

ESSEX COUNTY (NEWARK): New Jersey's SMART Social Media Initiative

The Problem:

As the use of technology and the internet continues to rise, criminal investigations reveal suspects are increasingly turning to social media to organize and plan their crimes, brag about criminal activity after the fact, or unknowingly leave a digital footprint. Gang members may "hashtag" their gang affiliation, post photos and videos of their activities, and may use their affiliation as their display names. Victims of crime often turn to social media for their own investigations when their assailant is not immediately arrested or known, and this may lead to retaliation and distrust/frustration of law enforcement's ability to use social media to solve a case. Prior to the grant, the Essex County Prosecutor's Office (ECPO) (<http://www.njecpo.org/>) and law enforcement had few mechanisms in place to unlock valuable social media and digital evidence, leaving much evidence uncovered and violent crimes unsolved.

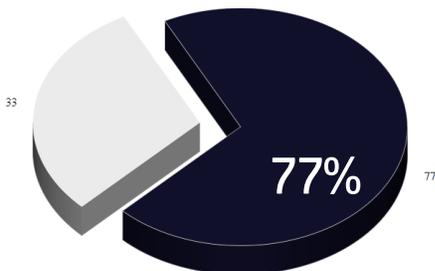


Chart 1: 2014:
77% of Americans now own a smartphone¹

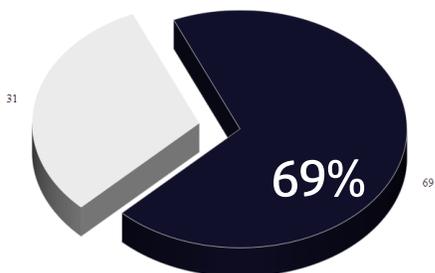


Chart 2: 2015:
69% of American adults use social media²

¹ <http://www.pewinternet.org/factsheets/mobile/>

² <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-media/>

³ <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-media/>

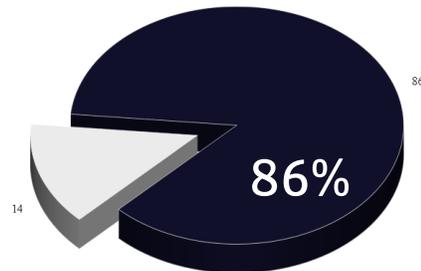


Chart 3: 2014:
86% of Americans aged 18-29 use social media³

The Response:

In 2016, ECPO, in partnership with researchers from Rutgers University - Center on Policing (formerly the Police Institute), launched a social media investigations section within its Special Prosecutions Unit to investigate and prosecute cases based on suspects' usage of social media funded through the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The unit is currently staffed with 3 prosecutors.

Key Features:

- Prosecutors screens approximately six new cases each week from the four largest municipalities in Essex County: Newark, East Orange, Irvington, and Bloomfield
- Social media evidence is obtained from open and public social media accounts including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and other lesser-known social media
- The team utilizes scraping software that ties key words to a specific crime
- Prosecutors combine social network analysis (SNA) with social media investigations to successfully prosecute gang, and violent crime cases

Early Successes:

Some notable cases from the initiative include:

- Two separate gun trafficking rings uncovered through social media
- Evidence discovered through Facebook of a retaliatory murder
- A court's allowance of an identification procedure that would have otherwise been subject to suppression, but, because of the social media evidence, was corroborated and determined admissible without a suppression hearing
- For a serial robber, a guilty plea of ten years in State prison, 85% of the sentence to be served before possibility of parole

Analysis:

Researchers from the Rutgers University - Center on Policing, Dr. Wayne Fisher, Dr. Rosalyn Bocker Parks, and Linda Tartaglia will evaluate the Initiative. They will assess the advantages of enhanced, social-media based, investigative and prosecutorial efforts of project-based cases compared to a control group that is comprised of similar cases not screened into the Unit for specialized treatment.

Biggest Challenge:

The researchers faced an early challenge—assembling a large enough cohort based on 2017 data to establish a control group. Cases in the control group are prosecuted without the assistance of social media investigations. To obtain enough cases for the control group, researchers are using data from 2016 cases.

Lessons and Next Steps:

If the ECPO's specialized unit produces statistically significant results at the end of the two-year grant period, plans for the future may include the office's 140 prosecutors adopting this targeted approach.

“ Social media is the wave of the future and we are just hitting the tip of the iceberg at this point. ”

-**Robert Laurino**, *Essex County Prosecutor*

“ Partnerships like the Social Media Initiative are a powerful example of the benefits of professionals in the field and academia working together to reduce crime and violence. ”

-**Linda Tartaglia**, *IPS Research Partner & Director, Rutgers University Center on Policing*

“ Further utilization [of social media evidence] will assist prosecutors with better case outcomes, convictions, and higher sentences based on higher proofs. ”

-**Robert Laurino**, *Essex County Prosecutor*

