

Research

## Social Media Use in Law Enforcement:

Crime prevention and investigative activities  
continue to drive usage.

November 2014

# Background and methodology

## Overview

Social media is increasingly valuable to the way law enforcement professionals operate in both crime prevention and investigation. However, as social media use becomes more prevalent, there remain many questions regarding how exactly it is utilized to optimal effect in criminal investigations. LexisNexis®, in a follow-up to its initial study in 2012, sought to further examine the law enforcement community's understanding of, and ongoing efforts to leverage social media. The LexisNexis 2014 Social Media Use in Law Enforcement report looks at current practices and processes and how the landscape has changed over the last two years in addition to new survey research areas.

## Research Objectives

To assess the law enforcement community – particularly those involved in crime investigations – and their understanding of, proclivity to use, and actual use of social media in law enforcement efforts.

To understand current resources and processes being used by law enforcement when leveraging social media intelligence in investigations.

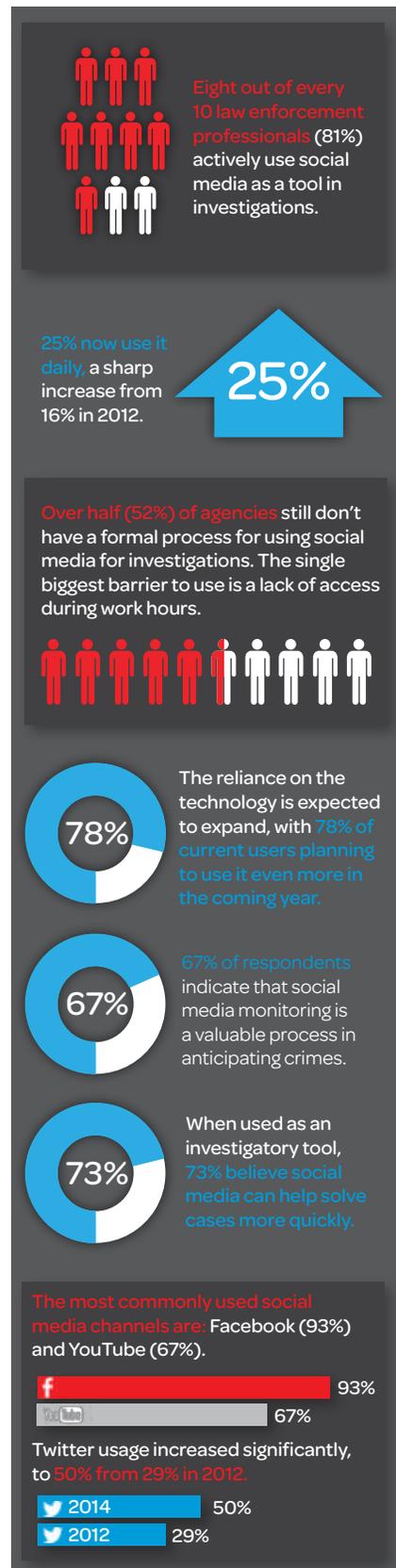
## Methodology

An online study was conducted among the PoliceOne.com community in February of 2014. LexisNexis was not identified as the sponsor. Respondents must have been users of social media on the job. Respondents included federal, state and local law enforcement professionals, representing a good mix of age, geographies, experience levels and ranks.

## Executive summary

Law enforcement professionals throughout the U.S. are increasingly turning to modern technology, including social media, to aid in carrying out their public safety mission, with a primary goal of preventing and investigating crime.

