

## Investigator Spotlight: An Expert Q&A Series

A narcotics investigator with the Knoxville Police Department shares insights on how his team utilizes digital intelligence to make connections and help juries see the complete picture.

Welcome back to our monthly Q&A series, where we're interviewing investigative experts to understand the impact of digital evidence in today's investigations. We sat down with Chip Braeuner, a narcotics investigator with the Knoxville PD, to talk about how investigations have changed with digital evidence.

### **Q: How has the investigative process changed with technology?**

**A:** When I started working narcotics, only Knoxville, Nashville, Chattanooga, and Memphis had beeper coverage—so there wasn't any technology. I had a big undercover 4x4 truck. Targets knew that when that truck was out, I was probably looking to score. People would flash their lights, we would pull over at the local convenience store or someplace, and the transaction would go down.

Now it's a totally different ballgame—you've got people dealing who have never met each other except by telephone or through social media or various other digital channels. And technology is kind of a double-edged sword, in that targets have increased their use of technology to do their work and hide, but it's also opened up different tools for investigators. Back in the day, pen registers weren't even done all that often, but now you wouldn't think of not knowing who your suspect's been calling. The technology is now a necessity for us.

Just five years ago, if I had a drug case I would do a search warrant, when possible; then with an arrest, I'd get my next target from the people closest to the target we'd arrested. But that left entire supply chains that were never addressed.

Everything was siloed, and it wasn't easy to move the investigation up the chain. Now, with the technology that PenLink provides, you can more easily see conspiracies.

For example, I've got a drug dealer whose phone I've downloaded twice on two different arrests, and I now have information on over 130 connected people. About a third of those are sources, and two-thirds are customers. Since that dealer was the supplier, a lot of those customers link to overdose cases; one of our victims was a grandmother who mysteriously died as soon as she signed the house over. By seeing more connections at once, I can identify the people I want to target, instead of being limited to the people closest to an arrestee. For an investigator, that's critical.

### **Q: What impact has digital evidence had on clearing your cases?**

**A:** Digital evidence is much easier to work with. I've gone to trial in federal court, having to walk through downtown Knoxville with eight kilos of cocaine. With digital evidence, I can give the data to the prosecutor and just carry a backup drive with me. Juries also like digital evidence, thanks to all the television shows they've watched—they now expect to see a "show" with perfect camera angles, good

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**Chip Braeuner,**

Knoxville PD Narcotics Investigator

lighting, and professional narration. In that same vein, juries like technology. They want more than just police testimony—they want something they can see.

**Q: According to research, investigators believe that digital evidence is more important than DNA evidence. Is that the case for your jurisdiction?**

**A:** Digital evidence helps us show the bigger picture of what's happened. In one rape case, we had a DNA swab, but the target said it was consensual and that he'd been there for hours watching TV. We were able to use geofencing and tracking to show that his cell phone wasn't there for hours like he'd said—so the DNA ended up being needed for the case, while the digital evidence helped the jury better understand what had happened. And DNA evidence isn't always available; it can be erased with bleach, whereas it's much more difficult to get rid of digital evidence. In another case, we were able to animate a map to show a stalker's movements. Even the DA said he didn't know that we could do that!

**Q: How has leveraging cross-agency deconfliction improved your investigations?**

**A:** PLX Connect allows us to share information, and people are using it more; when we get a phone dump, we put all the new numbers into PLX, which has been helpful. In one case, all we had for a dealer was the order-up phone. We got a subpoena, and I ran some numbers, including that one. We connected it to 14 different cases in a source city—using the tool, I found out we had documented 578 different drug-related phone numbers from that same source city alone in our jurisdiction. After that discovery, we ended up creating a specific initiative because we had so many out-of-state drug dealers coming down here.

It's also good for deconfliction, which helps us improve officer safety. When we know that there's more than one agency involved, we can avoid potential conflicts.

**Q: How has utilizing technology in your investigations made your team more efficient?**

**A:** PenLink gives me the ability to sort cases and pull up stats easily: overdose survivors, overdose

deaths, drug dealers we're working on as a narcotics unit, drug dealers patrol has arrested. Whenever patrol arrests someone on a drug felony, that's solid justification to get toll records, so it's not unusual for me to order between 50 and 150 toll records a week. Then, with the help of our technology, we can make connections that help show how various crimes interconnect. It's not just gun crimes, drug crimes, and sex-trafficking crimes alone—these crimes are often interrelated. For example, if we have a drug dealer using his girlfriend's phone, that number might also show up in our sex-trafficking database.

**Q: What's your favorite investigative tip?**

**A:** Get all the data you can right away, right after patrol makes an arrest of a worthy target. It's also helpful to sit down with the patrol guys and give them an overview of the kind of information we can get from patrol stops. When you involve patrol, they make good stops and get the phones. If they help you get a good case, you can give them a letter that their supervisor will see, which could help them get put into narcotics later in their career. It's a win-win.

**Q: How are the expectations for investigations evolving, and how are you preparing for those changes?**

**A:** I think more of our investigations will use technology to their advantage as time goes on. I'd rather go up on a Title III than have to do more patrol stops. When I send people out, I want it to be very targeted to mitigate the risks. I'd like to take information out of our RMS system and move it straight into our analysis software, so we can more easily make connections and minimize confrontations. Technology can help us get better cases, win better sentences, and have a bigger impact on the community..

*Thank you to **Chip** and the entire **Knoxville Police Department** for their devotion to keeping their community safe—and to Chip for his willingness to share his experiences with us.*

*If you would like to participate in our Q&A series, please contact [info@penlink.com](mailto:info@penlink.com). To learn more about PenLink and view additional resources, visit [penlink.com](http://penlink.com).*