

Law Enforcement on Twitter: Who's Tweeting and What

By Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA

Abstract

This research identified 923 US state and local law enforcement agencies with Twitter accounts. Based on an analysis of those accounts, the research documented current practices, identified best practices and recommends organizational policies for the set-up as well as operation of official law enforcement twitter accounts.

About The Author

Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.) is the author of nine books on policing including Police Technology (Prentice Hall, 2004) and A Concise History of American Policing (American Heroes Press, 2010). His full CV can be found at www.police-lieutenant.com and he can be followed on Twitter at www.twitter.com/policeofficer

Methodology

Over a 4 month period law enforcement organizations (LEO) with Twitter accounts were located by key word and relationship search (N=923). After the first pass at identifying LEO with Twitter accounts, the list for in-depth analysis was reduced to those law enforcement agencies that had tweeted at least three times, at least one of those tweets occurred between January 1, 2011 and February 15, 2011, (the research period) and their Tweets were not protected thereby precluding analysis. The LEO twitter accounts on the refined list were considered active tweeters for the purpose of analysis (N=539).

The data included gleaned from the active LEO twitters included:

- Agency Type
- Number of Followers;
- Number of people they followed;
- Number of Tweets;
- Software Used;
- Use of Lists; and,
- Substance of Tweets.

Statistical Recap

Agency Type:

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, 2004, “In September 2004, 17,876 State and local law enforcement agencies with the equivalent of at least 1 full-time officer were operating in the U.S.”ⁱ A further breakdown of the 2004 census reveals that 73% of the agencies were municipal, 18% were County and 9% were considered special districts, such as campus and transit. As shown in Figure 1, the 2004 census figures are close to the distribution of agencies included in this analysis.

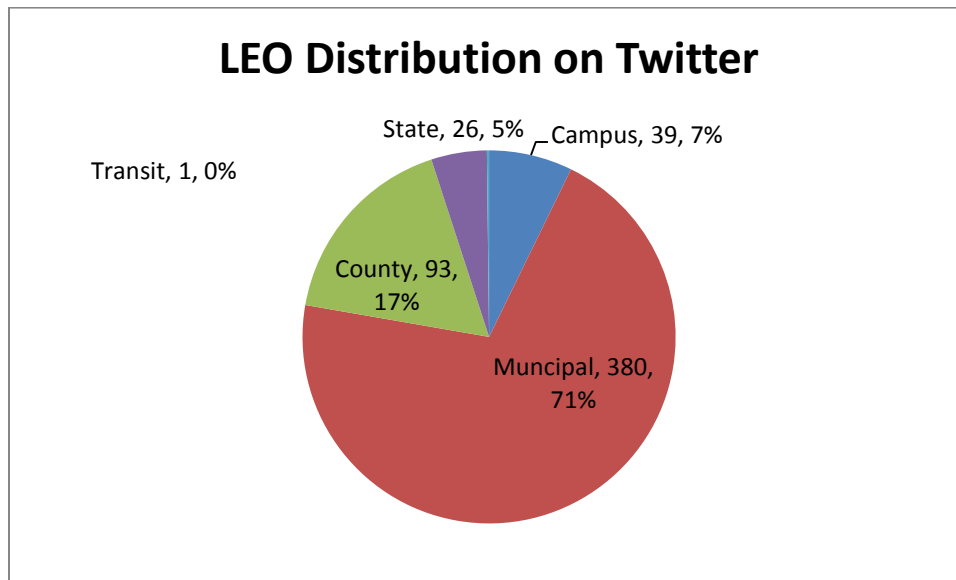


Figure 1

Number of Followers

A total of 328,826 people follow the 539 LEO Twitter Accounts. This analysis does not address follower overlap, and there is assuredly quite a bit. Additionally, given that there are over 200 million Twitter accountsⁱⁱ, the number of people following LEO is very small.

Agency Type	Total Followers	Average Followers
State	29278	1009
County	30397	332
Municipal	257042	677
Campus	12109	310

The following is a recap of the top ten LEO accounts by State, County, Municipal and Campus agencies.

