

# Citizens Self Reporting Crimes Online: The Law Enforcement perspective

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## Abstract

In an effort to streamline officer duties and to encourage the community to report more crimes, many police departments are launching an online tip and incident reporting system (Cisneros, 2009). A growing number of Police Departments have turned to cyberspace. Incidents such as vehicle burglaries and harassing phone calls can be reported online, in minutes (Larocco, 2009). The effect this technology has had on implementing police departments will be determined through surveys to assess it's effectiveness in allowing citizens to self report crimes online.

## Introduction

The advent of the internet has changed the way people interact with one another. From email to text messages; Facebook to Twitter; people now communicate in a world of electronic advancements. Businesses were forced to meet the demand for online services or go out of business. Government agencies felt the pressure of changing communication methods and began offering services through internet websites. However, most government websites simply offered access to posted information providing no interaction with the citizens they served.

Law enforcement agencies have long used technical advancements to improve communications and crime reporting within their agencies but little advancement had been made in the way they communicated with the communities they serve. Alternative methods of responding to low priority calls have ranged from taking walk-in reports, mail-in reports and staffing call centers. While these methods have addressed the need of freeing up patrol officers from paperwork, they still require a significant amount of time and resources. (Cartwright, 2008).

In 2006, I introduced my agency, The Orange County Sheriff's Office (FL.), to the idea of citizens self reporting crimes online. Shortly after this introduction we added an "E-Reporting" application to our website. Today there are many agencies nationally who provide the same interactive service, so how successful has the program been, can it be expanded and will it last? This research paper will determine the future viability of online crime reporting in a world wrought with technical advancements.

## Literature Review

Law enforcement agencies have, for years, explored new ideas to provide more effective policing services. Ways in which the police could serve more areas of the community with the same number of officers. Ideas that would encourage community involvement were introduced in the form of neighborhood watch programs and auxiliary police units. Using cameras to monitor traffic intersections or listening devices to detect the sound of gunfire in neighborhoods are new technologies law enforcement has deployed to collect information on criminal activity. All these initiatives have the same goal; to make our communities safer by reporting criminal violations to the police. The police would then use the information reported, as limited as it may be, to focus their resources in the areas of increased criminal activity. (Gitmed, 2007)

Technological advancements have also helped most law enforcement agencies improve their internal communication abilities. From the first in car radios used to dispatch officers to the scene of a crime to modern day in car computers to complete records checks of both people and their property. Law enforcement has done well with communication advancements amongst themselves but their communication with the public has made little progress in the collection of information from the citizens themselves, since the creation of the 9-1-1 system. Sure, cell phones have made this technology more mobile but until recently law enforcement had yet to tap into modern day communications; specifically the internet. Many departments have implemented the latest advancement, the Internet, to better serve their citizens while also saving labor and avoiding administrative red tape. (Gitmed, 2007)

While the internet has been used by government agencies, including police departments, to post information about themselves and the communities they serve, the communication was one sided. Until recently, information posted on a government website was usually followed by a telephone number to call if you had questions or needed to report a crime. There were attempts to facilitate better communication through the internet in the form of printing out police forms to be filled out and mailed in or dropped off at the local police station. While this was a step in the right direction it did little in the way of speeding up the reporting process. The success of the online crime reporting program may be measured by the hundreds of law enforcement agencies now offering this reporting option nationwide and the number of law enforcement agencies launching their own online programs each month. (Coplogic, 2009) Santa Ana Police (CA.) bought into the tool after hearing positive feedback from other users. (Cisneros, 2009).

It is estimated more than 80% of all households in the United States of America now have computers in their home and of those, almost 92% have internet access. As computers became more prevalent in American society, the next natural advancement in communication was through the internet. Private businesses not only advertise their products online they also complete internet sales with consumers who are buying from the comfort of their home. As this trend continues it indicates people are becoming

more comfortable with not only using web based programs but are comfortable with entering personal information such as names addresses and even banking information online. (Nielsen Report, 2008).

Faced with continuing budget cuts and an economy in recession, law enforcement agencies continue to look for ways technology can help them meet the everyday demands placed on them to maintain their current level of service with less money. When the idea of citizens reporting crimes online was introduced earlier in this decade, the timing seemed optimal, but would it work? (Larocco, 2009)

One company called Coplogic introduced a program to the law enforcement community that addresses this specific idea. Coplogic's Desk-Officer Online Reporting System (DORS) is designed to interface directly with current records management systems and to print formatted reports that are suitable for filing alongside police officer written reports. (Coplogic, 2009)

There are several major benefits to implementing an online citizen police reporting system. Chief is the reduction in time and resources spent on responding to and writing reports for minor incidents that rarely have a suspect and are primarily filed for insurance purposes. The belief is the less time officers spend taking reports for crimes most consider minor, the more time they can spend patrolling the community in search of in-progress crimes. The end result is maintaining the same level of service to an increasing population for the same money or a decreasing budget. (Cartwright, 2008).

In this research 16 Law Enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada, each serving a population of at least 250,000 full time residents were identified. All the agencies have employed the online crime reporting program for at least one calendar year (2009). These agencies were surveyed to determine the success of the program from both the satisfaction of their citizens as well as the agencies offering the program.

## Method

The purpose of this research is to examine the success of citizens self reporting crimes online from the perspective of the law enforcement agencies receiving the online reports. This research explored what percentage of total reports filed with each agency are received online. How long after the reports are received are they being reviewed and who is responsible for reviewing them. The research focused on whether there were more reported incidents of the crime types accepted online then before online reporting and of the reports received was there an increase or decrease in the clearance rate for these minor crimes. Secondly the research determined what the annual cost saving was, if any, for each agency.

Due to the vast differences in agency policies and local laws, the percentage of reports taken online versus total reports filed is reflective of what types of reports each

agency allows their citizens to report online. Some agencies allow online reporting of residential or commercial burglaries, if there was no forced entry, while others do not.

This research was conducted during the first quarter of 2010 by surveying 16 law enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada. All agencies surveyed provide policing services to a population of at least 250,000 fulltime resident citizens and have employed the program for at least one calendar year (2009).

This writer identified the administrator responsible for the day to day operation of the online program for each of the 16 agencies to be surveyed. A survey of 10 questions was emailed to each agency's online administrator. Survey question 1 identified how many sworn law enforcement officers each agency employs. Survey question 2 focused on what type of reports each agency accepted via the online system. Questions 3 and 4 were designed to calculate how many police reports each agency receives annually and of those reports how many are received online. Questions 5 and 6 asked who was responsible for reviewing the reports and how long the reports waited before being reviewed.

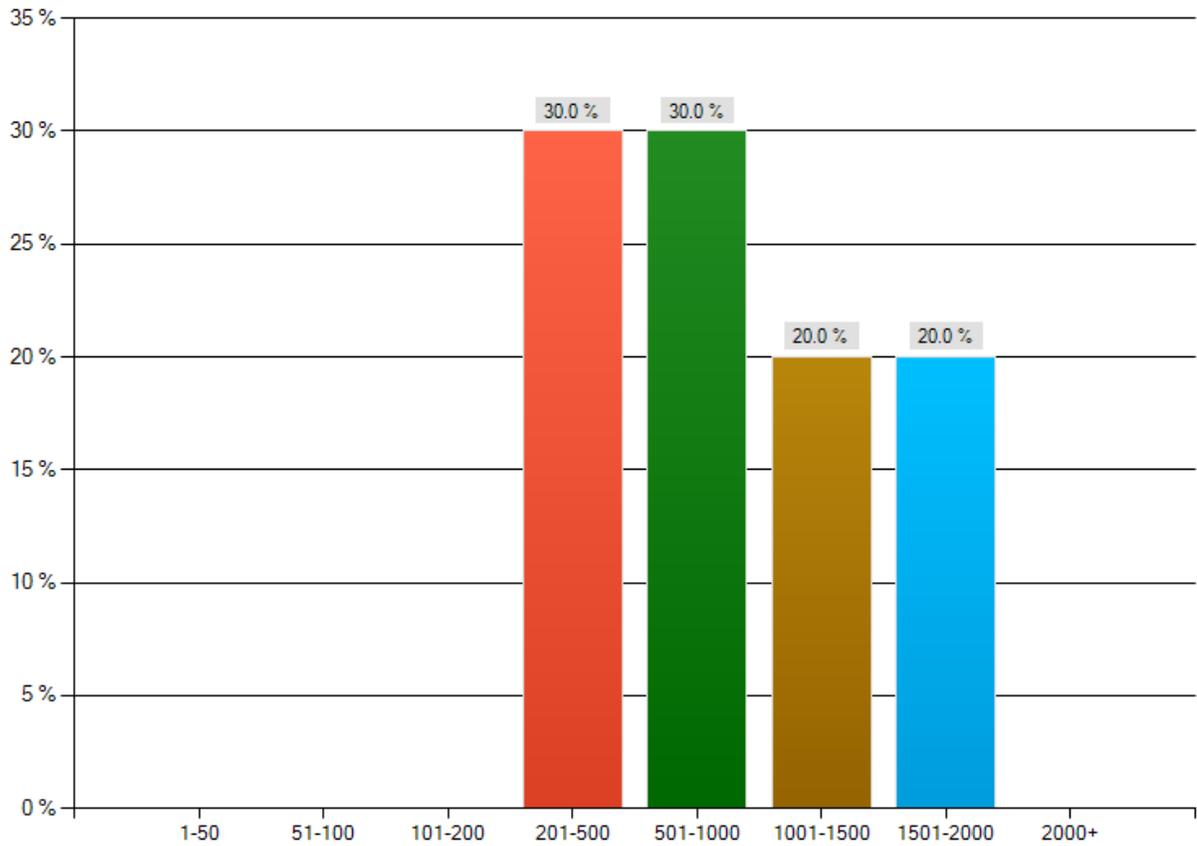
Survey question 7 was crafted to determine if the number of reported crimes increased due to the convenience of reporting them online, decreased due to the possibility of victims feeling "put off" by the police agency referring them to their website or did the numbers remain static. Question 8 was crafted to solicit additional information from agencies about how many online reports lead to the arrest of a suspect. This question explored the amount of incidents reported online that resulted in the arrest of a suspect that may not have been filed without the ease of online crime reporting. Question 9 explores whether the program resulted in the intended cost savings and if so how much? The final question was open ended and solicited any future plans for expanding the program to include additional services each agency may be pursuing.

