White Paper

Closing the Case:
Solving Violent Crimes Quickly and Efficiently with Public Records

Use the power of public records to locate people, detect fraud, uncover assets and discover connections.

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This paper will discuss how public records can play a key role in generating leads to solve violent crimes. From child abduction investigations to homicides and robberies, this paper will examine some of the many ways in which officers and investigators use public records information to make their neighborhoods safer. Public records information streamlines agency processes, provides quality leads and helps keep officers better informed to minimize danger.

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Introduction

The job of a police officer is not easy. Tasked with apprehending criminals, maintaining public order and preventing and detecting crimes, police officers put their lives in danger every day. In order to do their jobs well, officers need reliable information and plenty of resources. Yet, law enforcement agencies face daunting challenges: funding cuts, outdated information and increasingly sophisticated criminals.

Adding to the challenges are the common assumptions that many crimes can be solved with the same cutting-edge technologies people see on television. In many cases, however, these are "phantom" solutions that police officers cannot access, even though the average citizen may expect it of them. While the entertainment industry has generated unrealistic expectations about the speed and accuracy of some investigative tools, there are tools—such as public records and systems designed to make use of them—that exist right now and can be used to develop leads for solving crimes more quickly and effectively.

Nowhere are these tools more needed than in the area of violent crime. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the violent crime rate, while much lower than its peak in 1991, is still significantly higher than the crime rate of the 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, the decline in the violent crime rate appears to have stagnated, with statistics from 2005 indicating the first increase in violent crime in fourteen years. The current economic downturn may further exacerbate this problem as state and local governments may be forced to cut budgets while citizens commit crime to financially survive.

For these reasons it is critical that law enforcement personnel—at the federal, state and local level–understand how public records data can help accelerate and simplify the investigative process, leading to faster, more efficient resolutions. This paper explains why public records can and should play a key role in all law enforcement investigations. It will show why, regardless of the crime, public records information is an important tool in assisting law enforcement agencies, benefiting almost every point of an investigation, and will answer the questions:

- What are public records?
- Who benefits from public records?
- How do public records fit into the different stages of an investigation?
- How do public records play a role in specific violent crimes, including homicides, robberies and missing children?

What are public records?

The term "public records" refers to information, such as corporate and property records, that has been filed or recorded by local, state, federal or other government agencies. Public records are created by the federal and local government (vital records, immigration records, real estate records, driving records, criminal records, etc.) or by the individual (magazine subscriptions, voter registration, etc.). Most essential public records are maintained by the government and many are accessible to the public either free of charge or for an administrative fee. Availability is determined by federal, state and local regulations. Although public records are indeed "public," their accessibility is not always simple, free or easy. Some states have separate policies that govern the availability of information contained in public records.

Public records are used to solve a variety of societal problems and are being leveraged by financial services firms to make improved lending decisions, collections agencies to support and refuel the economy, business and government institutions to detect and combat fraud, waste and abuse, reduce identity fraud, protect our borders, identify and locate sex offenders, and find and save missing children.

Public records have always been available in one form or another; however, the ability to access and analyze this data has often been cumbersome, fragmented and expensive. Technology developments over the past decade, however, have enabled organizations to address this issue by centralizing the data and simplifying the process of identifying and retrieving relevant records at a moment's notice. These developments have the effect of supercharging the ability to use public records to quickly locate people, detect fraud, uncover assets and discover connections between suspects, witnesses or associates. While there are a variety of solutions that leverage public records to solve a myriad of societal problems, one example common to police officers is Accurint® for Law Enforcement from LexisNexis®.

Public records and the investigative process

The scope of an investigation varies depending on the size of the law enforcement agency. Police departments across the country vary in size and resources, and these variations can drastically alter how investigations proceed. In a smaller department, a uniformed police officer may be responsible for everything from traffic tickets to murder investigations. Larger agencies have the luxury of offering specialized resources, such as line officers, investigators, and analysts, for each role in the course of an investigation. Regardless of the size of department, each investigation can be considered to have three key components:

- **Initial police response:** An officer responds to a call for service or is dispatched to a crime scene. Once at the scene, the officer takes an initial amount of information from witnesses and gathers evidence. In the case of a violent crime, the officer must proceed with caution as the suspect may be armed, dangerous and nearby.

