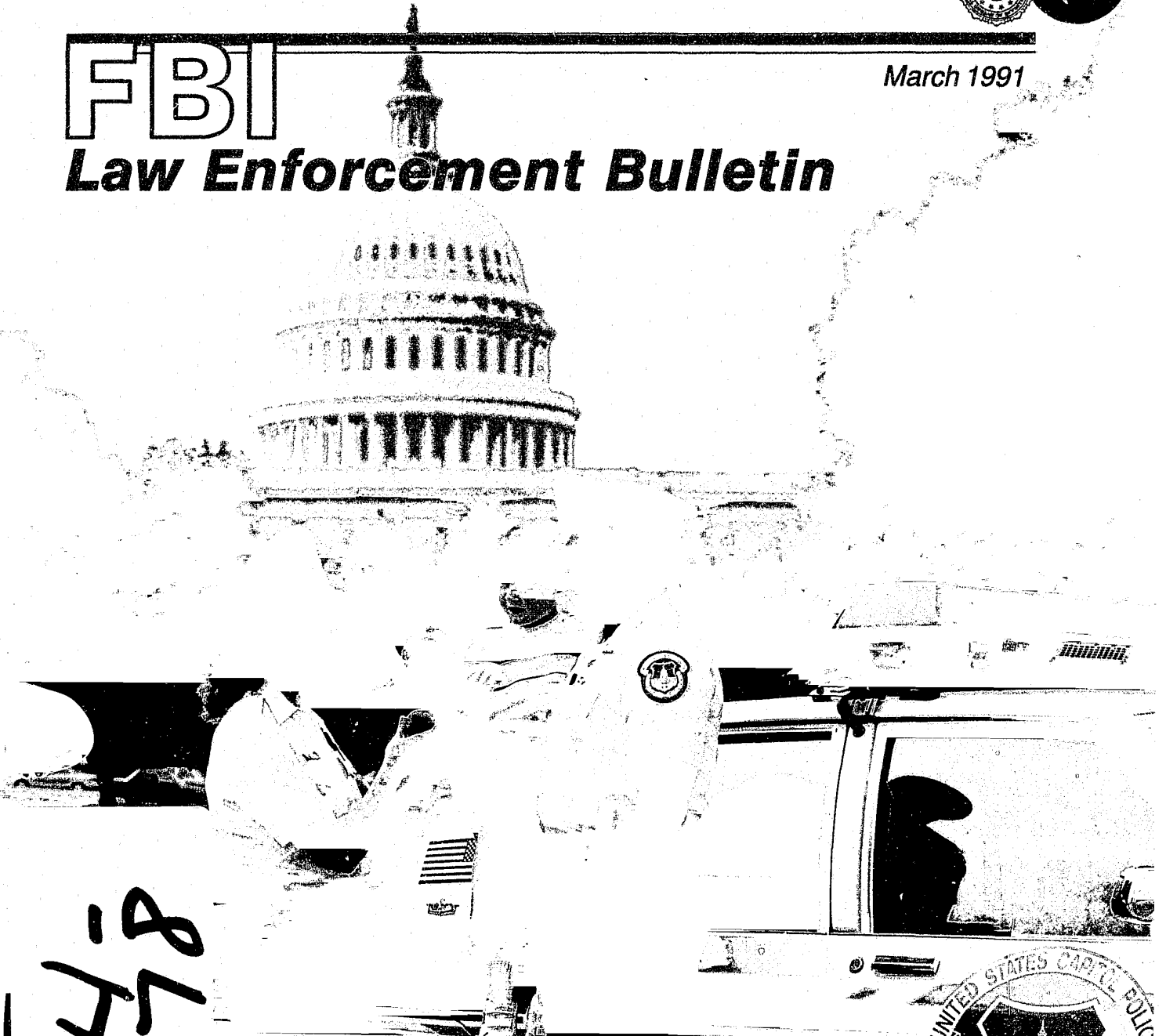




# FBI

March 1991

## Law Enforcement Bulletin



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131978

U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

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131978

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United States Department of Justice  
Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Washington, DC 20535