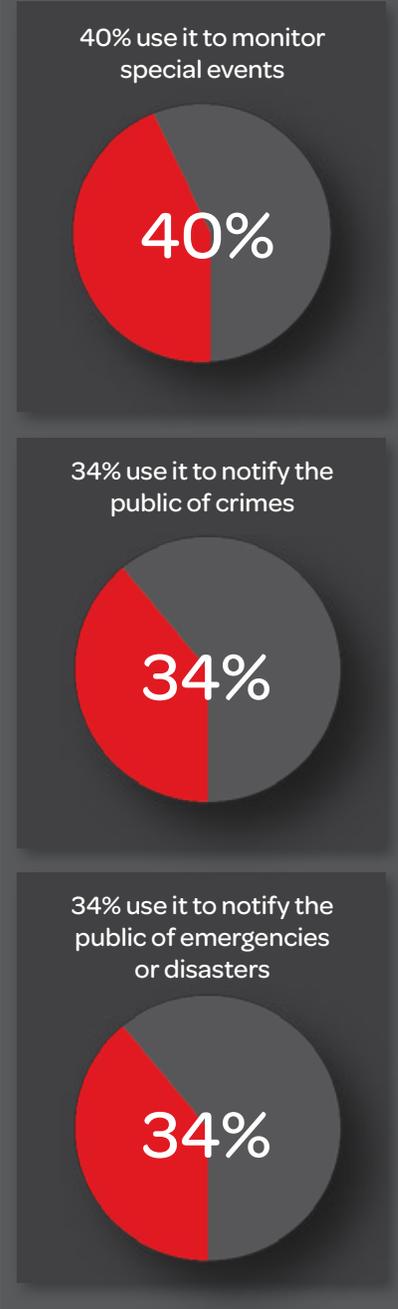
The frequency of social media use by law enforcement, while already high, is projected to rise even further in the coming years. Yet, few agencies have adopted formal training, policies or have dedicated staff in place, resulting in barriers to consistent and broad application throughout all of law enforcement.



Other pertinent findings from the 2014 survey reveal how law enforcement increasingly relies on social media tools to prevent crime, accelerate case closures and develop a dialogue with the public.

Activity	Insights/Advantages
Anticipating crimes	<p>Social media use in crime prevention is increasing both in use and importance to the law enforcement personnel utilizing it.</p> <p>Law enforcement officers can use real-time social media information to anticipate public gatherings and protests and prepare in advance to maintain the peace.</p> <p>Survey respondents indicated several real-world examples in which they prevented or thwarted pending crime, including: stopping an active shooter, mitigating threats toward school students, executing outstanding arrest warrants and actively tracking gang behavior.</p>
Closing investigations quickly	<p>73% believe using social media helps solve crimes faster; up six percent from 2012.</p> <p>Some positive examples cited by respondents: juvenile runaway with an older individual was found safe within hours by tracking cell phone movements and Facebook "check-ins"; speedy identification of suspects when police post photos to various online platforms and ability to connect suspects to other suspects or other crimes by examining posts, photos and "friends of friends."</p>
Two-way public communications	<p>More than a third (34%) now notify the public of crimes via social media, up 11% from 2012.</p> <p>They notify the public with urgent, real-time information and ask them to be on the lookout for certain criminal suspects, their cars and other identifying details.</p> <p>Law enforcement personnel increasingly reach out to the public via social media for help in solving crimes, with 29% soliciting crime tips. They also use it to alert the public about emergencies (34%), to build positive community and public relations (30%) and to communicate about traffic issues (27%).</p>

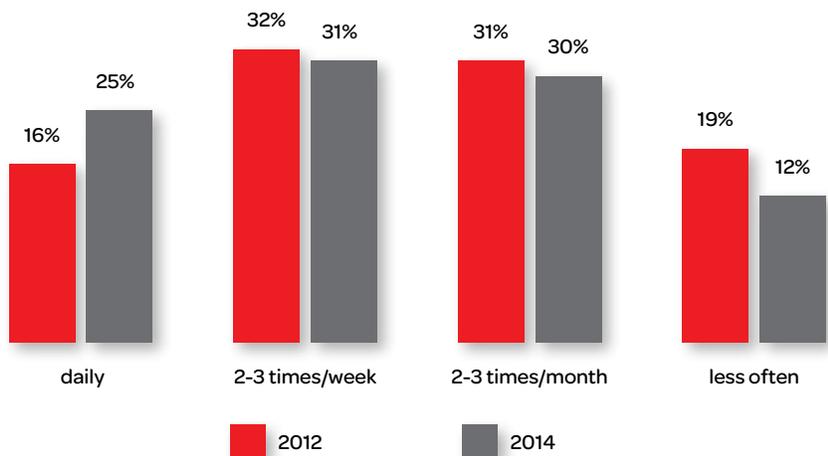
New information uncovered in the 2014 survey centers around how best to leverage social media as a tool to communicate information about emergencies and events and includes the following findings:



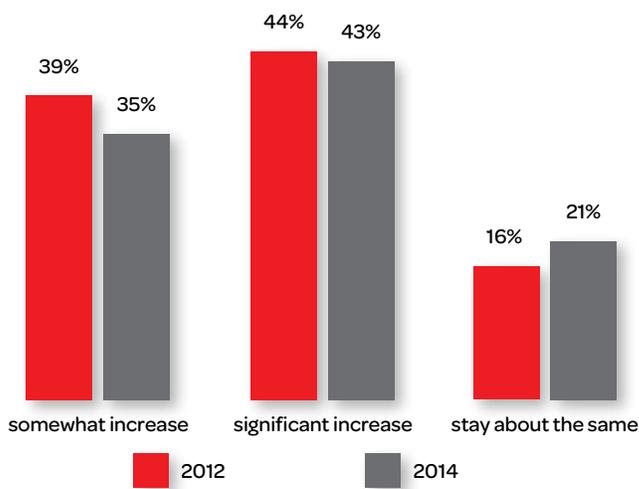
## Frequency of and expected change in social media use

Social media is frequently used for investigations. Use of social media grew in 2014 and is expected to continue to grow, with 78% expecting to use it even more over the next year.

### Frequency of use of social media in investigations



### Expected change of use in the next year

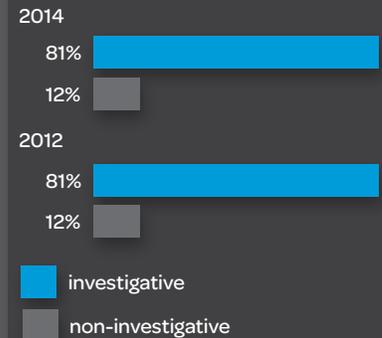


### Social media use in criminal investigations—overall community

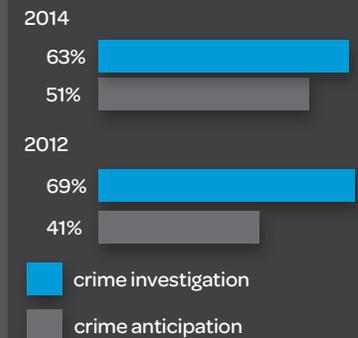
Among law enforcement professionals who use social media, four of every five use it for investigative purposes – this is unchanged since 2012.



