Camera System Provides Effective ‘Eye on Crime’
By Michele Coppola

A high-crime Tampa neighborhood is enjoying a reduction in violent crime thanks to a camera surveillance system, and officials are expanding its use.

Using a $1.3 million federal grant, the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office placed 20 highly visible closed-circuit cameras, dubbed the Eye on Crime system, within a three-square-mile area. Since the cameras became fully operational in the spring of 2010, overall crime has dropped by about 20 percent, according to Lt. David Fleet of the Investigations and Operations Section, District I.

District I is a patrol district that surrounds the area around the University of South Florida and is largely composed of multifamily housing units and apartment complexes.

“We cover 149 square miles in our district and have 222 deputies assigned. But we chose a three-square-mile area to put the cameras in because that is where the most high-level crimes and street-level drug dealing was happening,” Fleet says.

“There was an inordinate amount of violent crime, specifically, street robberies were really spiking and exceedingly high. We needed a way to improve the way we do business so we looked at options and decided that using a camera system in a high-crime drug area would be a force multiplier to give us an edge,” Fleet explains. “There is a correlation between open air drug markets and violent crime. Using the cameras made it harder to deal drugs on the street corners.”

The cameras are overt by design. They are housed in a large white box with a sheriff’s office star on it and a blue strobe light on the top. Deputies monitor the cameras at the District I headquarters and can also access the camera feeds from the laptop computers in patrol cars. The cameras can zoom, pan and monitor a 360-degree field of view. Video can be stored for 30 days or more if needed.

“We wanted people to know the cameras were there to dissuade them from committing crimes, and we wanted people to understand that we were not trying to be secretive and watch people without them knowing it,” Fleet says. “We put up signs and talked to community leaders and informed the community on the locations of the cameras. We anticipated we would get resistance from the community, but people in the community were very supportive.”

Since its deployment, the camera system has been used in more than 600 investigations and has helped solve numerous crimes, including robberies, burglaries, illegal drug cases and a homicide. The system has also provided information and evidence in traffic fatalities and missing person cases. In 2012, the University Area Community Development Coalition awarded the department a public safety award for the Eye on Crime program.

By and large use of the camera system did not result in simply shifting crime to another neighborhood, Fleet says. “We found a couple of areas where crime rose a little higher, but overall our analysis did not show that the cameras were just forcing crime to another area.”

Fleet spoke about the camera program at the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Fall 2012 Technology Institute for Law Enforcement.

In the fall of 2012, with $500,000 in funding from state Law Enforcement Trust Funds, the sheriff’s office added six more cameras in the district and two license plate reader cameras along two traffic corridors.

Fleet says the cameras have helped identify suspects in a 2012 fatal shooting and a hit-and-run fatality. In the hit-and-run incident, the camera did not photograph the license plate but got a good side shot of the vehicle that showed unique wheels and rear damage. Investigators found the vehicle several hours later and identified and arrested the driver. The cameras have also been helpful in undercover work, providing remote viewing of law
enforcement undercover drug or gun transactions and making it safer for the officers.

In the next phase of the project, with additional funding from the Law Enforcement Trust Funds, the sheriff’s office plans to place cameras in a different high-crime area of District I and incorporate video feeds from private businesses, beginning with the University Mall, which sits near the University of South Florida.

“The camera system is absolutely successful,” Fleet says. "A camera system is expensive at first, but in the long run it is a great program.”

For more information on the camera program, contact Lt. David Fleet at dfleet@hcso.tampa.fl.us or (813) 247-0651. For information on the NIJ Technology Institutes for Law Enforcement, contact NIJ Program Manager Michael O’Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.