William S. Sessions, Director

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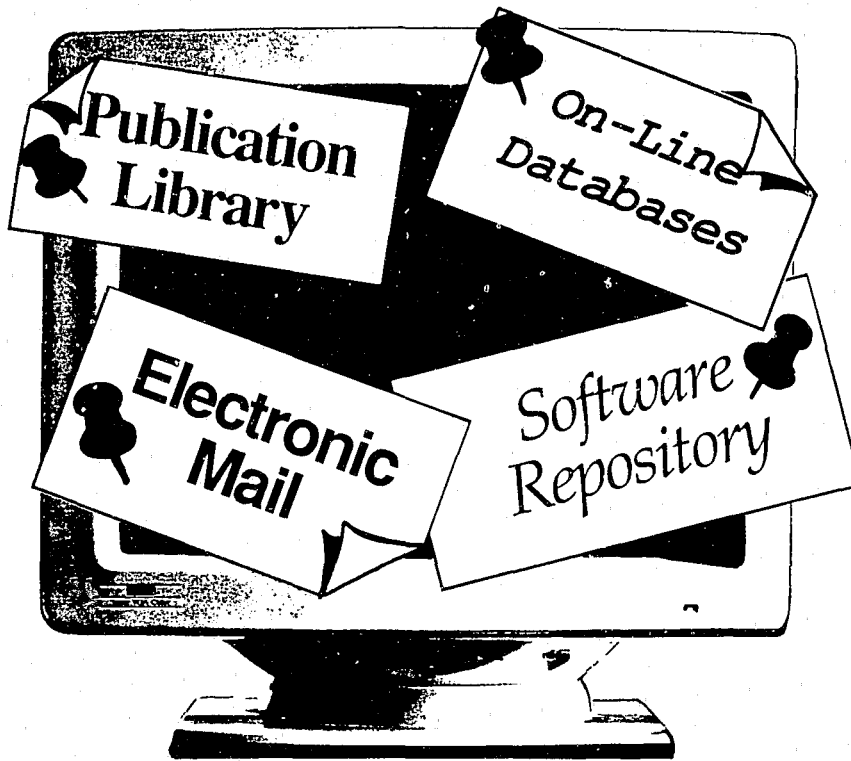
The Attorney General has determined that the publication of this periodical is necessary in the transaction of the public business required by law of the Department of Justice. Use of funds for printing this periodical has been approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

**Editor**—Stephen D. Gladis, *D.A.Ed.*  
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The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (ISSN-0014-5688) is published monthly by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 10th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20535. Second-Class postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C. 20535.

# Electronic Bulletin Boards

## A New Resource For Law Enforcement



BY  
SETH F. JACOBS  
and  
DAVID J. ROBERTS

The past decade witnessed an unprecedented growth in the power and speed of microcomputers, while the size and cost of this technology diminished steadily. The convergence of these seemingly contradictory trends (increasing power, decreasing price) enabled even small law enforcement agencies to implement sophisticated microcomputer systems.

At the same time, the technical expertise of law enforcement personnel grew significantly. In addition to using a broad range of com-

mercially available computer hardware and software, law enforcement personnel increasingly developed their own software applications for such police functions as records management, crime analysis, fleet maintenance, and manpower scheduling, to name but a few.

And in the years to come, as computer usage in law enforcement continues to expand, and personnel become technologically sophisticated, the use of microcomputers as vehicles for information exchange

will increase significantly. One key area of growth in this regard is the electronic bulletin board system geared to the needs of criminal justice practitioners.

### WHAT A BBS CAN PROVIDE

An electronic bulletin board system (BBS) enables users to exchange information, post notices, send and receive electronic mail, share software, and query online databases. Like the traditional wall-bound bulletin board, a BBS serves as a central meeting place for in-

formation exchange and resource sharing.