## Results

A Survey was emailed to 16 Law Enforcement agencies in the United States and Canada. 10 responses were received back for a return rate of 62.5%. The agencies solicited were identified by the total population of permanent residents they serve, being 250,000 or more and how long they have employed the program, at least one calendar year (2009).

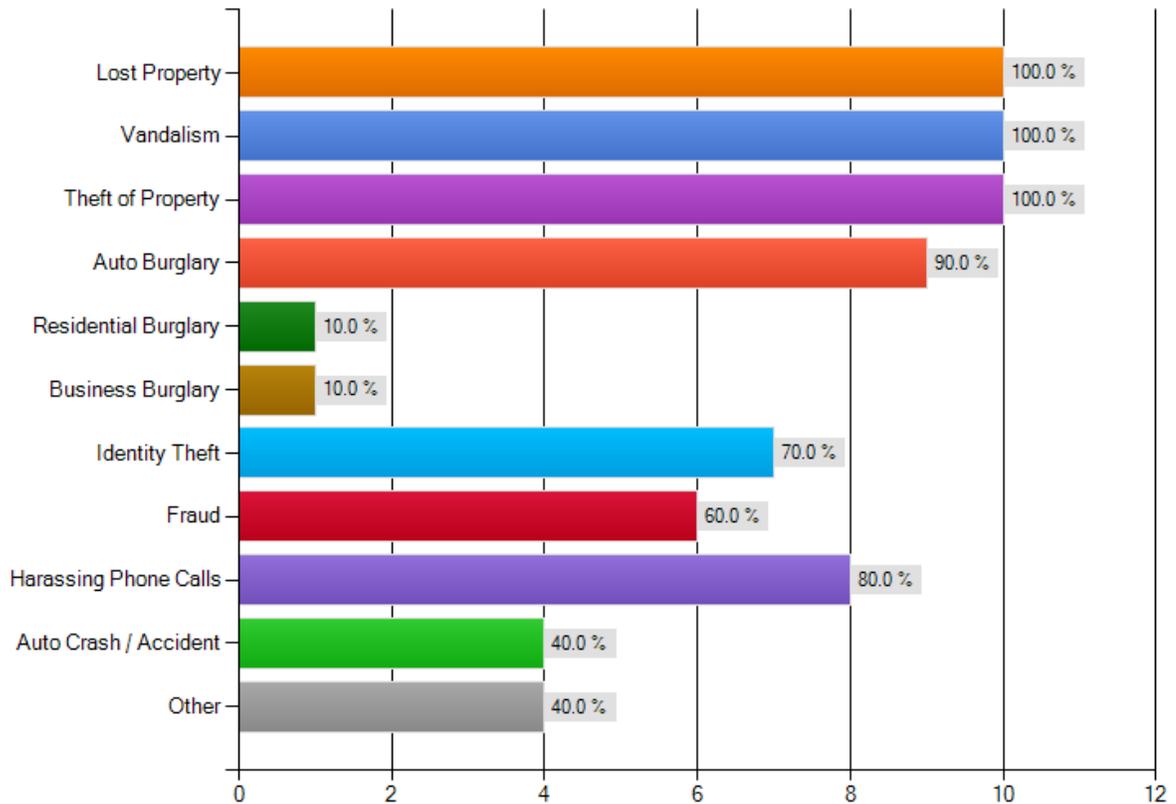
The goal of the survey was to identify the success or failure of citizens self reporting crimes on line from the perspective of agencies offering this communication option to its citizens and visitors. To further identify the participating Law Enforcement Agencies survey question one determined the amount of sworn officers each agency employs. The information gathered revealed:

**How many sworn officers / deputies are employed by your agency?**



The next question on the survey sought to identify what types of crimes the participating agencies accept from citizens via online self reporting programs. The results yielded:

Please indicate which of the following report types your agency accepts from citizens self reporting crimes online.



In the category of “Other” one agency indicated they accept Attempted Auto Theft reports as long as there are no suspects. Another agency indicated they accept violation of child custody orders of a non violent nature (eg. late drop off or pick up of a child).

After understanding the size of each agency, how large a population they serve and the types of reports they are accepting from citizens online, the survey sought to identify how many reports were being received by each agency. A determination was made to calculate what percentage of each agency’s reports are received online. The average “total reports filed” with the participating agencies was 97,306 with a high of 162,000 and a low of 35,575 (one agency abstained from this question). The percentage of reports filed online with each agency and the estimated money savings reported is as follows.

Total reports filed with each agency in 2009.	Total reports filed online with each agency in 2009.	Percentage of total reports filed online in 2009.	Estimated savings in 2009. Reported by agency
103,412	3,842	3.72%	\$150,000
35,575	2,026	5.70%	Unreported

130,000	16,917	13.01%	\$25,375
162,000	11,766	7.26%	\$470,640
132,432	2,938	2.22%	\$117,520
75,280	12,749	16.94%	\$380,000
64,500	6,000	9.30%	Unreported
58,315	7,117	12.20%	\$876,814
114,242	11,951	10.46%	\$478,040
Unreported	3,927	Unknown	Unreported
<b>Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Average</b>
97,306	7,923	8.97%	\$356,912

The next series of questions sought to identify who is reading and reviewing the online reports. Each participating agency was asked who they are employing to review online reports and how soon the reports are reviewed after received. The participating agencies reported a wide variety of agency personnel who are tasked with reviewing online reports. Some share the responsibility throughout their agency, while some agencies send all their reports to just one unit.

- Two agencies indicated their online reports go to sworn officers only.
- Two agencies indicated their reports go to civilian records staff only.
- Several agencies indicated their reports go to Telephone Report Units, sworn Light Duty staff and civilian police service staff.
- One agency reported routing reports to several different units based on the nature of the report.

\*It should be noted no agency hired additional staff to review these reports.

Actual agency responses:

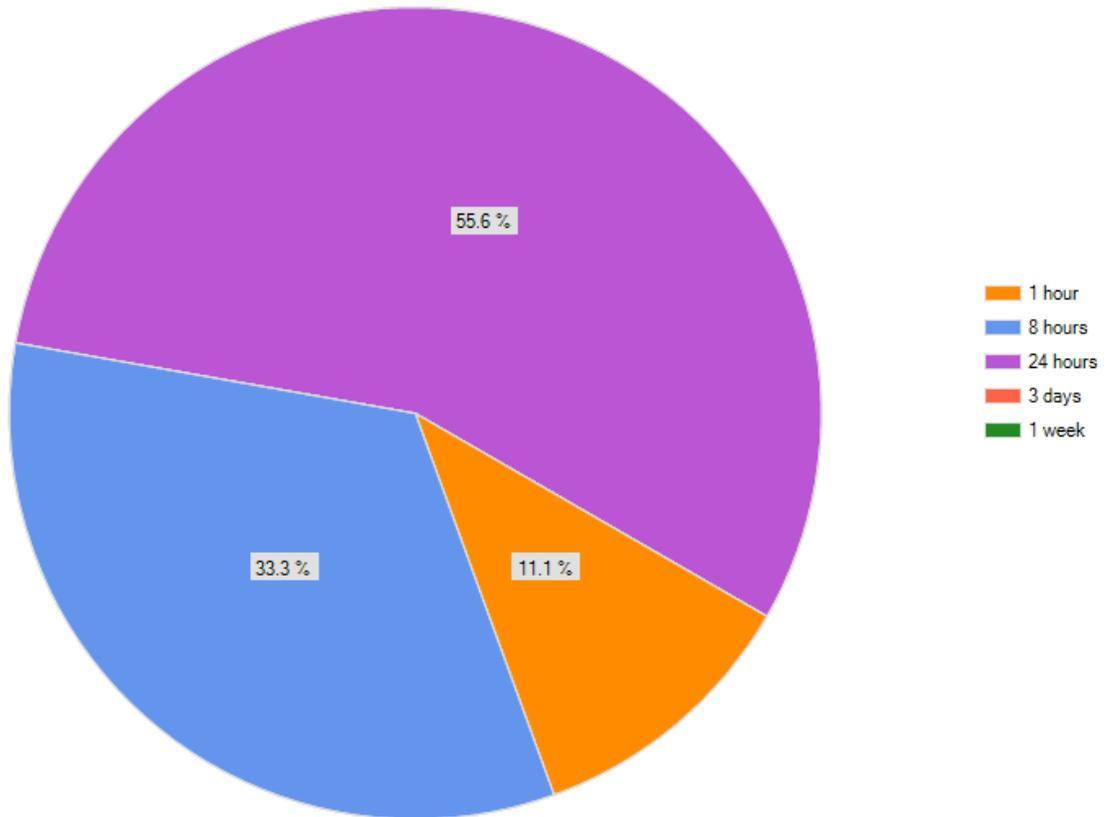
Officers, but researching alternatives.
Traffic Investigators review TC reports; Clerk in Economic Crimes Detail reviews ID Thefts and Modified Duty PO and civilian Police Service Representative review the remaining crime types
Once a report is filed on line, it is electronically routed to the Police District in which the incident occurred. The Sergeants assigned to the Police Districts are responsible for the report reviews.
Civilian staff in our Administration Section.
Alternate Response Unit.
Non-sworn and light duty sworn in the Telephone Report Unit.
Records staff.
Police Clerks in the Records Section.
We have a staff of 6 in our Telephone Report Unit (civilian) who do the review of these reports on their down time. It works very well. Any report that could possibly need follow-up is sent to a Case Review officer.
Deputies who are on "light duty" and civilian "Service" personnel.

How long a report waits for review was posed as a follow up question to further understand how participating agencies respond to online reports. While the times vary between agencies, more than half of the responding agencies report reviewing online

reports within twenty four hours while the remainder of reporting agencies complete this task in less than eight hours.

Based on an 80% response to the question:

