How Payment-app Data Can Help Criminal Investigators Follow the Money

In criminal investigations, following the money is often an excellent course of action. With digital financial transactions, data is available to show how much money is flowing online, where it's going and coming from, and more. Financial information can be critically important not only in investigating financial crimes, but also in resolving human trafficking, narcotics, and stolen-goods cases in which targets pay one another for contraband.

Traditionally, money has always meant cash or checks. Now, however, online payment services like Venmo and Cash App are commonly used to send and receive money. According to Pew Research Center data, 38% of U.S. adults say they use Venmo, and 26% use Cash App.[1] Those numbers climb higher for certain age groups: 57% of 18-to-29-year-olds say they use Venmo, and 39% in that age group say they use Cash App.

Uncovering data stored by payment services

To take advantage of the convenience and ease of payment apps, users must provide personal information, which those apps retain. By gaining a search warrant, investigators with access to that stored information can find a treasure trove of data about their targets, such as:

- Name
- Address
- Phone number
- IP address
- Date of birth

- Social security number
- Bank account information
- Credit cards

- Email accounts
- Social media links
- Payment notes
- Payees
- Linked devices

These details instantly expand the data sources that may be useful in building a case against a target. If a Facebook URL is available, it may lead to photos, more detailed conversations regarding financial transactions, or even a Facebook Marketplace account. Email addresses and phone numbers are key communication data sources. IP addresses and phone numbers can be used to map a target's activity, establishing their pattern of life. Payment-app returns will also show transactions, attempted payments, and transfers between the target and other users, revealing those most active in the target's financial network and generating a short list of persons of interest for the investigation.

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[1] Anderson M. "Payment apps like Venmo and Cash App bring convenience—and security concerns—to some users." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (September 2022.) Accessed at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/08/payment-apps-like-venmo-and-cash-app-bring-convenience-and-security-concerns-to-some-users/.

Using analysis tools to find the most meaningful data

To filter through volumes of data and zero in on the most useful information, PenLink tools provide easy-to-use options for efficient analysis, such as:

- Keyword searching
- Pattern matching (regular expression)
- Frequency reporting
- Advanced filtering
- Multi-column sorting

Aiding your investigation even further, you will find a dedicated Transactions Analysis area that calculates debits, credits, and net losses/gains for your records based on custom filters and groupings.

PenLink provides you with the opportunity to analyze all of your financial data and other case data—such as social media, phone, and LPR—simultaneously, creating maps, customized reports, and personalized dashboards that can help you paint a vivid picture for investigators and juries.

To learn more about the types of digital payment data available for investigators, how to efficiently filter that data for analysis, or how PenLink now supports the ability to ingest and analyze financial transaction data, please contact us at info@penlink.com.