With no more than a microcomputer, a modem, and a communications package, criminal justice agencies, regardless of size or location, can access a variety of BBS systems, which serve as national communication networks. By providing easy access and remote communication, BBS systems foster the development of an informal technical assistance network through which criminal justice practitioners of all levels of expertise can assist each other on a broad range of topics.

Thousands of these bulletin board systems exist in the United States, supporting everything from computer games to the information needs of major corporations. Among these systems are hundreds of criminal justice-oriented bulletin boards. (See tables 1 and 2 on the following pages.)

Local police departments, Federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, private companies, and private citizens operate these bulletin board systems, which were identified through an informal survey conducted by the authors. The availability of low-cost, shareware bulletin board packages that operate on microcomputers enables small agencies, or even individuals, to access bulletin boards.

### Electronic Mail

Electronic mail, or "e-mail," enables users to exchange (i.e., both send and receive) messages with other bulletin board users. Messages can be addressed to a specific person, or to all system users. Most bulletin boards have a central mes-



Mr. Jacobs



Mr. Roberts

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sage area for exchange of e-mail on general topics. Some bulletin boards also maintain one or more specialized "conferences" that users can join to exchange information on specific topics (e.g., DNA profiling and artificial intelligence). These conferences operate as mini-BBS systems, sharing messages only among registered conference members, and typically have chairpersons or moderators, who keep messages focused on the specific agenda of the conference.

Electronic mail dramatically expands the technical assistance resources available to users by linking criminal justice practitioners throughout the Nation. The operational experience of users on a variety of issues can easily be shared, creating an "institutional memory" that allows departments to build upon each other's work.

Unlike structured information systems, there are few restrictions

on the substance or format of electronic mail messages. Any questions or ideas that can be expressed in written form can be entered.<sup>1</sup>

Bulletin board systems function as effective delivery mechanisms for technical assistance among criminal justice agencies throughout the Nation. However, BBS systems do more than just facilitate communication. They encourage the development of an "electronic community" through which users can freely exchange information that may not otherwise be available, or would be too time-consuming to obtain through conventional channels.

### Software

Bulletin board systems also serve as a central repository for software applications developed by operational users. Typically, such programs are not broadly disseminated, though they frequently have

**Table 1  
Police-Oriented BBS Systems**

BBS Number	City and State	E-Mail	Shareware	Databases	Publications	Restrictions
	CALIFORNIA					
(415)644-6806	Berkeley	X	X		X	
(818)405-4242	Pasadena	X				
(408)287-8399	San Jose	X	X			
(415)877-5341	So. San Francisco	X	X			
	COLORADO					
(303)987-7388	Lakewood	X	X		X	
	CONNECTICUT					
(203)753-8351	Waterbury	X	X			
	FLORIDA					
(813)772-7585	Cape Coral	X	X			
(305)251-2698	Miami	X	X			
	GEORGIA					
(404)738-3626	Augusta	X				\$
	IDAHO					
(208)323-8626	Boise	X	X	X	X	
	MISSOURI					
(816)761-4039	Kansas City	X	X		X	
	NEW JERSEY					
(201)254-8117	Sayreville	X	X	X		\$
	NEW YORK					
(716)889-2016	Rochester	X	X		X	
(315)451-7148	Syracuse	X	X			@
(315)865-4070	Marcy	X	X			
	NORTH CAROLINA					
(919)886-8826	Thomasville	X	X		X	\$
	OHIO					
(216)545-0093	Girard	X	X			
	TEXAS					
(409)779-2936	Bryan	X	X			
(214)205-2129	Garland	X	X		X	

**Symbols**

X - Feature Available  
 \$ - A fee may be charged for full or partial access to the board  
 @ - Access may be restricted in whole or in part to law enforcement personnel

**Note:**

The list of bulletin board systems in tables 1 and 2 were compiled from several sources, including electronic mail left on the SEARCH-BBS. This list is not exhaustive; there may be many other similar systems that are not contained in this list. The information regarding features and restrictions was obtained by calling each board.

application beyond the agency for which they are developed.<sup>2</sup> Since law enforcement agencies frequently face similar information management issues, a solution developed by one agency may be relevant to the operation of others.