### Social media use: investigative vs. non-investigative

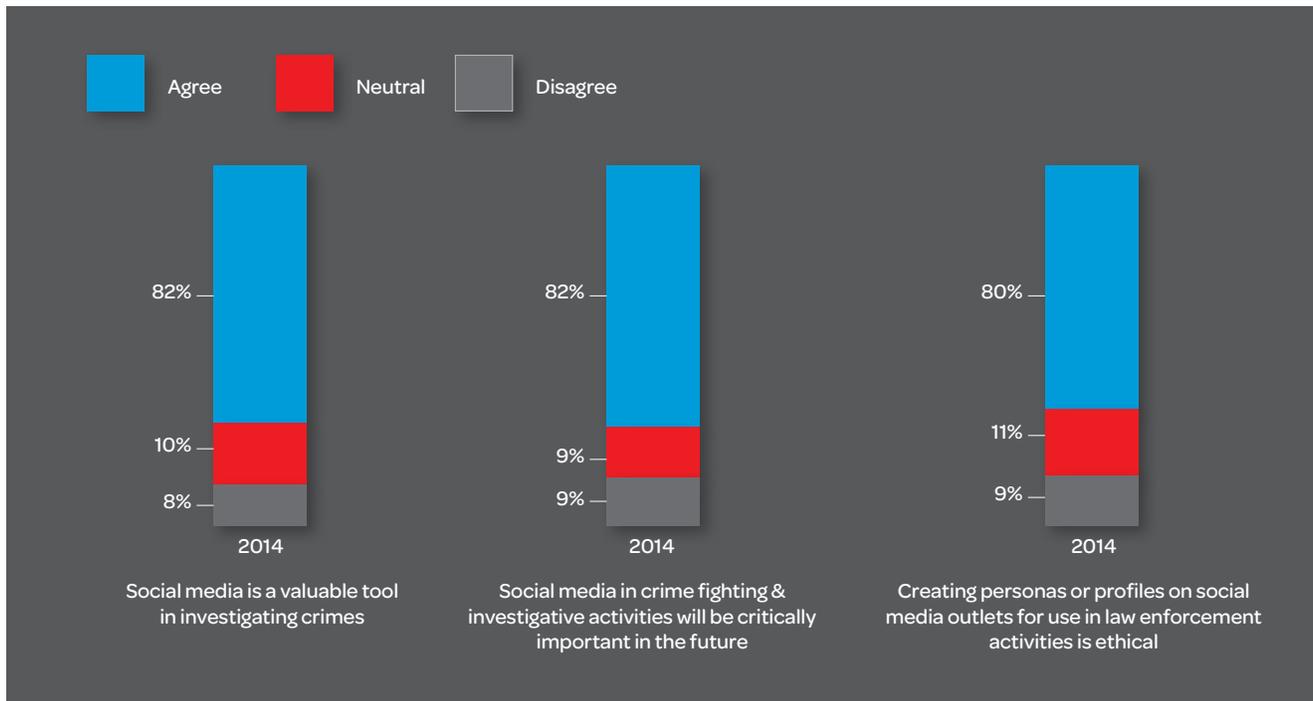


### Social media use: crime investigations vs. crime anticipation



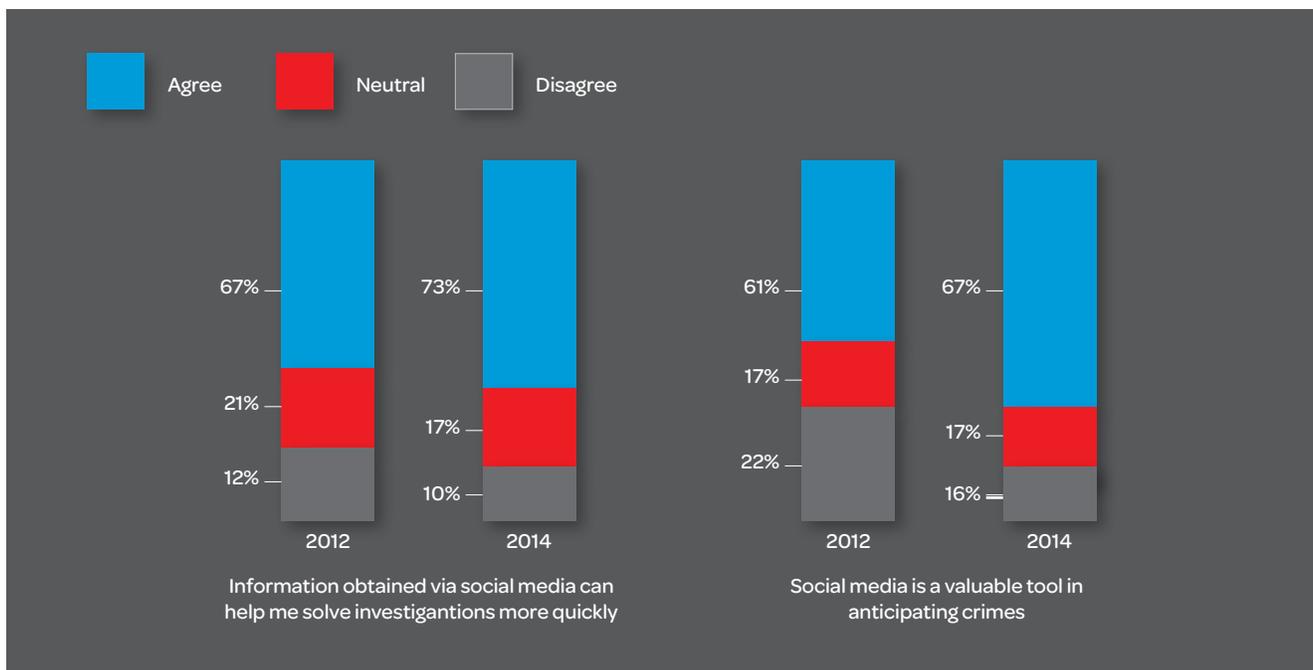
## Importance and value of using social media to investigate crime