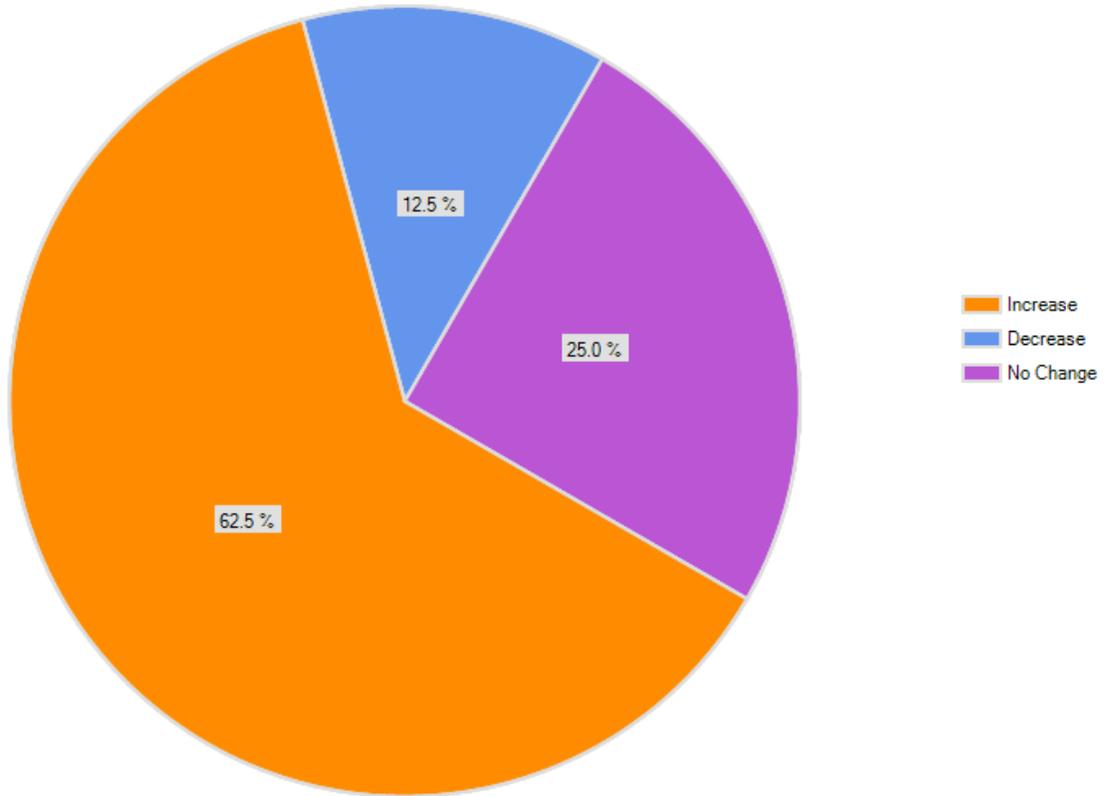
**On average, how long after a report is filed by a citizen online will the report be reviewed by an agency member?**



Questions 7 and 8 were designed to measure the effectiveness of the online program from the perspective of crimes reported versus crimes solved. The first question asked, was there an increase, decrease or no change for the amount of reports received after the online reporting option was now available. This question was followed up by collecting data on how many online reports resulted in arrests. The results are as follows:

Based on a 90% response to the question:

Of the crime types your agency allows citizens to reported online, was there an increase or decrease in reports since the online reporting program was implemented?



The follow up question of how many crimes reported online resulted in arrest yielded a 100% response indicating fifty percent (50%) of the agencies have not recorded this information. The remaining agencies reported the following:

Total online reports.	Online reports resulting in arrest.	Percentage of online reports resulting in arrest.
11,951	29	.24%
12,749	52	.41%
3,937	42	1.07%
2,026	2	.10%
<b>2,938</b>	<b>21,828</b>	<b>Faulty information</b>

The final question of the survey allowed participating agencies to share their future plans of expanding their online programs to further serve their communities. Based on a 100% response to the question the following information was reported.

1. 40% have no future plans for expansion.
2. 40% have plans for future expansion.
  - 2.1) We have implemented online submission of alarm permits and interdepartmental filing of Suspicious Activity Reports (SAR) to Criminal Intelligence.
  - 2.2) Yes, though not stated at this time.
  - 2.3) We are always exploring our options with online reporting. It has been a valuable tool for our agency.
  - 2.4) We recently allowed tow companies to enter vehicle tow information. We are exploring allowing citizens to report traffic complaints and bank forgery cases.
3. 20% are unsure.

#### Discussion

This research indicates a clear benefit to Law Enforcement agencies who offer online crime reporting to its citizens and visitors. The added means of communication between a Law Enforcement and the community they serve has proven beneficial in several ways. First is maximizing the convenience and ease of use provided by the internet. Looking back to the literature review a 2008 Nielsen report estimates 80% of all households in the United States of America now have computers in their home and of those, almost 92% have internet access. (Nielsen Report, 2008).

Secondly, the cost benefit has also proven advantageous to the budget restrictions of the participating agencies. Survey question 9 sought to determine the cost saving each agency was recording annually by offering online crime reporting. The average cost saving was, on average, an astonishing \$356,912 annually. Each agency reported they staff the program with existing agency personnel furthering their fiscal savings.

