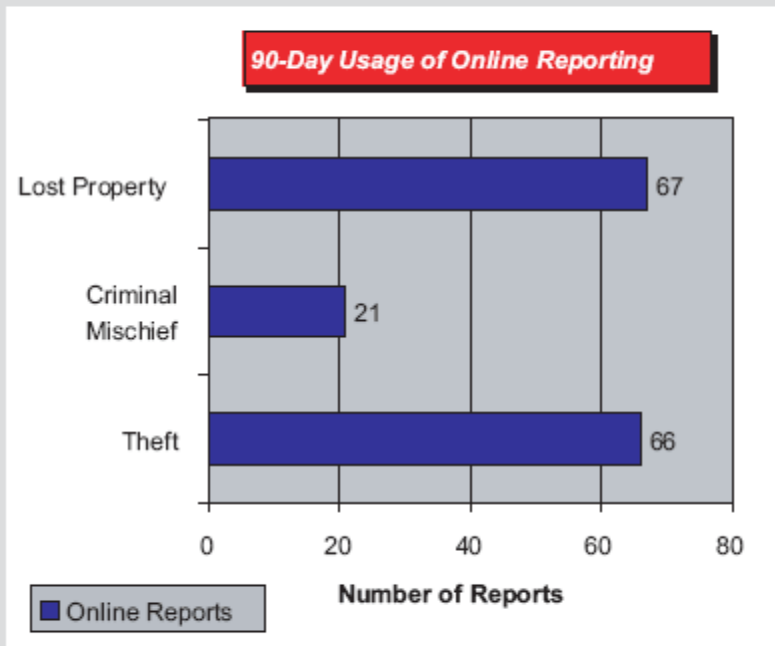■ Reports Filed Through Traditional Means

83%

Note: Based on crime data from the Boulder Police Department for the three-month period ending February 1, 2005.

Rewriting the reports takes time, and any benefit derived from the system will be lost. It is a good idea to review a report and check that it meets the established criteria, such as the type of crime being reported and the fact that there is no suspect information.

False reporting is another possible concern. None of the departments that the author researched was aware of any situation in which the online system had been used to file false police reports. A police agency could set up the system to red-flag a citizen who files numerous reports through the Internet. Follow-up could then be done to see if this indicates a misuse of the system, such as an insurance scam or a crime pattern.

Figure 2. Number of Online Reports Filed with Boulder Police for Three Common Categories

90-Day Usage of Online Reporting

Lost Property — 67
Criminal Mischief — 21
Theft — 66

Number of Reports

Online Reports

Note: Based on crime data from the Boulder Police Department for the three-month period ending February 1, 2005.

The cost of developing and implementing online reporting will vary from department to department. Depending on the estimated usage and the number of reports expected to be filed online, a department may need to purchase a new server, which could mean thousands of dollars.

If a new server is needed, the server could cost $15,000 or more depending on the specific requirements. Most communities already have Web sites set up for the community so, for the most part, areas would not need to develop an Internet site from scratch.

Another factor in the cost is the "soft" cost in terms of salaries and time spent by the employees developing online reporting. Departments recently adding the service of online reporting have spent several months in the development process. If a department has three officers and one sergeant working on the development and research, for example, the time spent could be several hours a week over six months. In this example, assume that the group works on the project an average of four hours a week. Multiply that by the four employees involved over a period of six months and the result is 384 ployee-hours.

The expenditure for that time will be based on the total compensation, including salary and benefits, which includes health insurance, of each of the employees. This could range from $70,000 and up. Assuming an average total compensation of $80,000 per year for the project group, a total cost in police employee time can be calculated. The result in this example is almost $15,000, and this does not include

any other employees who may be involved in the project, such as records or dispatch personnel, nor any IT personnel.

Also, the IT department might bill the police department for the time spent on development. In Boulder, the IT department spent some 240 hours working on the project, time normally billed at a rate of $60 per hour, for a total cost of $14,400. This did not include the time spent by police officers on the development and implementation of the system.

Possible savings to a department are valuable, in terms of time and resources, and can easily pay for the online system within a year. Larger departments, like the one in Sacramento, California, estimate that the 40 reports filed online per day are equivalent to about two full-time employees. Boulder, with a population of about 100,000, receives almost 20 reports per week, and the number is steadily increasing.

Time saved by police employees in Boulder is estimated to be valued at $30,000 to $40,000 a year, in terms of salary and benefits. This frees up officers' time for more proactive work. And perhaps the most important benefit is to the citizens themselves.

The Boulder Daily Camera reported in January 2005 that victims are pleased with the convenience of online reporting. Citizens can file reports at a time when it is convenient for them and do not have to wait for an officer to call or respond.

Smaller communities can also benefit from online reporting for citizens. Atherton, California, has a population of some 7,000 and has been using online reporting for six years. The city estimates that approximately 5 percent of applicable reports are filed online, saving approximately two hours per month of officers' time. Other areas like Aspen, Colorado, have officers follow up with the complainant who filed an online report. The time savings may not be as great as in other communities, but there is still the added service and convenience to citizens.

Many rural areas are experiencing rapid growth in population that outpaces the growth of government services. The Denver Post reported on several sheriffs' offices experiencing growth-related problems, including one county that faced a lawsuit over a slow-response time by a deputy. Deputies in rural areas may have to cover large areas, including several unincorporated towns. Online reporting allows deputies to remain on patrol and available to respond to emergency calls, while maintaining or increasing service levels.

Online reporting may vary in several ways from one department to another. The format might be different: some may use menus with drop-down choices for such specific items as vehicle make, while other forms may ask users to fill in blanks. Some agencies may follow up with a phone call to the complainant, and others may respond via e-mail.

The one universal feature is the benefit both to citizens and to law enforcement agencies. The result is truly a win-win situation for the community and for those who are sworn to protect it.

Eric Smith is president of Eric Smith & Associates, LLC, Thornton, Colorado (info@ericsmithonline.com). Author retains copyright to this article.