Practitioners who develop their own software often share it with others at little or no cost. Some developers leave their software in the public domain, free to anyone who may find it of value, while others request payment through a nominal registration fee. The registration fee may also entitle the user to system documentation and free upgrades. This latter form of

software is commonly referred to as "shareware."

Although the cost of shareware systems is typically very low, the quality sometimes rivals commercial software applications. Examples of effective criminal justice shareware packages currently available include a traffic citation system, a patrol car allocation package, and an intelligence database.

Bulletin boards also provide direct communication among software users, and between users and developers. This communication encourages users to share utilities and other routines developed as adjuncts to operating

systems, as well as the modification and development of shareware packages along lines most useful to the criminal justice community. Over several years, the cumulative impact of this increased feedback and reduced duplication could dramatically improve the quality of criminal justice shareware.

**Database "Doors"**

Another feature of bulletin board systems is their ability to provide users with online access to databases through "doors" that link the two systems. A database is an organized collection of data, such as mailing lists, field interrogation

cards, or crime reports. Properly constructed, a computerized database functioning as part of an information storage and retrieval system allows authorized users to obtain needed information quickly. Although the criminal justice system is just beginning to exploit this capability, it is clear that almost any information that can be stored in a database can be accessed through a bulletin board.

A database currently available to criminal justice practitioners is the Automated Index of Criminal Justice Information Systems.<sup>3</sup> The automated index enables criminal justice practitioners to identify quickly and easily information systems appropriate to their needs. It contains detailed information on

criminal justice agencies (e.g., size and structure, computer hardware and operating systems, automated functions, and the criminal justice software packages used by each agency), as well as commercial and shareware information systems (e.g., required hardware and operating systems, support services and product features, modules available, and a list of agencies currently using the software). The automated index enables users to identify systems that meet specific criteria and to talk with agencies currently using those systems.

### Publications

Electronic bulletin boards also function as extremely low-cost disseminating points for publications.

Published periodicals, court opinions, and administrative orders can be placed on the system as soon as the text is finalized. Users may read articles online or download any or all articles of interest. While the actual layout of an electronic version may differ slightly from the hardcopy (e.g., photographs will not be included), the substance of each article—the text—is the same.

Electronic dissemination of reports is especially effective for governmental agencies whose principle goal is to maximize dissemination of information rather than generate sales. In fact, several criminal justice agencies already disseminate their publications through a bulletin board.<sup>4</sup> Their readers gain immediate access to

**Table 2**  
**Criminal Justice-Oriented BBS Systems**

BBS Number	Name	E-Mail	Shareware	Databases	Publications	Restrictions
(800)322-4638(voice)	ABA Net	X		X	X	\$
(800)825-2665(voice)	ACA-NET	X	X	X	X	\$
(904)423-1312	APCO	X	X		X	\$@
(608)849-9796	Canine Corner	X	X	X	X	
(414)761-2582	C.A.T.C.H.	X	X		X	
(615)899-4714	"City of Greyhawk"	X				
(517)483-9615	CJT BBS	X	X		X	
(800)848-8990(voice)	CompuServe	X	X	X	X	\$
(708)972-3275	HMIX BBS	X	X			
(305)360-2991	House of Ichthys	X	X	X	X	\$@
(419)435-8335	Judges Conference	X	X	X	X	@
(701)224-9807	LegalNet	X	X		X	\$@
(202)466-7820(voice)	MetaPol	X			X	\$
(301)738-8895	NCJRS	X	X	X	X	
(906)227-2658	N. Michigan Univ.	X				@
(703)256-7516	NWIS	X	X		X	
(215)568-0356	Philadelphia Court	X	X	X		@
(916)392-4640	SEARCH-BBS	X	X	X	X	@
(603)352-0194	Tactical Edge	X	X		X	@
(714)873-9547	Whistle Blower BBS	X	X			

