

Multnomah County turns to GPS tracking to fight gang violence

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Carl Goodman, assistant director of the county Department of Community Justice, wonders hypothetically whether having GPS bracelets on young offenders could have done something to prevent last month's fatal shooting of Andre Payton, a 19-year-old Grant High School graduate pictured in a photo left last week at a memorial for him.

Imagine a beef breaks out between rival gangs and law enforcement officers could track members in real time, possibly preventing a crime.

It may sound a bit like the movie "**Minority Report**," but **Multnomah County's Department of Community Justice** hopes new technology could push back the wave of gang violence rolling across the county.

The county **Board of Commissioners** late last month approved \$9,750 as part of \$117,000 in emergency anti-gang funds for a five-month pilot program to place five GPS bracelets on youths who've been involved in gangs and are under the county justice department's jurisdiction.

The bracelets would be reserved for offenders that county officials deem the most likely to participate in violent gang activity, and the units would move to different teens as tensions shift.

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But the program troubles some civil libertarians and youth advocates who are concerned about the rights of teens who will have their every move monitored only on the suspicion that they might re-offend. Further, advocates worry that targeting gangs could unfairly affect youths of color.

County, Oregon
**Violence program
aims to turn
around gang
members,
troubled youths**

"We really are concerned about the rights of youth," said Carl Goodman, assistant director of the county Department of Community Justice. "But what corrections has to do is balance civil liberties with the risk of extreme violence."

Multnomah County already uses GPS to monitor some adult offenders. Law enforcement agencies across the country are also increasingly leaning on GPS units to keep tabs on probationers and parolees. California, for example, tracks more offenders than any other state, including some 6,500 sex offenders and 800 gang members. San Antonio launched a pilot program to track high school truants. And agencies from Idaho to Washington, D.C., track juveniles with the technology.

GPS units are better than old-school monitoring bracelets, which told officers only when someone had left a designated area. GPS units can pinpoint a person's location at any time. In the Multnomah County system, someone at the county or the company leasing the units will monitor the bracelets in real time.

Multnomah County officials hope the units serve as both deterrent and crime-solving tool.

Goodman pointed to the gang-related **shooting death last month of 19-year-old Andre Payton**, who was killed outside a Portland nightclub. Hypothetically, he said, a GPS unit could have been attached to one of the people involved.

"If we had a bracelet on one of them, we would have known he was downtown during the shooting," Goodman said. "Right now, we know guys who are going to be retaliating, and we want to know their movements. We would use this technology to help track the person but also as deterrent because they know we are following them."

He pointed out that the technology also would show when an individual wasn't involved. And he noted that the program is just one piece of a broad strategy that includes hiring an outreach coordinator to work with schools, launching a bike patrol to monitor gang hotspots, opening an office in an apartment complex with high gang activity, and providing money and support for people who want to leave gangs.

Mark McKechnie is executive director of Portland's **Juvenile Rights Project** and a public defender for youths charged in juvenile court. He said community justice "is doing a lot of good things, and I think in the big picture this can be an appropriate tool. But it is telling authorities where youth are every moment of the day, and that's getting where most of us would be uncomfortable in terms of privacy."

Authorities will need a judge's permission to track someone. Still, McKechnie worries that the devices will be disproportionately used on African Americans and Latinos.

"As opposed to specific crimes or offenses, whether someone is considered gang involved is often more subjective and is based on perceptions from law enforcement and Community Justice," he said.

Jann Carson, associate director of the **American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon**, shares that concern. She said using GPS monitoring constitutes a search.

"It is always very troubling when you are singling out particular youth," she said. "As we have found in many other attempts to get a handle on crime in our city and our county, they result in a disparate impact on people of color."

Goodman said he is well aware of the issues and that his agency will use the technology sparingly.

"If these were skinheads doing this, we would use it on them," he said. "Sex offenders are mainly white, and we use it on them. It's the criminality we're focusing on."

--Nikole Hannah-Jones

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