The value of social media in investigations, both now and in the future, is abundant. Law enforcement professionals often leverage personas and undercover accounts during investigations to follow subjects or collect evidence.



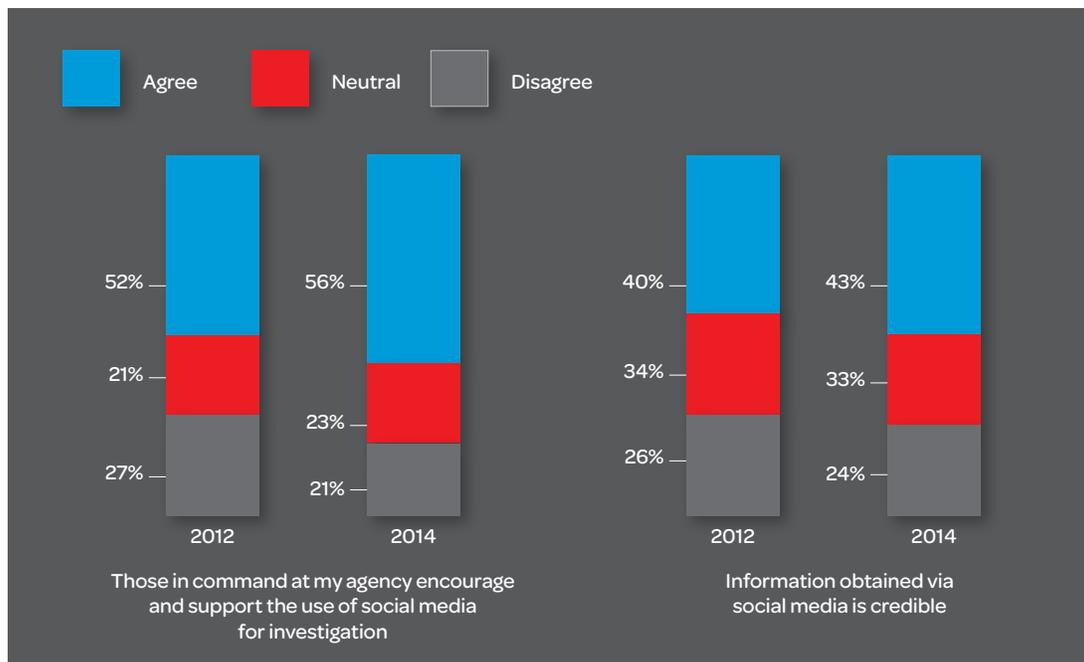
## Social media as a means to solve and prevent crime

The value of social media in helping solve crimes more quickly and assisting in crime anticipation is increasing.



