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With a degree in history, Sheriff's Civilian Crime Analyst Michael Morris says his education and research skills have been a plus in his job.

Transit Service Bureau Sleuth Fights Crime with Data

By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

(Oct. 29, 2009) As a college history major, Michael Morris says he never imagined that one day he'd be pouring over criminal databases to help solve crimes committed on Metro's trains and buses.

Now working as a crime analyst with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Transit Service Bureau, Morris' history and research skills have come in pretty handy on the job.

Overall, Morris notes, Metro's trains and buses are very safe, but when crimes do occur, his job is to assist detectives by fine-tuning police collected data to catch the criminal.

While detectives are busy with legwork – interviewing victims and witnesses, and completing reports, Morris, a civilian employee, is busy sifting through police databases and examining statistics to hone in on areas where crimes are occurring.

"A lot of times, the deputy is out on the street concentrating on their one area, and they may not see a bigger picture of what's happening around them because they're focused on getting out there, stopping the bad guys," he said.

Patterns and conditions

Part of Morris' work is examining crime patterns such as time of day and specific conditions and asking questions such as what are the suspects taking - phones, wallets, briefcases - and where are they most active? Are they committing crimes alone?

"Basically what we're doing as crime analysts is using information about previous events to forecast when the suspects are most likely to hit again," he explained.

"We'll give the deputies a predicted window of day and time where the culprits will likely strike again. They may not hit there at all, or you might get lucky and they do hit," he said. "I look for patterns and series in crimes."

Morris' assistance proved helpful earlier this year when he helped nab a robbery suspect who victimized a juvenile patron on a Metro bus.

"He (the victim) did a great job of giving us a description of the suspect. The suspect had very distinct tattoos on his face and head. And so I went into the department databases and searched for those tattoos, and came up with a possible suspect," he said.

Detectives used the suspect's photo along with five other mug shots to create a "six-pack" of evidence presented to the victim, who was able to provide a positive identification.

"The suspect's name was placed on a wanted list to be seen by other law enforcement officials, and he was picked up and subsequently charged," Morris said.

"Crime analysts are being utilized more because of technology, he added, noting that the amount of information and enhanced databases have created a greater need for them.

Research and evidence

A former document control handler at an engineering firm, Morris decided to switch careers a few years ago after spotting a job description for an intelligence analyst on the FBI website.

Morris said he decided to attend Cal State-Fullerton to study crime analysis, and then completed an internship in the Special Victims Bureau and Commercial Crimes Bureau with Los Angeles County. A job at the Crime Assessment Center at the Sheriffs Department headquarters opened up followed by the move into transit.

"It's very exciting when you help catch somebody," he said. "My history degree has really helped me here with research and evidence. It's actually been really good for me."