Agency	Followers
New Jersey State Police	4880
Nebraska State Patrol	4416
Minnesota State Patrol	4285
New Jersey State Police	2682
California Highway Patrol Border	1539
California Highway Patrol Traffic	1500
North Carolina Highway Patrol	1420
Ohio State Patrol	1184
Texas DPS	1115
Arizona DPS	806

Agency	State	Followers
Oklahoma County Sheriff	OK	3646
Sacramento County Sheriff	CA	2396
Anne Arundell County Police	MD	2024
Jacksonville Sheriff	FL	2022
Ventura County Sheriff	CA	1671
Johnson County Sheriff	KS	1645
Ada County Sheriff	ID	1375
San Diego County Sheriff	CA	1304
LASO Santa Clarita	CA	1214
Polk County Sheriff	FL	1182

Agency	State	Followers
Boston PD	MA	20781
Baltimore PD	MD	12786
NYPD	NY	8801
Seattle PD	WA	8060
Milwaukee PD	WI	5904
Las Vegas Metro PD	NV	4638
Denver PD	CO	4323
San Francisco PD	CA	4197
Richmond PD	VA	4064
Modesto PD	CA	3393

University	State	Followers
Texas A & M University PD	TX	2376
University of Miami PD	FL	1213
Michigan State University PD	MI	1131
Ohio State University PD	OH	882
University of Chicago PD	IL	721
University of North Carolina PD	NC	718
Angelos State University PD	TX	635
University of Arizona PD	AZ	567
Univ of Pennsylvania Public Safety	PA	539
University of Maryland PD	MD	518

The following is a top ten list based on overall number of followers:

Agency	State	Followers
Boston PD	MA	20781
Baltimore PD	MD	12786
NYPD	NY	8801
Seattle PD	WA	8060
Milwaukee PD	WI	5904
New Jersey State Police	NJ	4880
Las Vegas Metro PD	NV	4638
Ohio State Patrol	OH	4416
Denver PD	CO	4323
Texas DPS	TX	4285

Number of people LEO follow

Figure 2 represents LEO twitter accounts and the number of people they follow. The analysis section of this report will go into detail on who they do follow, when they follow. But, it is important to realize that 80% of LEO on twitter have essentially a “no follow back” policy.

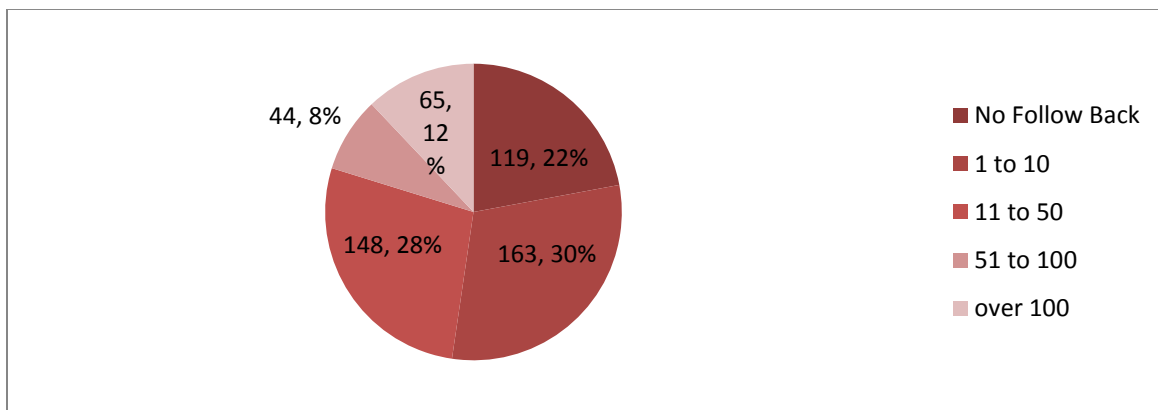


Figure 2

Number of Tweets

As of the analysis, LEO had tweeted 209,421 times. The following is a breakdown by agency type and the top ten Tweeters in the four categories:

Agency Type	Tweets	Average
State	11903	457
County	22511	242
municipal	170765	449
Campus	4172	106

The following charts list top ten agencies in their category:

State Agencies	State	Tweets
California Highway Patrol Traffic	CA	2171
Kentucky State Police	KY	1969
Texas DPS	TX	1639
California Highway Patrol Southern	CA	1249
Indiana State Police	IN	748
Kansas Highway Patrol	KS	598
Oregon State Police	OR	407
Wyoming Highway Patrol	WY	370
Indianapolis Department of Public Safety	IN	369
New Jersey State Police	NJ	350

Sheriff Agencies	State	Tweets
El Paso County Sheriff	TX	1976
Oklahoma County Sheriff	OK	1095
Collier County Sheriff	FL	917
Troup County Sheriff	GA	608
Johnson County Sheriff	KS	606
Alachua County Sheriff	FL	602
Washington County Sheriff	AK	596
Walton County Sheriff	FL	560
Tulare County Sheriff	CA	553
Anne Arundell County Police	MD	536

Local Agencies	State	Tweets
Shawnee PD	OK	63671
Wellesley PD	MA	10704
Albuquerque	NM	3431
Richmond PD	VA	3108
Bellevue PD	NB	3056
Boston PD	MA	2905
Baltimore PD	MD	2713
Woodstock PD	VT	2705
Greenfield PD	CA	2236
Woodstock	GA	1933

Campus Agencies	State	Tweets
Texas A & M University PD	TX	697
Ohio State University PD	OH	492
Butler University PD	IN	430
Baldwin Park School PD	CA	372
Angelos State University PD	TX	303
University of Tennessee PD	TN	218
University of Chicago PD	IL	142
University of North Alabama PD	AL	130
Univ of Pennsylvania Public Safety	PA	129
University of Alaska PD	AK	101

Software Used

This section looks at the various software and platforms used to tweet. Of the 539 LEO Twitter accounts, the research was clearly able to identify the type of software used by 350 of the accounts. Of the seven different software (Figure 3), the category of “Other Mobile” includes a wide variety of software applications used, generally, for handheld wireless devices. And, the category RSS (Real Simple Syndication) means that the LEO used a software code integrated with their website to tweet. Facebook, followed by Nixle, were the two most common.

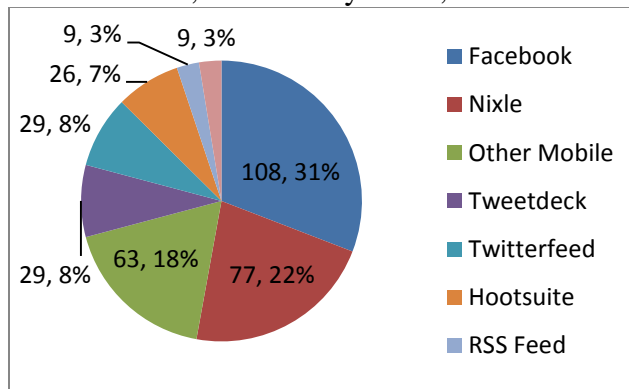


Figure 3

The two most prevalent platforms are Facebook and Nixle. The research indicates that the smaller the jurisdiction, the more likely it is to use Facebook. As an example, of Facebook/twitter integrators, State 15%, County 18%, City 20% and Campus 25%. Also, of Nixle users, there were no State LEOs found, one campus and 13 County users. Of the Nixle, they are predominately Cities, 81%.

Use of Lists

Only two LEOS were found to make use of lists.

Substance of Tweets

The last 3 tweets of the 539 agencies were recorded into 8 categories:

Weather: A general or specific statement about weather conditions.

Traffic: A road closure or traffic collision.

Emergency: A tweet that indicated the LEO was responding to a crime or other call for service.