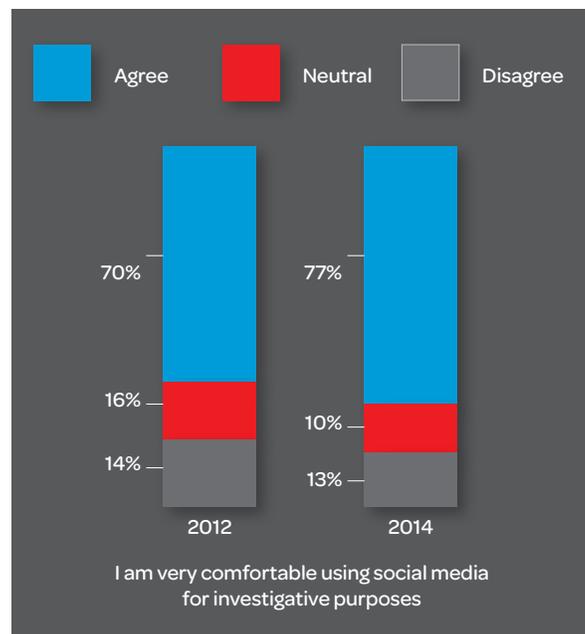
## Support of social media use by agency command staff and information credibility

Agency support of the use of social media and credibility of the information obtained through social media is on the rise, but remains low overall despite increased usage and perceived value.



## Comfort level of law enforcement personnel who use social media

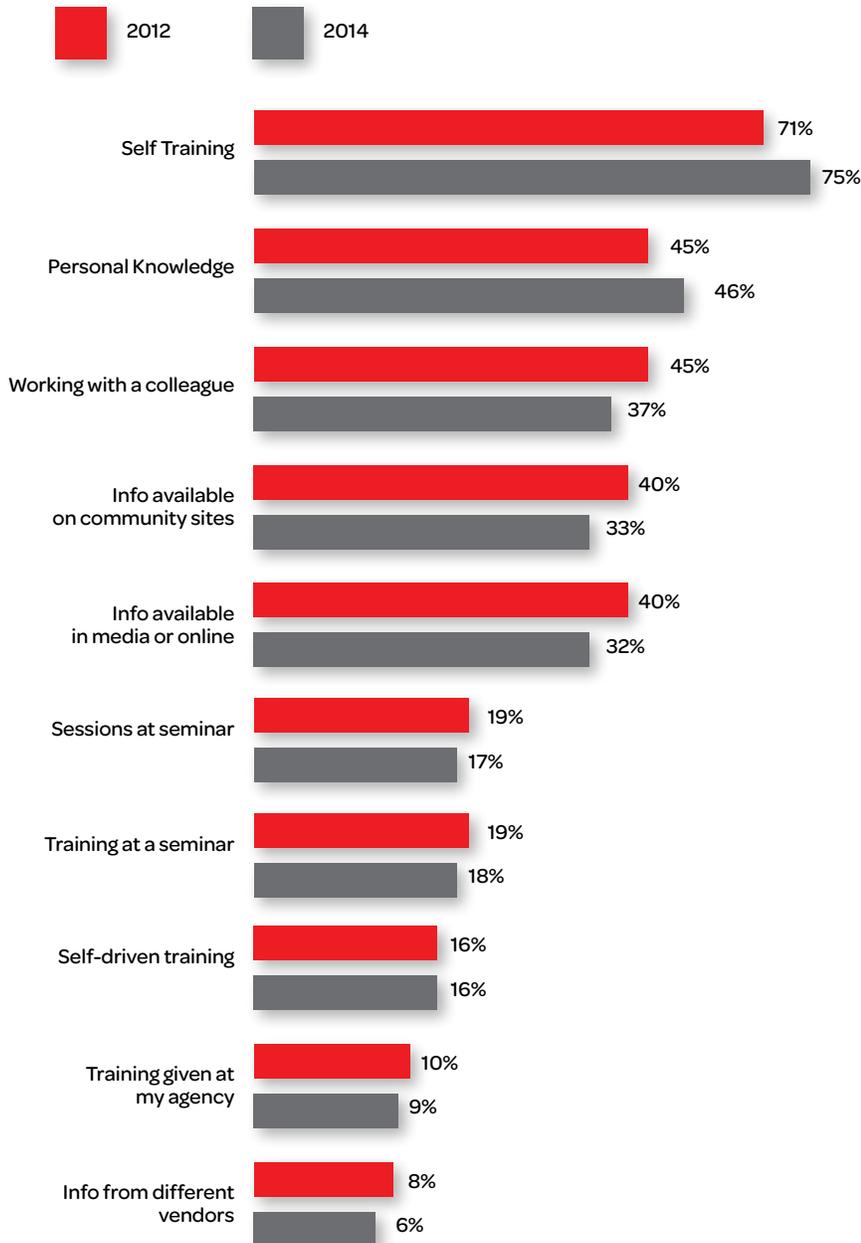
Three quarters of law enforcement professionals are very comfortable using social media, showing a seven percent increase over 2012 despite a decrease in availability of formal training. Interestingly, there are no significant differences in comfort level across personal, agency, or geographic characteristics.



