

Wednesday, August 17, 2005
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Police get tool to find missing

Authorities to use eye-scan program to ID youngsters

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REVIEW-JOURNAL

In the blink of an eye, children in Southern Nevada can be enrolled in a new database that identifies missing children by their iris rather than fingerprints.

Las Vegas police Tuesday became the seventh police department in the country to acquire the technology to identify people through eye scans and link their personal information to a database that is expected someday to hold the identities of children across the United States.

With 4,381 runaways reported in Southern Nevada in 2004, Sheriff Bill Young thinks the eye-scan program could help identify troubled youth detained by police or a social service agency.

"It augments what we have been doing with fingerprint cards, and I think it is easier to use than the fingerprint cards," Young said. "As a person who raised four kids, if this had been around when they were young, I would have taken them up on it."

The Children's Identification and Location Database project enables authorities to identify missing children in seconds while matching fingerprints takes far longer, said Sean Mullin, president and chief executive officer for the Massachusetts-based organization.

Iris identification is faster because less room for error exists, according to Child Project literature. An iris match is about 12 times more accurate than a fingerprint, according to the literature.

"The retrieval time on a fingerprint file can take days or even weeks," Mullin said.

At community events and schools, the Police Department will set up the machinery.

Parents can have their children's eyes scanned and have the child's photograph and identifying information -- such as birth date, address, phone number, height and weight -- entered into the database.

The children are given a plastic card that includes the photograph and identification information.

After having her eyes scanned in a Police Department demonstration Tuesday, 9-year-old Stepheni Collins said, "If you get lost, you can give it (the card) to a policeman, and they will give you back to your parent or guardian."

Stephanie Parker, executive director of Nevada Child Seekers, which helps parents find missing children, said the eye-scan technology would be especially helpful in cases in which children under 6 are abducted.

In such cases, a relative who abducts a child changes his or her name because the child is too young to know the name, she said.

In the past two months, police departments in Massachusetts, South Carolina, Illinois, Tampa and elsewhere have introduced similar programs, Mullin said.

The program is expected to expand to Oakland, Calif., next month, he said.

The database is controlled by a Phoenix-based nonprofit agency, the Nation's Missing Children Organization, Mullin said.

Because police departments do not control the data, police cannot use the identification information for any purpose other than locating a missing person or child, Mullin said.

Also, the iris scans do not provide any forensic information that investigators could use in a criminal investigation.

Unlike fingerprints or DNA, a person "can't leave eyes behind" at a crime scene, Mullin said.

"A lot of parents, justifiably, would be concerned that a law enforcement agency is holding the information when they (their children) haven't committed a crime," Mullin said.

"There is no way for law enforcement to use this for anything other than searching for a missing child or adult."

Young said the iris scan technology has potential in other areas of law enforcement.

He said it could be used to verify an inmate's identity when he is released from the county jail in downtown Las Vegas.