


On parade



Credit: Thames Valley Police

The VIPER System in operation at Thames Valley Police

Electronic identity parades are helping police in West Yorkshire track down suspects and match up offenders to CCTV images. John Dean reports on how the technology has helped the force to catch criminals.

 The laborious process of putting together a police identity parade - searching for willing volunteers in the street - did not change for decades. However, over the past eight years the identity parade in Britain has been revolutionised thanks to a system developed by West Yorkshire Police.

The development of VIPER by members of West Yorkshire Police's Scientific Support Unit was

one of a number of technological breakthroughs which they have made, and remains, to date, the most far-reaching.

The Video Identification Parade Electronic Recording System (VIPER), which creates identity parades using electronic databases of faces, was inspired by the many problems which confronted police forces trying to conduct identity parades the old-style way.

For years, the parades were done with officers going out onto the streets to find people who looked like the suspect.

That was dogged by practical problems and Det Supt Mick Fickling, head of scientific support at West Yorkshire, said: 'You can only really appreciate the difficulties if you have tried to put together an identity parade.

'We had to go out onto the street and try to find enough peo-

ple who looked like the suspect, which was not easy, then when you did find them you had to persuade them to take part.

'It was very difficult and it only needed an unusual feature, such as a beard, or ethnicity, or exceptionally long hair or exceptionally short hair, and it became even more difficult. The result was that 50 per cent of identity

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parades did not take place under the old system.'

Another difficulty was the time it all took. Under the old system, it could take considerable time to track down the right people and in the meantime, witnesses' memories may have started to fade or suspects had to be bailed because they could not be held any longer.

Det Supt Fickling said: 'While police were trying to put together an identity parade, suspects could be back out on the streets committing more offences.'

Success across forces

So West Yorkshire set out to develop their own system. The result was VIPER, launched eight years ago and now a national system used by Scottish forces and 60 per cent of those in England and Wales.

Co-ordinated from West Yorkshire, VIPER has collected a vast database of video clips of people from all over the country.

When a suspect is arrested and an identity parade is organised, officers film the person at their local police station, asking them to face the camera and be filmed from the right and the left.

The decision on whether or not VIPER is used is down to the police and not the defendant or their solicitor.

The choosing of volunteers for the parade takes place on a computer provided by the VIPER system and located in ID suites within the various forces. The ID police officer and the suspect and solicitor select the lookalikes from still photographs, useful in avoiding later challenges since they have been involved in the selection.

Once that process is complete, they notify the VIPER team using unique reference numbers and the team in Wakefield then put together the package of moving footage.

The resultant video package can then be screened for the witnesses, regardless of where they are.

There are many advantages of the system, according to Det Supt Fickling. He said: 'One of the

advantages is that the parade can be held anywhere, not just in the police station. It is possible to put the package onto a laptop and take it to a victim's home or to a hospital bedside, which may be useful in cases such as stabbings where time is of the essence.

'With VIPER, we can put a package together pretty quickly and we have been known to stage an identity parade within 20 to 25 minutes. That means that we do not have to release the suspect to commit more crimes and it is allowing for remands in custody once the person has been identified.

'It also means that VIPER is carrying out 150-200 parades a day, roughly double the amount taking place before. Research suggests that we get the same success rate from VIPER parades as we did with the old system so given that we are doing twice as many parades it means we are identifying twice as many suspects.'

And if the team finds itself short of particular facial types - perhaps a particular nationality - Det Supt Fickling says it is prepared to travel abroad to carry out a mass filming for use back in the UK.

Police forces can see the advantages; when the system was introduced into Scotland recently, Malcolm Dickson, deputy chief constable of Lothian and Borders Police, speaking on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland, hailed the VIPER system as a major step forward for the criminal justice system in Scotland.

He said: 'Often identity parades can be quite traumatic events for vulnerable witnesses and victims but this new system will help lessen that fear and ensure they do not have to come face to face with the accused. It also means valuable police time and resources will be saved through this use of modern technology with officers not having to comb the streets for suitable line-up suspects.

'VIPER is a fine example of Scottish police using the latest technology to help in the fight against crime as well as protect-

ing vulnerable people at the same time.'

Face in the crowd

West Yorkshire's breakthroughs did not stop with VIPER. Last year, the Scientific Support Unit introduced a facial recognition system to track down suspects caught on CCTV.

The unit has developed existing technology into a system that significantly speeds up the investigation process, allowing officers to make quicker arrests.

When it was launched, West Yorkshire Police was the first force in the country to develop and use such a system operationally in this way.

The new system means images of unidentified suspects, mainly taken from CCTV at or near the scene of a crime, can be checked against the force's database of tens of thousands of 'mugshot' photographs in a matter of minutes, a process that was previously impossible.

Using biometric search engine software, bought in for the project, the system checks a number of points on the image, such as the distance between the eyes, and seeks matches against existing prisoner pictures.

The possible matches can then be reduced by expert operators to produce the most likely suspect, a procedure which would previously have taken a long time.

Once the identification is made, the database can provide additional information to narrow down the extent of the search, including the area where a known offender lives and the type of offences they have been convicted of previously.

Det Supt Fickling said: 'Prior to the creation of this system, CCTV images of suspects could only be circulated within the force or publicised in the media or on posters, to try to identify them. Now we are able to narrow down likely suspects in a very short space of time.

'For example, about seventy per cent of burglars live within a two-mile radius of the properties they target. Our system can include this sort of criteria in the search, along with age range and

other parameters, to narrow down likely suspects. So, instead of having to wade through the whole encyclopaedia, you are now being taken to the chapter or even the page you need very quickly.

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The unit also spearheaded Operation Converter, which, since its launch in October 2003, has seen fingerprints, DNA, shoe-marks and images recovered during investigations into high-volume crimes, such as burglary and car theft, sent by courier to the unit for expert analysis.

As soon as the results are known, the information is fed back to the investigating officers, a new way of working which has led to a significant rise in detection rates, as well as an increase in the recovery of stolen property.

Det Supt Fickling said: 'There are more improvements and refinements which we can make. It is about pushing back the boundaries. It is a case of looking at what is available then coming back and saying "we can do better than that".'