## How law enforcement personnel learn to use social media to aid investigations

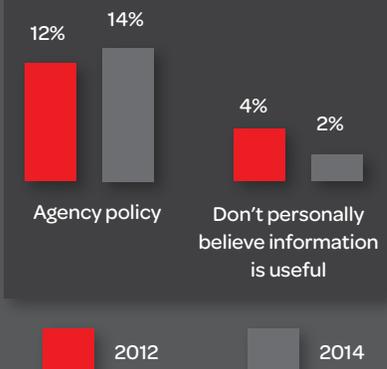
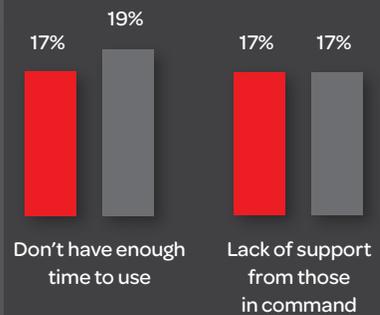
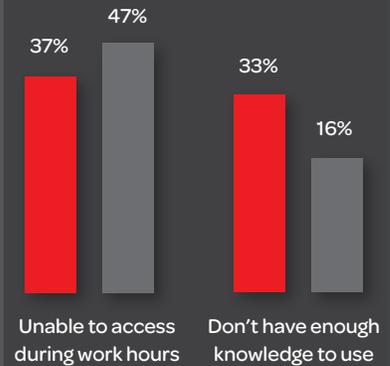
Law enforcement professionals are predominately self-taught in using social media for investigations and secondarily seek out colleagues. Formal training has decreased slightly, with larger decreases in learning from colleagues and utilizing information on community sites, and from the media or online.

## How did you learn or discover how to use social media in your investigations or crime monitoring activities?



## Non-use of social media by law enforcement professionals

Lack of access to social media channels is the single biggest driver for non-use and has increased from 2012. Whereas, lack of knowledge has decreased significantly as a reason for not using social media.



## Law enforcement officers share social media success stories

Law enforcement use of social media to anticipate criminal activity experienced a significant increase in 2014 compared with the 2012 survey. It is the second most commonly utilized social media activity, following crime investigations, and currently more than half (51%) listen or monitor social media activity for potential criminal activity. Two-thirds find social media a valuable tool in anticipating crimes.

Law enforcement personnel are using social media tools in increasingly unique and effective ways, from locating criminals and evidence to communicating directly with the community about public safety matters. Here are just a few of the creative ways they've employed social media:

### Discover Criminal Activity and Obtain Probable Cause for a Search Warrant

"I authored a search warrant on multiple juveniles' Facebook accounts and located evidence showing them in the location in commission of a hate crime burglary. Facebook photos showed the suspects inside the residence committing the crime. It led to a total of six suspects arrested for multiple felonies along with four outstanding burglaries and six unreported burglaries."

