The Minneapolis Police Department is enjoying a steady decrease in crime rates and more efficient use of manpower thanks to a cohesive use of different technologies.

“Tough financial times are a time to invest rather than divest from technology,” says Deputy Chief Robert Allen. “By effectively using technology and merging existing technology, you can make your law enforcement efforts more effective.”

The department uses crime mapping and predictive analytics to identify where to concentrate police resources, and video cameras to perform tactical analytics to help assess scenes to identify the location, how many officers should respond, from which direction they should approach and what they should do when they arrive.

Minneapolis now has about 200 cameras and police are integrating mobile cameras and license plate recognition cameras to the system. The department is no longer purchasing fixed cameras, but rather purchasing mobile camera systems. Mobile cameras allow police to move them around in response to emerging crime trends and patterns. The department is also working to identify exterior cameras on buildings that the building owners are willing to share with police.

Allen says the department, which has about 850 patrol officers, will expand the use of video cameras where emerging crime patterns are apparent. A current project seeks to allow police access to businesses’ interior cameras in the event of an incident alert.

“Our hope is to build the switchboard that allows us to pull in cameras from different sites. We don’t want to look inside a bank or a school routinely, only unless there is an emergency and we really need to. It would be in response to a triggered alert,” Allen explains.

The department has also merged ShotSpotter® gun detection technology with a video system.

“We have integrated the ShotSpotter® system with a video system so that when a shot goes off the camera automatically turns to where the shot is coming from,” Allen says. In 2010 the system was instrumental in police identifying and arresting a suspect in a homicide case.

“We would have been unlikely to solve it had it not been for the camera. Shots were fired, the camera turned and got the vehicle, and based on that we were able to track down a suspect,” Allen says.

Allen spoke about the department’s efforts at the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice Fall 2011 Technology Institute for Law Enforcement. He emphasizes the importance of a cohesive technology approach.

“The mistake people make is the belief that stand-alone technology has to stand alone. By merging ShotSpotter and video cameras, we made them both more effective,” he says.

The department has been employing predictive analytics for about a year and a half, with good results.

“We now have 70 percent of Part I crimes occur in about 6 percent of the land mass of Minneapolis, so knowing where that 6 percent will occur really helps us focus the police resources,” Allen says. Part I offenses are homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, auto theft and arson.

The department has seen about a 48 percent reduction in Uniform Crime Reports Part I offenses since 1998, when the department began to strongly embrace technology such as crime mapping, and plan how best to use it. Since 2005, the city has seen declines in the crime rate every year. Part I crimes are at the lowest level since the early 1960s, according to Allen.

Before the city installed any cameras, officials sought community approval.

“We first went to the community and said we are thinking of doing this and if they won’t support cameras we won’t do it, and every community said we want them,” Allen says. “There have been relatively few concerns. We talked to the community and it was their decision to put them in. We had 20 community meetings before putting cameras in downtown Minneapolis. We
put a privacy policy in place that says the cameras are used only to enforce criminal behavior. We have a kiosk in the police station where the public can come in and look at what we are monitoring at any given time.”

The inspiration for integrating cameras with the retail establishment came from the Northamptonshire Police in England eight years ago. Police there had developed a retail crime initiative that was a partnership between police and private security. Minneapolis set up a system that uses video cameras to monitor street corners, and a radio network allows private security services to communicate and share information with the police.

Minneapolis continues to collaborate with other police departments to share information, ideas and best practices.

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This article was reprinted from the Winter 2012 edition of TechBeat, the quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2010–MU–MU–K020, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

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The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Office for Victims of Crime; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART).