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Kane is 1st county in state to use iris scanning

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Kane County's new system that identifies jail inmates and missing children using high-tech iris photography is one to keep an eye on.

On Wednesday, the county sheriff's office began training deputies and jail guards to use the high-tech photography equipment, which captures a high-resolution digital snapshot of a person's iris.

Kane is the first county in Illinois to join the CHILD Project, or Children's Identification and Location Database, officials said. The project is building a national iris database that aims to help authorities more quickly confirm the identities of those who have been photographed, including children who have disappeared.

"The iris, the colored part around your pupil, is the most unique identifier in the human body," said Robert Melley, chief executive officer of the project.

Compared with a fingerprint, "which might have 70 to 75 characteristics, the iris has 235 different characteristics. Each person's iris is unique, even right [eye] from left [eye]," said Melley.

Once an iris code is captured on computer along with an accompanying digital snapshot, the information will be stored in a database at the sheriff's office and also downloaded to a central repository in Phoenix where it can be accessed by law enforcement agencies and other authorized users nationwide, said Capt. Ronald Smith, who is assigned to oversee the project in Kane County.

Detailed information about the project is available at the national organization's Web site, www.thechildproject.org.

An iris scan cannot be used to identify anyone who is deceased and "doesn't have any forensic value," said Smith. "You don't leave iris prints behind. You leave fingerprints behind," he said.

"We're not looking to try to solve crimes with [iris] evidence. We're just looking at identifying kids," said Smith. "Once children are enrolled, they can be checked on a [CHILD Project] device anywhere in the country and within about 20 seconds or so you'll have a positive ID if they have been scanned before," he said.

The training, as well as the four mobile "iris recognition" units acquired by Kane, is funded through a \$150,000 federal grant.

The Kane's sheriff's office is one of only about 25 in the nation to join the project so far, Melley said. The project is being hosted by the Nation's Missing Children Organization and the National Center for Missing Adults, said Melley.

"We're somewhat on the ground floor here," said Smith.

"We're in 21 states right now," said Melley. "The size of the database right now is about 30,000, and our hopes are for about 3 [million] to 5 million" in the next few years, he said.

"At this point the [national] database is fairly small but it's got to start somewhere," said Smith.

According to Melley, about 1,500 sheriff's offices throughout the U.S. are committed to participate in the program as funding becomes available.

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