#### Symbols

X - Feature Available  
 \$ - A fee may be charged for full or partial access to the board  
 @ - Access may be restricted in whole or in part to law enforcement personnel

## Example of Electronic Mail Messages

**Q** Does anybody have any information that they can forward to me about the use and operation of in-car computers? (Fayetteville, NC)

**A** The Los Angeles Police Department is using Mobile Digital Terminals in our vehicles to receive calls. We have a pilot program underway using laptops. Call me at.... (Los Angeles, CA)

**Q** Has anyone heard of a new form of drug testing called RIAH (Radioimmunoassay of hair)? It's supposed to be more accurate and less intrusive than urinalysis. (Warrensburg, MO)

**A** While RIAH can be more accurate than urinalysis under some circumstances, some argue that it is more intrusive than urinalysis because it detects drug use months or even years in the past. A national expert on RIAH you may want to contact is.... (Washington, DC)

**Q** Does anyone know of any micro- or mini-based information systems related to intelligence operations? (Sacramento, CA)

**A** You may be interested in the New Jersey State Police NOMAD narcotics and intelligence system that runs on a Unisys mini. For more information call.... (Albany, NY)

(These examples were obtained from the SEARCH-BBS, and they have been edited slightly for publication.)

publications, and this dissemination is accomplished at a much lower cost than for printed materials.

### EQUIPMENT

To access a bulletin board system, a user must have a microcomputer or terminal, a modem, a communications package, and a telephone line. As long as the communications package is properly configured,<sup>5</sup> virtually any microcomputer can be used to log onto any bulletin board system without regard to the hardware in use by the

host. It might not be possible, however, for a local microcomputer to take full advantage of a bulletin board system operating on a radically different host computer.

### CONCLUSION

Microcomputer-based bulletin board systems dedicated to the criminal justice profession offer a responsive and cost-effective means of addressing the information needs of law enforcement agencies. Available 24 hours a day, criminal justice bulletin boards provide a

computer-based forum for officers to communicate, receive, and provide technical assistance, share software, review articles, and query criminal justice databases. By creating this "electronic community," bulletin boards enable law enforcement professionals to work together to find common solutions to their information needs. **LEB**

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Message length limitations, however, do exist, but vary, among systems. Additionally, some BBS administrators may impose content limitations on messages.

<sup>2</sup> Shareware packages occasionally are infected with computer viruses. While recipients should always check software and ensure that adequate protections exist, the risk of such problems can be greatly reduced by obtaining shareware only from reputable bulletin board systems.

<sup>3</sup> The Automated Index of Criminal Justice Information Systems is available via the SEARCH-BBS (916) 392-4640. In addition, data from the automated index has been compiled in a publication, *1990 Directory of Automated Criminal Justice Systems, Volumes I-V*. Each volume is dedicated to a specific discipline in criminal justice: Corrections (vol. I); courts (vol. II); law enforcement (vol. III); probation and parole (vol. IV); and prosecution (vol. V). The directories are available from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service at (800) 851-3420.

<sup>4</sup> Selected reports of the U.S. Department of Justice are available through the NCJRS BBS, which can be reached at (301) 738-8895. The *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* is available through the SEARCH-BBS, as are press releases and selected publications of the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Selected articles from the *Court Technology Bulletin*, a publication of the National Center for State Courts, are also available on the SEARCH-BBS.

<sup>5</sup> A communications package is a software program that establishes the linkage between the local and remote computer by setting several parameters. Most users will be able to log onto a bulletin board system if the databit, stopbit, and parity parameters are set properly. Most bulletin board systems use 8 databits, 1 stopbit, and no parity. A few, CompuServe for example, use 7 databits, 1 stopbit, and even parity.