

Iris scanning technology proposed to identify missing people

By Adam Gorlick, Associated Press Writer May 27, 2005

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. --When Hampshire County Sheriff Robert Garvey started using technology that identifies people by their eyes, it was to keep order in his jail.

And what has been a good system to keep track of visitors and prisoners at the Hampshire County House of Correction is now the latest way to detect a missing child or adult.

Joined by advocates for missing people, Sheriff Robert Garvey on Friday announced the creation of a new database that matches a person's name with the unique patterns of his or her iris, the colored membrane that surrounds the pupil of the eye.

"There are lots of missing children this could probably help," Garvey said. "Runaways, children who have been abducted -- if there's a question about someone's identity, this is a quick way to solve it."

Garvey gained support for his idea of using iris recognition technology to create a database from the Nation's Missing Children Organization and the National Center for Missing Adults. Last year, the program was endorsed by the National Sheriff's Association, and more than 1,000 sheriff departments across the country have agreed to join the network during the next year, Garvey said.

Garvey's department is the first to start collecting iris images for the database. The sheriff said he plans to start visiting schools throughout Hampshire County next fall, giving parents the chance to voluntarily enter their children into the database.

The program, called the CHILD Project, is meant as an addition to other popular ways of identifying children, such as by their fingerprints. Like fingerprints, there are no two irises that are identical. And the design of the iris never changes once a person reaches the age of one.

"You can't overlook the importance of having an up-to-date photo of your child and having their fingerprints on file," said John Bish of Warren, Mass., who has become a leading advocate for missing and abducted children since the 2000 disappearance of his daughter, Molly. Her remains were found three years later.

"But this is an extra tool that police can have to identify a child," he said. "But there's still no better protection for a child than a parent's eyeball."

Iris recognition technology has been used for several years to increase security measures in places such as hospitals and airports. At the Hampshire County House of Correction, Garvey uses the system to register visitors and restrict access to certain parts of the facility.

Getting registered into the CHILD Project system takes a matter of minutes. A digital camera snaps a shot of a person's eye, and stores it in a database with corresponding information about the person, such as their name, address and who their parent or guardian is.

"There's no social security number in there, and this isn't used to do any kind of background check on anybody," said Sean Mullin, president of the Plymouth, Mass.-based CHILD Project. "This is simply to identify who you are."

For a person to be identified by the system, they must stare into a lens that "reads" their iris and searches the database for a match. The database search takes a few seconds.

"Once you have the person you want to identify, you will know immediately who it is," Mullin said.