

# TEN TIPS

Follow these steps to improve LPR effectiveness

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**L**icense Plate Reader (LPR) equipment is one of the most effective tools ever provided to law enforcement. Throughout the last two years, I've had the opportunity to work extensively with this technology and visit the agencies that benefit from its use. I've seen the extremes: from agencies just getting started to agencies that have made it the cornerstone of their crime-fighting efforts. Although widely touted as a device to identify stolen cars, LPR is so much more, especially when used as an investigative tool. I know of several serious crimes that have been solved solely because of LPR. In fact, limiting LPR to stolen cars is like asking an Olympic marathoner to walk around the block.

Following are 10 tips I've gleaned from experience that might improve your LPR use. Even if you haven't started using LPR yet, I encourage you to look it over. I think you'll be surprised at how powerful LPR can be when fully utilized.

**1** Make use of wildcard or multiple-character search capability. Most LPR systems have the ability to do wildcard searches—searches for partial plates or variations in numbers. This is particularly important in states where fonts vary or certain letters/numbers can be easily confused, such as 8s and Bs or 5s and Ss.

Also consider whether your state plates are likely to be partially covered by a plate frame. For instance, if the bottom of the characters are close to the bottom edge of the plate, they may be partially covered by a plate frame. This can easily turn a Z into a 7 or an E into an F, etc. If you understand this potential, you can search more effectively. *Note:* The more serious the crime, the more inclusive and expansive you should make your search. Any homicide detective would be happy to go through 50 or 60 possibles if it resulted in the identification of a suspect vehicle.

**2** Remember that victim searches can be invaluable. Savvy criminal investigators have long known that understanding the habits or travel patterns of a victim can provide important investigative leads. I know of one jurisdiction that solved a homicide by running the victim's plate and then looking at the plate captures that came after the victim's vehicle. They found a vehicle that matched the description of the suspect vehicle and, because it was an LPR capture, they had a full plate and picture of the car to work with. Now that's a lead!

**3** Make sure that any alert gives clear instructions to an officer as to what is expected. For instance, if the alert is simply an advisory message: "Vehicle may be involved in a series of burglaries. *If* a lawful traffic stop is made, document but *do not alert* the driver. Provide all information to Detective Smith, ext. 109."

Equally important is remembering that once action is taken, the plate should be removed from the system as is appropriate.

Failure to do so is asking for a real problem when someone is stopped multiple times because of continuing LPR alerts. *Remember:* The LPR alert is only data; it's not an infallible crook detector. Any read should be visually confirmed and the alert verified as current. This should be part of your policy to avoid problems.

**4** Share your data. LPR data is most effective when it can be viewed on a larger scale and many departments have benefitted immensely by sharing their data with other LPR agencies. It depends on your equipment, but definitely check with your vendor to determine whether this is possible and how you can move toward this capability. At the very least, establish an e-mail list of LPR contacts in your region, so you can do an e-mail blast when you have a hot situation and/or you're looking for a particular car.

If you go the e-mail route, I recommend having two contacts in each agency, so that a vacation or extended training period doesn't result in missing valuable information.

**5** Use LPR to target problem spots. Areas that are high in crime or experiencing an unusual spike in activity should get extra attention from your LPR car. Although you might turn up a stolen car, it's likely that you'll eventually capture the plate of a suspect vehicle in the specific geographic and time range of a crime pattern. It might take a crime analyst to figure it out, but there's almost no way to have this information without an LPR effort.

**6** Use LPR both proactively and reactively: If you're expecting a gathering of any type where problems might occur, run the LPR car through and document the plates of those in attendance. If a shooting or stabbing occurs, a single plate capture could be the ultimate alibi buster for a suspect who



claims he was on the other side of town when it happened.

Consider using your LPR unit(s) to grid an area when you have a major incident. Prior to LPR, an officer was often assigned the unenviable task of driving all adjacent streets and writing down the plate numbers after a serious incident. LPR can do this much more effectively and take in a broader area in less time. During major incidents, all vehicles equipped with LPR should routinely drive towards the incident using different routes if possible. Doing so will increase the chance of documenting a suspect leaving the scene even before you have a vehicle description. Use the LPR car(s) to do this as part of a regular response and it won't be long before you find that you've documented your bad guy in the neighborhood or leaving the scene.



have a traffic officer who has the unwelcome task of following up on all the hit and runs. Often they find that even when a plate is provided, the case reaches a dead end because the car can't be located or the registration isn't current.

To avoid this, check the existing LPR reads to determine if the vehicle has already been captured in the system. If so, you may have a spot to look for it. If not, consider putting it into the system as an alert so that an officer can impound the vehicle if the LPR spots it. And here's a thought: You might consider putting documented sexual predator vehicles in

**7** If you're currently updating with a USB flash drive, consider using a wireless update system. If you're using cellular as your means of wireless connectivity for mobile computers, you may be able to use the same technology to send and receive LPR updates on a near-real-time basis. If you're not using cellular and are dependent on a USB stick to start and end the day, consider putting a cellular card in just the LPR car to obtain this functionality. (This assumes you have cell coverage in your area.)

If your agency uses hot spots or mesh or some combination to have wireless connectivity with your mobile computers, consider using this capability to provide the updates and downloads for your LPR data. (Check with your LPR and wireless vendors to determine the feasibility of using any of the above.)

**8** When it comes to effective LPR use, numbers count. You want to get as many plate captures from as much of your jurisdiction as possible because this information will later help you locate a vehicle that might not otherwise be found. It's not unusual for certain individuals who want to stay off the radar to avoid properly registering their car. However, they still have to park somewhere. Consider using a grid system to literally drive every street in town on a periodic basis.

Cops tend to drive the main roads and get tied up with calls, so you may want to assign this task to a volunteer unit. You can even specify a run at two different times of the day to determine work and home locations. Imagine the investigative benefit of knowing where any car in your community can be found, day or night.

**9** Consider appropriate applications based on specific authorities of your state's laws. *Example:* If your state permits impounding of hit-and-run suspect vehicles, you may find LPR invaluable for resolving cases that used to go unworked. Many departments

**LPR systems are powerful force multipliers. Use the tips listed in this article to maximize your effectiveness.**

your system if you have a geographic limitation around schools or playgrounds. If a vehicle is spotted and is in a prohibited area, an officer can take appropriate action.

**10** Finally, consider encouraging all patrol officers to put a higher priority on plate enforcement and education. Clearly visible plates and having plates mounted on both the front and rear (in states that require it) will increase the effectiveness of LPR. When dealing with those officers who consider this type of activity to be beneath them, remind them that many of the worst offenders (including the Oklahoma City bomber) were captured because of plate violations.

#### Conclusion

Here's a freebie that's so basic it doesn't deserve its own number, but it is so important I have to mention it: Some agencies have reported problems when they run their LPR cars through an automatic car wash because the heavy rollers moved the cameras out of alignment. This depends on your setup, the mounts and the car wash, but do be aware that there's a potential for compromise if a heavy roller brush comes in contact with your camera mounts. If you've experienced a drop in effectiveness, it may be that your cameras need to be realigned—with or without the car wash.

Like any good tool, LPR has multiple uses and can be utilized most effectively by those who fully understand its capabilities. If your agency is currently using LPR as a part-time tool (meaning you drive around looking for stolen cars and do nothing with the data), then you're definitely missing out on much of what these crime-fighting tools have to offer.

For more information on LPR and about how other agencies are using it, go to [www.lawofficer.com](http://www.lawofficer.com) and search using the key word LPR.

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