- **Investigative process:** Investigators take the information and evidence from the scene of the crime and follow up on leads. This stage often involves tracking down witnesses and associates, knocking on doors, examining physical evidence and verifying statements.

- **Analysis:** The analysis component is an in-depth process intended to make connections and detect patterns. Analysts often work with outside agencies and associations, using law enforcement data to identify patterns and link cases. The analysis can be a time-consuming process involving many pieces of data.

The main focus in solving any crime is getting the facts about what happened and ensuring the accuracy of those facts. Public records play an important role in optimizing each step of the investigative process:

- **Initial police response:** When a police officer responds to a call for service, public records information is critical before the officer even arrives at the scene of the crime. If feasible, the officer should know who lives or works at the address and any associated criminal records, as well as whether

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention:

- A child goes missing every 40 seconds in the U.S.

- In excess of 800,000 children are reported missing each year.

- Another 500,000 children go missing without ever being reported.

any guns are licensed to people at that address. It's important to know who is at the scene before the officer arrives, as the resident may have potentially dangerous relatives or associates.

- **Investigative process:** On the investigative side, public records information can verify information that witnesses provide, and draw attention to additional current occupants who may have outstanding warrants and other red flags, such as parolees or probationers. Using public records also streamlines the investigative process, so officers can identify relevant witnesses and associates, verify identifies, verify locations, prioritize who to speak with first and provide best address and phone number information.

- **Analysis:** In the latter stages of the investigation, analysts can integrate public records information with data from law enforcement databases to create a comprehensive view of the crime, link individuals, assets and contacts, and find conclusions that would otherwise be missed.

Law enforcement agencies don't use crystal balls, and police officers are not able to predict what will happen during the course of their day. From finding missing kids to homicide to robbery, each investigation presents its own set of challenges. The following scenarios illustrate how public records information may assist in specific investigations of significant violent crimes.

Finding missing children

The first minutes and hours following the abduction of a child are crucial, as the chances of rescuing an abducted child decrease significantly after the first 24 hours. The investigation commences with police officers conducting a forensic investigation of the abduction site, while other investigators are deployed to coordinate and track investigative leads. The need for accurate information is critical as these leads can often number in the thousands. When an officer brings back information, an investigator begins the process of verifying the facts. While not all child abductions are violent, timeliness is critical: it has been estimated that 75 percent of children who are murdered after being abducted by strangers are killed within the first 3 hours after being abducted.

In the case of a missing child, officers follow protocol established by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to canvass the scene and find leads. NCMEC analyzes and prioritizes leads for investigators using public and private databases, identifying patterns between cases across the country.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice*:

- 797,500 children (younger than 18) were reported missing in a one-year period of time studied, resulting in an average of 2,185 children being reported missing each day.

- 203,900 children were the victims of family abductions.

- 58,200 children were the victims of non-family abductions.

- 115 children were the victims of "stereotypical" kidnapping (these crimes involve someone the child does not know or someone of slight acquaintance, who holds the child overnight, transports the child 50 miles or more, kills the child, demands ransom or intends to keep the child permanently).

*2002 statistics

How public records can help

In addition to the numerous ways in which public records optimize the investigative process, they play a uniquely important role in child abductions—especially when there is reason to suspect the involvement of a sexual predator.

In these investigations one of the first steps in the investigative process is to determine if any sex offenders have a relationship with any individuals in the home of the abducted child. That step is followed by checking online databases for registered sex offenders who may live in the vicinity. Police officers should, and do, prioritize these offenders in their investigations.

However, there are serious shortcomings in the sex offender registry systems of most states. For instance, these registries require offenders to register themselves and update their registry when they move within or between states. Individuals intent on abducting children have an obvious motivation not to be found. Additionally, existing registry data may not include all known information about the offender, such as known aliases and associates.

