

GPS helping U.S. keep track of high-risk offenders

Published in the International Herald Tribune

By Jason Szep

Reuters

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

BOSTON: Electronic surveillance technology is changing the way the authorities in the United States monitor repeat offenders. Its advocates say the new technology can save lives. Its detractors fear a widening breach of civil liberties and an illusory sense of protection.

Coast to coast, the authorities are expanding electronic monitoring to fight crime. They are moving beyond its early use in tracking movements of sex offenders to include gang members who have been released on probation, people accused of repeated violence against women and even truant students at schools.

At the heart of the surveillance is a technology best-known for helping people on the road: the Global Positioning System, or GPS. Other countries are watching closely. GPS monitoring is already established in parts of Europe but applied more narrowly, and it is growing fast in Latin America, said Jeff Durski, spokesman for iSECUREtrac, which is based in Omaha, Nebraska, and makes the devices and leases them to the police and courts.

Massachusetts, one of the first states to employ it in 2006, has about 700 people fitted with electronic bracelets that send signals via satellite to computer servers if they go places they should not - "exclusion zones."

The Massachusetts law, which allows judges to impose electronic monitoring as a condition of a restraining order, has become a model for other states. The Oklahoma Senate voted 47 to 0 in April to enlist GPS technology to protect victims of domestic violence. The Illinois House of Representatives unanimously passed similar surveillance legislation last month.

Part of the appeal is the cost-savings. GPS is a cost-effective alternative to prison, said Paul Lucci, deputy commissioner of the Massachusetts Probation Service, pointing to a chart taped to his office wall showing a state-wide surge in use of GPS, mostly to track sex offenders but also for others. "These people probably should be in jail, but the cost of incarceration can be as much as \$30,000 or \$40,000 a year," he said. "The GPS costs about \$3,400 a year."

He added: "I think it's good on both sides. It is a device to protect the public. Although we can't guarantee anyone's safety, it provides an extra level of supervision on somebody. On the other side, for a defense attorney, it is in lieu of incarceration."

The Massachusetts law was inspired in part by statistics: Over 1,000 women are murdered each year in the United States by intimate partners. The law allows the police to be alerted whenever an offender enters a restricted zone, like near a woman's home or office.

"It's more than just slapping a GPS on a guy," said Diane Rosenfeld, a Harvard law professor who helped draft the Massachusetts law. "You have to really have an intelligent coordinated approach to it and then it really can save lives."

The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, a women's shelter that began a pilot GPS program in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 2006, has a high success rate: None of the eight men fitted with GPS has violated protective orders while wearing the bracelets.

Barry Bryant, deputy director of the Governor's Crime Commission in North Carolina, said the police, not the court, mostly determine who wears the surveillance bracelets in North Carolina, a fact that raises civil liberties concerns.

"This should be done by independent judicial officials, not by police officers whose job is to investigate, not to mete out justice," said Barry Steinhardt, head of the American Civil Liberties Union's technology program in Washington. "You want to protect the victims of domestic violence but there has to be a fair process."