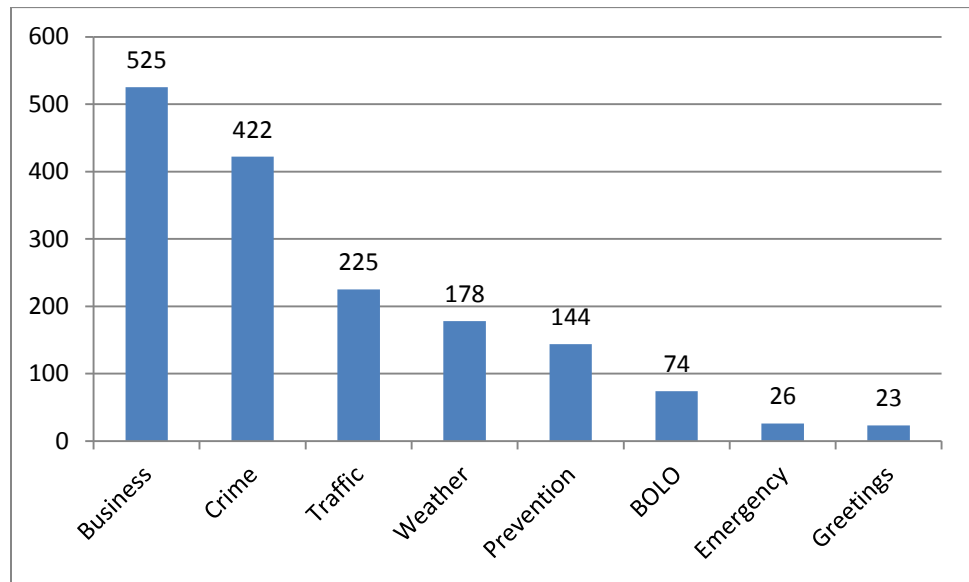
Crime: A tweet that a crime or other event had taken place.

Business: A tweet about general business, as examples citizen academies, promotions, police officer charities and other organizational events.

BOLO: A tweet asking for the public’s help in identifying a criminal or missing person.

Prevention: A crime prevention tip.

Greetings: Salutations in general (Happy New Year) to response to specific followers.



Analysis

Twitter as a Social Media

Twitter was designed and is being used a by the public and some organizations as a Social Media. While there are a variety of definitions for the term Social Media, they all include ideas

of interaction and user-generated content. Law enforcement, in the United States, is not using Twitter as a social media. As examples, the De Facto “no follow back” policy, the lack of lists and the type of tweets all indicate a one-way flow of information. Law Enforcement is simply, for the most part, using Twitter as one more means of one-way communication. It is no different than wanted posters at the Post Office, only more slightly more complex. The balance of this report will explore means to make fuller use of the social media aspects of twitter and outline some basic best practices.

Following

As stated, most agencies have a de facto No Follow Back policy. It makes sense that an agency is cautious in following as can be seen as a tacit endorsement. The large number of commercial and just plain crazy tweets should give any chief executive pause. However, as a best practice, agencies should follow the Twitter accounts of contiguous and overlapping jurisdictions as well as any other government or utility service potentially impacting their agency. If you follow you generally get followed back. And, by being followed by other agencies you would significantly increase the likelihood your tweets are mentioned, re-tweeted and seen.

Lists

Lists should be created for the same reasons an agency should employ a judicious follow-back policy. By creating lists an agency is also likely to be listed and increase their visibility. Here are some suggested lists:

1. Surrounding Agencies
2. Local Emergency Services
3. Local Public Utilities
4. Local Non Profits
5. State Law Enforcement
6. Federal Law Enforcement
7. Military
8. Local News Media

Use of Hashtags

According to Twitter, “The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages. Hashtags: helping you find interesting Tweets:

- People use the hashtag symbol # before relevant keywords in their Tweet to categorize those Tweets to show more easily in Twitter Search.
- Clicking on a hashtagged word in any message shows you all other Tweets in that category.
- Hashtags can occur anywhere in the Tweet.
- Hashtagged words that become very popular are often Trending Topics.”

The use of hashtags and greatly increase the visibility of an agencies Twitter account. As an example, the hashtag #BOLO would insure that anyone, world-wide, who clicks on that hashtag would potentially see an agencies own Be on the Lookout (BOLO) The following is a list of hashtags recommended for use:

Tag	Phrase	Definition
#Below100	Officer Safety Alert	An initiative to lower the Line of Duty Deaths to below 100 per year.
#BOLO	Be on the Look Out	Used to alert the public and other law enforcement personnel of people or vehicles that are wanted, missing, etc.
#ColdCase	Cold Case	Used to develop leads in a cold case.
#CRIME	Information on a crime	Could be used in conjunction with #BOLO, or as information about an arrest, etc.
#CrimePhoto	Crime Photograph	A photograph released for the purpose of aiding an investigation.
#CrimeSketch	Crime Sketch	A sketch of a suspect released for purpose of aiding an investigation.
#CrimeVid	Crime Video	Video of a crime released for purposes of aiding an investigation.
#HiTechCJ	Hi Tech Criminal Justice	Daily updates on Criminal Justice Issues.
#LEO	Law Enforcement Organization	Information about the activities of a law enforcement organization.
#LODD	Line of Duty Death	
#MISCONDUCT	Misconduct	Used in conjunction with law enforcement scandal or misconduct.
#MISSING	Missing person.	
#REWARD	Reward	Used when a reward is offered.
#TACOP	Thank a Cop	
#UOF	Use of Force	Used to describe situation where less-lethal force was used
#WANTED	Wanted person or vehicle	

The Language of Twitter

You only have so many characters to get out your message. Below is a list of recommended abbreviations.

Law Enforcement		Twitter	
ANPR	Automatic Number Plate Recognition	about	abt
avail	Available	after	aftr
BOLO	Be on the Look out	are	r
Capt	Captain	because	b/c

COP	Chief of Police		before	b4
COL	Colonel		could	cld/cud
CPL	Corporal		email	Eml
CMDR	Commander		forward	fwd
desc	Description, or described as		for	4
DOA	Dead on Arrival		Facebook	FB
dept	department		into	in2
EMT	Emergency Medical Technician		it is	itz
EOW	End of Watch		meeting	mtg
ETA	Estimated Time of Arrival		million	mil
evid	Evidence		MySpace	MySp
GOA	Gone on Arrival		1000	1K
ID	Identify (ID'D Identified)		please	plz
Inv	Investigate, Investigation		people	ppl
LT	Lieutenant		pounds	LBS
ofcr	officer		should	shld/sld/sud
OIC	Officer-in-Charge		to, too	2
OIS	Officer-Involved-Shooting		thanks	thx/TY
O/T	Overtime		you	u
PAL	Parolee at Large		your	ur
PD	police department		with	w/
Maj	Major		would	wld/wud
marj	marijuana			
rpt	report			
sgt	Sergeant			
S/O	sheriff's office			
SOW	Start of Watch			
STA.	Police Station, Precinct, etc.			
susp	Suspect (in lieu of Perpetrator, offender, etc.)			
TC	Traffic Collision			
traff	traffic			
UFAP	Unlawful flight to Avoid Prosecution			
Univ	University			
UTL	Unable to Locate			
vict	Victim			

Integration

Generally, integration makes Twitter accounts more efficient and likely wider read. Efficiency is gained by posting once and having the message transmitted via multiple outlets. Readership is gained by consistently generating useful content. It is a best practice to ensure integration.

Content

The types of tweets being communicated give us an idea as to the wide range of content that could be tweeted:

Weather: A general or specific statement about weather conditions.

Traffic: A road closure or traffic collision.

Emergency: A tweet that indicated the LEO was responding to a crime or other call for service.

Crime: A tweet that a crime or other event had taken place.

Business: A tweet about general business, as examples citizen academies, promotions, police officer charities and other organizational events.

BOLO: A tweet asking for the public's help in identifying a criminal or missing person.

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Field officer comments about arrests, traffic stops and calls for service were included in the category Emergency. The author believes that tweets about arrests, traffic stops and calls for service are not a best practice. As an example, many people are detained for one thing, arrested for another and often ultimately booked for a third. This is a fluid process and likely discoverable. In addition to potential legal questions, tweeting in the field seems contrary to officer safety. In addition to the act of tweeting being distracting, an officer who is tweeting is likely monitoring the twitter stream.

Who Should Tweet

Having a sworn police officer design, tweet and monitor an agencies account is not the only option. Indeed, it may not be the best option. Given the open source nature of Twitter and the simplicity of instituting these best practices, an agency could designate a community volunteer as their "tweeter." Once accounts are integrated, information can come from various sources and merged into the agency's Twitter stream. The volunteer might tweet daily crime logs, BOLOs from your crime analysis unit or anything you put in an old style in box.

ⁱ Reaves, Brian A., Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, 2004, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2007

ⁱⁱ Johansmeyer, Tom, 200 Million Twitter Accounts...But How Many are Active. Social Times, February 3, 2001.