Videoconference Police Reporting
Reducing Personnel Costs and Still Providing Personal Service

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

Videoconference Police Reporting

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It's 2018; you get up in the morning, grab a quick breakfast and a cup of coffee in your travel mug to go with you. You are in a hurry because you have a big meeting this morning at work and you have to prepare your presentation. You look for your laptop and realize you must have left it in your car when you got home late last night. You take your coffee and head out to the car.

S@#*, you look at your car and the passenger side window is broken. You quickly assess the damage and look to see what is missing. The laptop is gone along with your GPS unit that was on the dash. You recall the officer at last month's neighborhood watch meeting telling everyone the importance of not leaving any valuables visible in a vehicle. You didn't believe her because you live in such a good neighborhood that you seldom ever worry about locking your doors.

You are in a hurry like always, and you can't wait for an officer to come make a report, so you head off to work. You remember your laptop has a Lojack unit in it, so you know it is important to report this crime right away. You recall the officer describing a videoconference reporting system the police department has and decide to give it a try after you get to work.

A little later that morning, you call the police department using your smart phone. The dispatcher takes your information and gives you a videoconference address to talk to an officer via the smart phone videoconference program. You connect to the officer. "This is great," you think. "I can see the officer and just have a conversation." You use

your phone's web cam to show the officer the broken window and the empty cradle where your GPS unit was located on the dash. He records pictures of the damage from his computer, records the Lojack identification information and contacts the company to activate the unit. The officer made an appointment for you to bring your car by the station on your way home for an evidence technician to dust it for fingerprints.

You complete the report in less than fifteen minutes and are back to work. What a great service you think to yourself! An hour later the officer calls to notify you officers have arrested a suspect. They also recovered your laptop along with some additional stolen items from other victims.

Sound like science fiction? The reality is these technologies exist today. In the near future, law enforcement can take advantage of these emerging technologies to create a videoconference police reporting system available to the public. If they are to do this, however, the videoconference programs and high-speed Broadband Internet service must be widely available to the public at a cost low enough for the majority of citizens to afford.

Videoconference Technology

The videoconference scenario described above can become a reality for California law enforcement. Videoconference software programs are currently available for individual users, and simply require a computer with enough processing power to run streaming video. Streaming video over the Internet requires systems that can provide a large amount of data flowing across the line. Fortunately, these systems are already in place. Systems that provide high-speed Internet data flow are called Broadband connections. The FCC defines broadband Internet service as "advanced communications

systems capable of providing high-speed transmission of services such as data, voice, and video over the Internet and other networks. Transmission is provided by a wide range of technologies, including digital subscriber line and fiber optic cable, coaxial cable, wireless technology, and satellite. Broadband platforms make possible the convergence of voice, video, and data services onto a single network." (Federal Communications Commision, 2009) It is through this platform that we can transform the way in which we interact with victims of crimes and others needing quick, reliable and proficient police service.

In January of 2008, 96% of all households in California already had broadband Internet service available to them, making the State the leader in broadband service availability. (Internet Use, 2009) A 2009 survey by the Public Policy Institute of California on Internet use indicates that 62% of Californians currently have broadband Internet service in the state, up from 55% last year. The survey also indicated 76% of Californians use the Internet, up from 70% last year. In California, though, there is an income divide on Internet use. 97% of those with household incomes over $80,000 use the Internet; 87% of households with income between $40,000 and $80,000 also use it. Only 58% of those with household incomes under $40,000 use the Internet. (Public Policy Institute of California Survey, 2009) To implement efficient videoconferencing protocols for the police, then, we will have to first address the income divide.

As high speed Internet providers compete for customers, the costs of services could decline making it affordable for more lower income users. With current broadband internet use in California at 62%, there are enough citizens with broadband service now to make videoconference police reporting a viable alternative. If the current trends

continue the number of citizens able to use videoconference technology will improve into the future as more citizens obtain broadband service. Certainly, police agencies interested in the advantages of such services must become involved in their advocacy as a public safety need. The voice of law enforcement is widely heard, and speaking on behalf of those who cannot easily afford broadband can pay dividends far beyond mere connection with the Internet.

If We Were To Do It…

If police agencies are going to use a videoconference reporting system, then the computers, webcams and software must be readily available and affordable. Nearly all laptop and desktop computers now sold come with webcams built in. Apple Macintosh computers come with built in webcams and Skype videoconference software already installed. Many PC models also come with this software. For those with older PC systems, aftermarket webcams are available as an add-on to existing computers for a reasonable price.

One option to expand broadband access would be to utilize the growing "netbook" computer. A netbook is a small, light and inexpensive version of a laptop computer. Netbooks have general computing capabilities and are specially suited to be very portable with convenient wireless access to the Internet. Internet providers are using these netbooks as a low cost way to entice consumers to purchase a computer with wireless high-speed broadband Internet service. In December of 2008 Radio Shack and AT&T combined to produce a $99.99 computer netbook. The netbook is offered at this price if you sign up for a two-year AT&T broadband wireless service contract at $60 a month. The netbook is an Acer black Aspire One model with a 160GB hard drive, 1GB

of RAM, Windows XP, a webcam, and a built in 3G modem. This netbook is capable of connecting to the Internet and has the ability to videoconference using a built in web cam. In 2009, as competition increased for wireless customers, some service providers were even offering free netbooks with a long-term contract for wireless service.