Further evidence of the public's willingness to use the internet to self report crimes online is evident in survey question 4 where 90% of the agencies returned data indicating they now take 9% of all their police reports online, with one agency reporting over 16% of reports taken online. While the focus of this program was to provide a convenient alternative for the public to report "low priority" type incidents to the police, it is worth noting survey question 8 revealed half of the participating agencies report 1% or less of the online reports received resulted in an arrest while the other half of the participating agencies do not record this information for online reports.

How long an incident report waits for review and response is critical to the success of these programs. If the reporting public feels there is little, or worse, no concern for their report they will lose confidence and insist on reporting their incident to an officer in person. The agencies participating in the survey seem to understand this theory as 90% returned information indicating their reports are reviewed in 24 hours or less.

Survey question 7 is somewhat limited in its effectiveness to help us understand what effect online crime reporting has to encourage people to report crimes to Law Enforcement. With an 80% return, 62.5% of the participating agencies reported an increase in the crime types they accept online. The survey instrument did not account for general increases attributed to other variables such as population increase etc. It is however, worth noting 25% on the agencies reported no increase in reports and 12.5% reported a decrease in reported incidents.

## Recommendations

Several years after the idea of citizens reporting crimes online was introduced to the Law Enforcement community, this research sought to identify the success or failure of the concept, from the perspective of the agencies utilizing the program. After allowing citizens to self report crime online for several years the survey instrument used in this research was designed to determine its effectiveness from the Law Enforcement perspective. It is clear, citizens reporting crimes online is a benefit to law enforcement in time saved, services offered and budgetary constraints. This writer recommends further research and possible expansion of these programs to include accepting additional languages be accepted and translated to English. I further recommend exploration to implement Kiosk locations throughout the community to further encourage citizens to take advantage of the reporting option.

Lieutenant William Van de Water has 24 years of law enforcement experience and has been with the Orange County Sheriff's Office since 1990. Bill has worked in several divisions to include Criminal Investigations, Uniformed Patrol, Special Investigations, and Youth Services. Bill is currently a Lieutenant managing the county wide Tactical Anti -Crime Unit. He also serves as the Sheriff's Office Hostage Negotiations Team Leader.

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## Appendix - A

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# Citizens Self-Reporting Crimes Online Survey

**1. How many sworn officers / deputies are employed by your agency?**

- 1-50
- 51-100
- 101-200
- 201-500
- 501-1000
- 1001-1500
- 1501-2000
- 2000+

**2. Please indicate which of the following report types your agency accepts from citizens self reporting crimes online.**

- Lost Property
- Vandalism
- Theft of Property
- Auto Burglary
- Residential Burglary
- Business Burglary

- Identity Theft
- Fraud
- Harassing Phone Calls
- Auto Crash / Accident
- Crime Tips

Other (please specify)

**3. How many total police reports were filed with your agency in 2009?**

**4. How many police reports were filed online by citizens with your agency in 2009?**

**5. On average, how long after a report is filed by a citizen online will the report be reviewed by an agency member?**

- 1 hour
- 8 hours
- 24 hours
- 3 days
- 1 week

Other (please specify)

**6. Who is responsible for reviewing the online reports once they are received by your agency?**

**7. Of the crime types your agency allows citizens to reported online, was there an increase or decrease in reports since the online reporting program was implemented?**

- Increase
- Decrease
- No Change

Other (please specify)

**8. How many online reports filed in 2009 resulted in arrests?**

**9. What was the estimated cost savings to your agency in 2009 as a result of citizens self-reporting crimes online?**

**10. Does your agency have plans for any future expansion of the services offered by the citizens online crime reporting program?**

Done

## Appendix - B

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### Citizens Self-Reporting Crimes Online Survey With Reply

**1. How many sworn officers / deputies are employed by your agency?**

**100% return**

- |                                     |           |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1-50      |     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 51-100    |     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 101-200   |     |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 201-500   | 30% |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 501-1000  | 30% |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1001-1500 | 20% |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 1501-2000 | 20% |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 2000+     |     |

**2. Please indicate which of the following report types your agency accepts from citizens self reporting crimes online.**

**100% Return**

- |                          |                   |      |
|--------------------------|-------------------|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Lost Property     | 100% |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Vandalism         | 100% |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Theft of Property | 100% |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Auto Burglary     | 90%  |

- Residential Burglary      **10%**
- Business Burglary      **10%**
- Identity Theft      **70%**
- Fraud      **60%**
- Harassing Phone Calls      **80%**
- Auto Crash / Accident      **40%**
- Crime Tips      **40%**