Public records can help solve this problem by enabling law enforcement agencies to, within minutes, determine which registered and unregistered sex offenders may have a link to the abducted child or may live close by, and whether they have taken out a new public record at a location where they are not registered. Using advanced technology, public records databases can identify, in seconds, individuals with a prior conviction for a sex offense whether or not those individuals have registered–as they are required by law to do–with their municipality. As a result, officers can respond more quickly to child abductions, identifying addresses associated with local sex offenders and prioritizing them in their investigations.

Homicide

Murder is the most egregious crime that can be committed, and homicide investigations are clearly the highest priority for any state or local law enforcement agency. Significant resources are placed into homicide investigations and, because of the egregiousness of the crime, there is no statute of limitations on homicide prosecution. Unlike sexual predators, murderers are not required to register themselves in a database, so even previously convicted criminals can be extremely difficult to track down.

In murder investigations, many agencies follow the 72-hour rule, in which officers investigate the first 48 hours from the time the homicide occurs and the previous 24 hours before the victim died. Most homicides are precipitated by an event that occurred within the last 24 hours of the victim's life, so an effective investigative method is to dissect the last 24 hours of the victim's life, then aggressively investigate leads within the first 24 hours after the crime has been committed.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice:

- Most homicide victims meet their demise as the result of an acquaintance. An acquaintance can be a person they either knew intimately or casually, or had met on previous occasions.

- Spouses and family members make up about 15% of all victims, and about one third of the victims are acquaintances of the assailant.

- In more than one third of homicides, the victim-offender relationship is undetermined, and in 14% of all murders, the victim and the offender are strangers.

How public records can help

Time is of the essence in any investigation, especially homicide investigations. Public records can enhance a homicide investigation in several key ways.

First, after any crime, the perpetrators need time to get their stories straight, and it is critical for officers to reach involved parties before they have time to coordinate stories and alibis, in order to prevent collusion. Public records information can be used to verify stories, or find inconsistencies within statements and relationships provided by witnesses, suspects or associates.

Second, if a victim or suspect has never had contact with a law enforcement agency (the individual has never been arrested, never filed a complaint, etc.), then the agency will not have any records in its own database. Officers can then turn to public records to obtain the most current information, such as date of birth, address and driver's license information. If the suspect is already on the run, officers can turn to public records information to retrieve a comprehensive list of associates and relatives, enabling them to knock on doors, call persons of interest and generate even more actionable information.

Third, the more interviews that take place, the more information is uncovered that can lead to a breakthrough in the investigation. Immediate family may not know everything about a victim, but associates may be more willing to disclose hidden secrets. However, if the interviews do not result in strong leads and potential suspects, police officers then focus on the victim. A "victimology" is a complete background investigation on who the victim is, where he spent his time and who he associated with. Public records information is invaluable in generating leads from this process. For example, identifying previous places of employment can enable officers to interview former coworkers. Additionally, a victimology can be informed by the type of cars registered to the victim, the people he worked with, and businesses and corporations related to him. This information can then be combined with information from a law enforcement agency database to create a comprehensive report, including actionable data points.

Robbery

Every single component that goes into a homicide investigation also applies to a robbery investigation. With most crimes, the severity of the crime is the only differentiator in how much effort will be placed in the crime's investigation. With the exception of sexual crimes, most felonies follow the same model in terms of investigative process.

The frequency of robberies can be hard to believe; 60 robberies can occur per month in a single square mile area. The sooner an identification is made in a robbery case, the sooner officers can apprehend the suspect and prevent future robberies. Serial robbers will continue to rob until they're caught.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program compiles crime statistics from more than 17,000 city, county, state, tribal and federal law enforcement agencies. According to the 2003 annual report:

- The UCR Program estimated that nearly 30% (29.9) of all violent crimes in 2003 were robberies.

- Robbery victims collectively lost an estimated $514 million in 2003, an average dollar loss of $1,244 per offense.

