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New Police Cars Have Voice Recognition

Associated Press, Durham, NH

DURHAM, New Hampshire - A police officer sees a bank robbery suspect speed by and says "pursuit." Automatically, the cruiser's blue lights, siren, flashing headlights and video camera turn on. The car also sends a message to dispatch giving the location and saying the officer is chasing someone.



This voice-recognition

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system is not a prototype -- it's on patrol in New Hampshire today, and if the robbery scenario

The Project54 system provides police with hands-free control of the lightbar, siren, radio, radar, records check and GPS units.

were to occur, officers could keep their hands on the wheel and eyes on the road instead of fiddling with switches, buttons, dials and microphones as they weave through traffic.

It's called Project 54, after the 1960s police television comedy "Car 54, Where Are You?," and its global positioning system even answers the show title's question.

University of New Hampshire engineers started developing the system in 1999 after they witnessed the number of tasks officers perform behind the wheel.

"To pull you over for doing one thing, they have to do 12 different things," engineer Brett Vinciguerra said. "They have to turn the lights on, turn the siren on, figure out where they are, pick up the radio, turn on the video camera, radio in that they are pulling someone over."

After two years of testing, state police have about 75 smart cruisers on patrol, with several more added weekly. UNH and several surrounding communities also use the smarter cars.

A system with similar goals was developed by Visteon Corp. of Dearborn, Michigan. Called [TACNET](#), a prototype was being tested by North Carolina State Police and in Maryland, Michigan and California and is now available on routine patrol, said sales manager Jeff Pauley.

Users of Project 54 say it has transformed radio communications for them. Instead of tapping a button to change channels, an officer now presses a button on the steering wheel -- a reprogrammed cruise control switch -- and tunes the radio to any community or troop station by calling out its name.

The system uses a variety of standard voice-recognition programs, though officers can still operate equipment by hand.

"Finding your channel out of 256 while you are trying to maneuver around traffic and through traffic can be a little stressful," says

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New Hampshire State Police Sgt. Mark Liebl, who has driven a smart cruiser for two years as Project 54's main guinea pig.

UNH professor William Lenharth, the lead engineer, remembers the first time he sat in Liebl's cruiser. The front seat was jammed with equipment, and Liebl constantly reached away from the wheel.

"He said, 'I just feel around for things,'" Lenharth said. "I'm thinking, 'This is really pretty bad.'"

Vincent Stile, president of the Association of Police Communications Officials, kicked Project 54's tires at a recent convention and says he'd recommend it widely.

"It's not a novelty," said Stile, head of radio operations for the Suffolk County Police Department on Long Island, New York. "It should be put into play."

The system was born out of a New Hampshire tragedy in 1997, when a gunman killed two troopers, a part-time judge and a newspaper editor in the remote town of Colebrook. As local, state, county and federal officers from Vermont and New Hampshire tracked the killer, many couldn't talk to each other by radio.

In response, agencies converted to digital systems to transmit voice and data. Adding computers was a logical next step, but with so much equipment already in cruisers, they had to consolidate. The program was helped by \$15 million in federal grants.

An increasing number of police agencies around the country have access to FBI and other databases through wireless digital communications. Project 54 enhances that feature by allowing officers to interact by voice rather than typing queries into a computer.

Liebl said getting driver or criminal records now is a cinch.

Previously, he radioed dispatch, waited his turn behind other calls, gave a driver's license number or name and birthdate, waited for the dispatcher to run the check, then either tried to remember the information as the dispatcher read it back or stopped to jot it down.

Now, he hits the talk button, announces he wants a license check

and calls the license number into a microphone mounted near the visor. Within eight seconds, the information is retrieved from the cruiser computer, which verbally relays it and displays it on a screen mounted to his right, below the dashboard.

Liebl said the process makes it easier, and safer, to keep an eye on a suspect.

Lenharth plans to license the software to police agencies for a couple hundred dollars and hopes a police-equipment maker will step in to mass-produce the controllers.

So far, it appears Project 54's only major alternative is Visteon's TACNET system, which uses a slightly different format.

TACNET is built around two computers in the trunk, with a screen mounted in the dash. Unlike Car 54, it can project information such as license checks on the inside of the windshield so an officer can read it and still keep an eye on a stopped driver.

But TACNET's equipment takes up valuable trunk space, making it unacceptable for police agencies needing that real estate for spare tires and other equipment.

Visteon plans to market its complete TACNET system for less than \$10,000 per cruiser, Pauley said. He said Visteon may also seek to work with UNH.

Project 54's team of six faculty members and 14 graduate students continues to work on enhancements.

Within a year, Vinciguerra said, officers will be able to send messages or turn on cruiser equipment with a handheld device while outside their cars. That would, for instance, allow a wounded officer who might be unable to use a two-way radio to broadcast an automatic emergency message.

Such a device might have saved a life in the 1997 New Hampshire incident that prompted Project 54, as one mortally wounded trooper sought shelter in a field when another drove up and was killed before he knew what was happening.



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