**3. How many total police reports were filed with your agency in 2009?**

**90% Return**

- 1.) 103,412
- 2.) 35,575
- 3.) 130,000
- 4.) 162,000
- 5.) 132,432
- 6.) 75,280
- 7.) 64,500
- 8.) 58,315
- 9.) 114,242

**4. How many police reports were filed online by citizens with your agency in 2009?**

**90% Return**

- 1.) 3,842
- 2.) 2,026
- 3.) 16,917
- 4.) 11,766
- 5.) 2,938
- 6.) 12,749
- 7.) 6,000
- 8.) 7,117
- 9.) 11,951

**5. On average, how long after a report is filed by a citizen online will the report be reviewed by an agency member?**

**90% Return**

- 1 hour    **1- 11.1%**
- 8 hours    **3- 33.3%**
- 24 hours    **5 - 55.6%**
- 3 days
- 1 week

**6. Who is responsible for reviewing the online reports once they are received by your agency?**

**100 % Return**

- 1.) Officers, but researching alternatives.

2.) Traffic Investigators review TC reports; Clerk in Economic Crimes Detail reviews ID Thefts and Modified Duty PO and civilian Police Service Representative review the remaining crime types

3.) Once a report is filed on line, it is electronically routed to the Police District in which the incident occurred. The Sergeants assigned to the Police Districts are responsible for the report reviews.

4.) Civilian staff in our Administration Section.

5.) Alternative Response unit.

6.) Non-sworn and light duty sworn in the Telephone Report Unit.

7.) Records Staff

8.) Police Clerks in the Records Section

8.) We have a staff of 6 in our Telephone Report Unit (civilian) who do the review of these reports on their down time. It works very well. Any report that could possibly need follow-up is sent to a Case Review Officer.

9.) Deputies who are on "light duty" and civilian "Service" personnel.

**7. Of the crime types your agency allows citizens to reported online, was there an increase or decrease in reports since the online reporting program was implemented?**

**80% Return**

- Increase    5- 62.5%
- Decrease    1- 12.5%
- No Change   2- 25%

**8. How many online reports filed in 2009 resulted in arrests?**

**100% Return**

1.) Unknown

2.) 2

3.) We do not track this information at this level of detail (online report results)

4.) Unknown, would have to research this.

5.) 42

6.) 21,828

7.) 52

8.) Unknown

9.) Exact number has not been researched. Aprox 25%

10.) 29

**9. What was the estimated cost savings to your agency in 2009 as a result of citizens self-reporting crimes online?**

**100% Return**

1.) \$150,000

2.) Unknown

3.) \$25,375

4.) 11766 reports x\$40.00 per report=\$470,640

5.) \$117,520

7.) Approx. \$380,000.00

8.) Several Thousand dollars in police officer time

9.) \$876,814 Based on average officer salary and time that would normally spent responding to and taking the report.

10.) Allowing that we estimate a cost of \$40 if a report is written by a deputy the savings would be \$470,040.

**10. Does your agency have plans for any future expansion of the services offered by the citizens online crime reporting program?**

**100% Return**

- 1.) Yes, in Process
- 2.) We've implemented online submission of alarm permits and interdepartmental filing of (SAR) Suspicious Activity Reports to Criminal Intel.
- 3.) Not at this time
- 4.) Not at this time
- 5.) Possibly
- 6.) Yes, though not stated at this time
- 7.) No
- 8.) Not at this time
- 9.) We are always exploring our options with online reporting. It has been a valuable tool for our agency.
- 10.) We recently allowed tow companies to enter vehicle tow information. We are exploring allowing citizens to report traffic complaints and bank forgery cases.

Done

## Appendix - C

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### Citizens Self-Reporting Crimes Online Survey Participating Law Enforcement Agencies

- ❖ Fresno Police Department, California
- ❖ Anaheim Police Department, California
- ❖ San Francisco Police Department, California
- ❖ Calgary Police Service, Alberta Canada
- ❖ York Regional Police, Ontario Canada
- ❖ Albuquerque Police Department, New Mexico
- ❖ Sacramento Police Department, California
- ❖ Anchorage Police Department, Alaska
- ❖ Stockton Police Department, California
- ❖ Orange County Sheriff's Office, Orlando, Florida