

Software Helps Police Draw Crime Links

by Gareth Cook

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Coplink has already been installed in a handful of cities and counties, mostly in the West: Tucson and Phoenix; Redmond, Wash.; Huntsville, Texas; Polk County, Iowa; and Montgomery County, Va. Though the program is bound to alarm some privacy advocates with its relentless drive to find even the most subtle connections between people and events, officers point out that the software does nothing police don't already do, and it is still the police - not the machine - deciding what leads are worth following.

In Tucson, Coplink has helped track down rapists, murderers, and other violent criminals based on the slimmest of clues. In one case, a detective was able to identify a suspect in a child rape case using only a rough physical description of the suspect and his car, and the first few letters of his last name, said Tim Petersen of the Tucson Police Department. They tracked the suspect through his father, who shares the same last name and once reported a lost wallet. In another case, Petersen said, a criminal was nabbed on the basis of a tattoo, a previous association with the victim, and the nickname "Shorty."

The software then automatically links items that have names or other facts in common, allowing detectives to pose very complex search challenges. In the Washington, D.C., sniper case, for example, Coplink was called in to help. The system wasn't operational until the day the suspects were caught. But when it was asked to find any person or car that was associated with events within an hour of any of the shootings, the suspects, and their blue Chevrolet Caprice, popped up immediately because they had been stopped by officers after more than one of the shootings, said Robert Griffin, president of the Knowledge Computing Corp., which sells Coplink.