- Offenders used firearms in 41.8% of robberies, strong-arm tactics (hands, fists, feet, etc.) in 39.9% of robberies, and knives or cutting instruments in 8.9% of robberies. Other weapons were used in 9.4% of robberies.

In fact, statistics show that just 6 percent of the criminals in America commit 70 percent of the crimes. Identifying and incarcerating these criminals drastically decreases crime rates.

How public records can help

Robberies often have witnesses, and public records information is critical to validating their information and finding additional leads. If a getaway car is involved in the robbery, public records information can help identify the vehicle, its current and previous owners, and associated addresses.

The importance of accurate information

An incredible amount of time can be wasted during investigations because of a lingering culture that doesn't yet understand the importance and value of public records. Although some agencies prioritize information within their own internal data over public records, they are doing themselves a disservice. This information should work in tandem to allow the officers to work faster, more efficiently and safer. Rather than compete, public records information complements existing law enforcement records and contacts.

Law enforcement data applies more towards specific law enforcement information, such as identifying patterns between crimes. Consider a situation in which a police officer is trying to identify a suspect in three different robberies, and only one of the three robberies has strong leads. Public records information can be leveraged to help identify and locate the suspect from the leads in the first robbery, while internal law enforcement records can link the three cases together. The combination of public records and law enforcement data has helped solve all three robberies, an outcome not possible without both sources of information.

Public records information can drastically improve the efficiency of agencies by enabling them to accomplish tasks in one day that may have taken several days and a significant amount of resources previously. By enabling agencies to be just as if not more efficient with less personnel, they can cut costs and reassign key personnel to other cases, leading to more arrests, more cases cleared positively and an overall reduction in crime. It is up to all of us to challenge any remaining reluctance to embrace new technologies and methodologies. When all agencies understand the true capabilities of public records and utilize them more effectively throughout their investigative processes, officers can solve more crimes in less time, making our neighborhoods and their enforcement activities safer.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice:

- Of the 272,111 persons released from prisons in 15 states in 1994, an estimated 67.5% were rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within 3 years, 46.9% were reconvicted and 25.4% were resentenced to prison for a new crime.

- The 272,111 offenders discharged in 1994 accounted for nearly 4,877,000 arrest charges over their recorded careers.

- Within 3 years of release, 2.5% of released rapists were rearrested for another rape, and 1.2% of those who had served time for homicide were arrested for a new homicide.

- Sex offenders were less likely than non-sex offenders to be rearrested for any offense—43% of sex offenders versus 68% of non-sex offenders.

About LexisNexis

Every minute counts when you're trying to solve a crime, locate a suspect or search for a missing child. LexisNexis provides law enforcement officers with access to a full suite of advanced investigative tools to quickly locate people, detect fraud, uncover assets and discover connections between suspects, witnesses or associates. Our solutions leverage state-of-the-art fusion and linking technology to integrate agency and department data sets with authoritative public records, identifying additional leads and enhancing complex investigations.

The company's primary solutions for law enforcement include:

Accurint® for Law Enforcement, a cutting-edge investigative technology that expedites the identification of people and their assets, addresses, relatives and business associates by providing instant access to a comprehensive database of public records that would ordinarily take days to collect. Developed by experienced law enforcement professionals, it enables law enforcement agencies to locate suspects, find missing children and quickly solve cases.

Accurint® LE Plus, which helps increase efficiency and save time by integrating a comprehensive suite of analytical tools into one easy-to-use desktop application. Developed in response to the specific needs of law enforcement investigators and criminal intelligence analysts, it builds on the cutting-edge Accurint® investigative technology to give investigators a new way to access critical information, visualize complex relationships, rapidly identify potential investigative leads and more quickly solve cases.

For more information:

Call 866.242.1440 or visit
lexisnexis.com/government

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Our government solutions assist law enforcement and government agencies with deriving insight from complex data sets, improving operational efficiencies, making timely and informed decisions to enhance investigations, increasing program integrity, and discovering and recovering revenue.

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