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Social networking helped bust gang

By Sharon Coolidge
scoolidge@enquirer.com

The thug on the corner texting his friends or the gang member posting pictures on his Facebook or MySpace page just might be helping police build a case to arrest them.

That's because a new partnership with the University of Cincinnati gives Cincinnati police the ability to analyze those messages and postings to link one suspect to another.

The approach brought about the arrest of 30 members of the so-called Taliband, a gang that was running amok in Northside and driving up neighborhood crime.

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<http://news.cincinnati.com/apps/pbcs.dll/gallery?Site=AB&Date=20090717&Category=NEWS01&ArtNo=907150801&Ref=PH>

target="popup"onClick="window.open('','popup',width=775,height=695,status=no,toolbar=no,location=no,scrollbars=no,resizable=no')">Photos: College sleuths

"It is the first time we ever realized the important of social networking and social networking Web sites in criminal investigations," Capt. Dan Gerard said.

Linking criminals often means police can charge them with participating in a criminal gang, a charge that carries two to eight years of prison time on top of whatever sentence the actual crime warrants.

The gang slaying of Michael Grace in a Mount Airy parking lot in December 2007 was the trigger that brought down the Taliband, which is considered one of the largest and most organized city gangs.

Two men thought Grace was invading their gang territory and gunned down the 19-year-old man.

The pair was arrested, but while investigating the case detectives found a rivalry between the Taliband, the Northside gang Grace belonged to, and its rival, the Hawaiian Terrace Bloods.

The Bloods were small and all but decimated by a spate of arrests when officers began looking at the gangs. The Taliband - named for the Islamic terrorists in Afghanistan but with a D added at the end - was a different story.

The gang was more complex.

But a casual conversation led police to partner with the university.

Gerard mentioned to Robin Engel, director of the University of Cincinnati's Policing Institute, how difficult it was managing so much Taliband evidence.

She offered help.

Gerard accepted, but was skeptical. "We didn't know what their capabilities were," he said.

When they formed a partnership with Engel's team, police got a database specialist, a social networking analyst, a person who was able to organize social networking site photos and a proficient mapmaker.

"It took one meeting with Robin and her team, and my street enforcement team said, 'We need them on our side,' " Gerard said. "We would not have been able to do this without them."

Engel and students Jessica Dunham, Murat Ozer, Davin Hall and Ashley Fritz organized 1,800 surveillance photos in a database so that a simple click on any person in the photo went to a page detailing the person's criminal history. The team created maps of Taliband crimes, and conducted a social network analysis that linked various gang members.

With that evidence, prosecutors took the case to a grand jury in November. Jurors took just 10 minutes to bring 96 charges against 30 gang members. So far six have been sent to prison.

Ozer, a Turkish national police officer, who is getting a doctorate in criminal justice at UC, said he never thought he'd be helping local police crack a case. "The greatest lesson is experience," he said.

Sharon Koehler, head of Northside Court Watch, which monitors court cases of people arrested in the neighborhood, praised the partnership.

"A lot of people were absolutely, positively terrified," Koehler said. "Bringing the university in was extremely smart."