A $100 netbook would certainly make the technology to videoconference available to most Californians as long as they could afford broadband Internet service. AT&T was offering their wireless service on the Radio Shack netbook at $60 a month. "Currently Verizon's service has a starting cost of $140 per month. Cablevision is offering its service at $99.95 a month." (Yao, 2009) The Verizon and Cablevision service prices are for home systems.

The technology for handheld devices such as smart phones also continues to increase. For example; an iPhone purchased with a broadband wireless contract can be bought for around $199. These phones are capable of doing many things that were years ago reserved only for computers. They can connect to the Internet and stream video. They are capable of taking pictures and some smart phones can take video. They have word processing capability with touchscreen keyboards capable of creating documents or text quickly. Other manufacturers are quickly following suit, developing similar products to the iPhone with the same or more capabilities. It does not take much imagination to realize that these devices will soon be capable of videoconferencing.

Recent technolgy using cloud servers along with smart phones may allow smart phones to process as much information as a computer. " 'The problem with mobile phones' says Allan Knies, associate director of Intel Research at Berkeley, 'is that everyone wants them to perform like a regular computer, despite their relatively paltry

hardware.' Byung-Gon Chun, a research scientist at Intel Research Berkeley, thinks he might have the solution to that problem: create a supercharged clone of your smart phone that lives in 'the cloud' and let it do all the computational heavy lifting your phone is too wimpy to handle." (Mims, 2009)

According to a recent article in *Technology Review* magazine, "Clone Cloud, invented by Chun and his colleague Petros Maniatis, uses a smart phone's high-speed connection to the Internet to communicate with a copy of itself that lives in a cloud-computing environment on remote servers. The prototype runs on Google's Android mobile operating system and seamlessly offloads processor-intensive tasks to its cloud-based double." (Mims, 2009) This technology would allow mobile smart phones to perform operations such as videoconferencing at speeds like a computer.

IPhones and other smart phones are selling like crazy. Since the debut in July of 2008 through September of 2008 the iPhone 3G sold 6.9 million units, bringing total iPhone sales for 2008 up to 13 million. (Fulton, 2008) iPhone sales continued to increase with over 24 million units sold in 2009. Worldwide total smartphone sales increased to 172 million in 2009 up from 100 million in 2008. (Gartner, 2010)

The trends here are clear. Manufacturers are making computers, netbooks and smart phones more powerful, with faster processers, more memory, more features and at lower prices. Computers, laptops and netbooks are all capable of videoconferencing and it is no stretch of the imagination to envision smart phones in the near future with videoconference capabilities.

Why Should Law Enforcement Use a Videoconference Reporting Method?

Okay, so the technology is out there, affordable and available. Why would law enforcement want to use a videoconference reporting method? The answer is simple, cost savings and efficiency. Many law enforcement agencies still send officers out in the field to meet the victim and take cold police reports (one where it is reported after the occurrence, and for which there is little or no evidence or investigative leads on the case). Cold reports make up a large portion of the reports that are taken every day by police officers at law enforcement agencies throughout California. A brief case study illustrates the current costs and potential for change.

A six-month review of the reports taken at the Monrovia Police Department from July 2009 through December of 2009 indicates 58% of all reports taken were "cold reports." The Monrovia Police Department is a mid-sized agency (60 sworn officers) in Southern California serving an ethnically diverse community of 40,000 citizens.

The ability to take many of these cold reports by a videoconference reporting method has the potential to handle more than half of all the reports taken at this agency using a more efficient and cost effective method. Taking these cold reports using traditional methods is very time consuming. The Monrovia Police Department has the officer drive to the location, interview the victim, collect evidence, and then write or dictate a police report. Because a cold report is the lowest priority call for service often times the victim has to wait an extended period of time before an officer is free from higher priority calls to respond and take the cold report from the victim. All of this

results in lost time for proactive patrol by officers and lost time spent by the victim waiting to make a report.

Federal Bureau of Investigation crime data for California indicates 1,265,920 crimes were reported in the state in 2008. Of these the majority, 1,080,747 or 85%, were property crimes, which in the FBI report are burglary, larceny and vehicle theft. Property crimes account for a greater percentage of the number of cold reports a police department receives. If the Monrovia Police Department percentages of cold reports were applied to the state statistics for just property crimes, 626,833 reports could potentially be handled by the videoconference method in the State. This could result in a tremendous amount of time saved for the police while also providing a convenience for those we serve.

Videoconference reporting would eliminate the need for the officer to drive to the victim's location. The victim's statement could be recorded and transcribed using voice recognition software. The officer could then dictate and review the report right at his/her workstation. The victim would be able to have a face-to-face conversation with the officer and have their questions about the case answered. Police departments could use trained civilians to take these reports at a significant cost savings over police officers in the field.

Another cost saving option would be to contract with retired officers to take these videoconference reports from their homes via the Internet. The 3% at 50 retirement program has increased the number of highly trained officers that are retired but still looking for options to make additional retirement income. Contracting with these officers would take advantage of their investigative and report writing knowledge to take videoconference reports from their home at a significant savings to the department.

Conclusion

With the current economic recession hitting California cities hard, police departments must look for cost saving ways to work more efficiently and more effectively. Web-based videoconference police reporting is a way to take cold police reports efficiently at cost savings to a department and still provide a high level of customer service and personal interaction to the victim reporting a crime. As the availability of these technologies grows, the opportunity will be there for a police agency to develop a videoconference reporting system and take advantage of the potential cost savings this program can provide.

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