### Collection of Evidence

"Located a very unique three finger ring used in an assault. Used Facebook photo to ID ring with victim and also used it to match marks left during the assault."

### Identifying Location of Criminal

"We contacted a guy [on social media] that had been involved in a homicide two days prior. We set up a date with him and let him pick the location, because we couldn't find him and wanted to arrest him on federal gun and drug charges and interview him about the murder. He showed up and we arrested him."

### Identifying Criminals

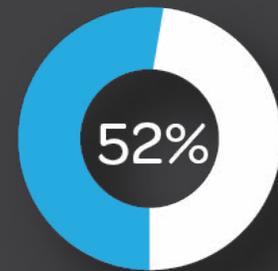
"I was able to identify a drug dealer known only by his street name and physical description by finding him on another dealer's page. He was showing off his bike and you could see the plate. Got the registration and ID'd him."

### Identifying Networks of Criminals

"Facebook has helped me by identifying suspects that were friends or associates of other suspects in a crime and all brought in and interviewed and later convicted of theft and drug offenses."

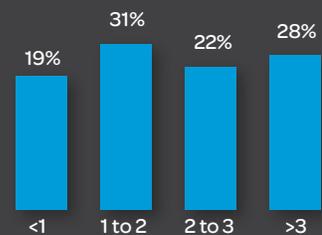
"My biggest use for social media has been to locate and identify criminals. I have started to utilize it to piece together local drug networks."

## Policies and Logistics



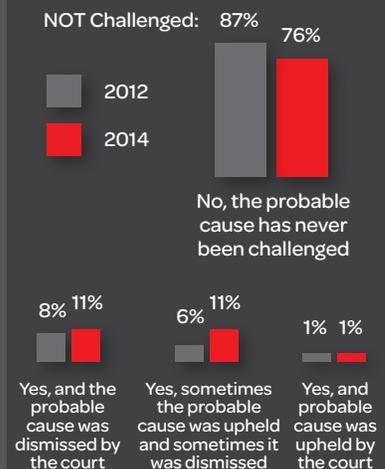
Despite widespread use of social media for investigations, over half (52%) of the agencies surveyed do not have a formal process in place regarding the use of social media for investigations.

### Number of years a formal process has been in place



Social media information used to help establish probable cause for a search warrant continues to be widely accepted

### Has use of social media as probable cause for a search warrant been challenged?



### Manage Volatile Situations

“Tip from social media user led to medical and mental assistance to a teen who had ingested excess medication in suicide attempt. Discovered via Tumblr.”

### Public Safety Awareness

“We use a dedicated Facebook page and Nixle to alert our citizens about what is going on in [Town]. We put out advisories, warnings and details of crime. We also use Facebook for public service announcements.”

### Geographic Searches

“We are a small department, so using [social media] to look for warrants and wanted individuals in other counties has been my biggest use.”

### Community Assistance

“Posted to Foursquare to solicit tips for an armed robbery and to alert similar locations to be aware of potential offender in that crime.”

### Witness Identification

“I regularly read our local gossip page on Facebook. One night after a pursuit I was scanning the site and found that someone had witnessed a portion of the pursuit. I contacted that person and we obtained a witness statement supporting our charge of felony eluding against the suspect.”

### Conclusion

Law enforcement use of social media to aid in criminal investigations will continue to be an important tool in preventing crime and identifying evidence and individuals associated with criminal activity. The adoption of formal policies and processes within agencies will lead to a unified, consistent approach to modern technology usage. As personnel become even more familiar and comfortable using it, they will continue to find robust and comprehensive ways to incorporate emerging social media platforms into their daily routines, thus yielding additional success in interrupting criminal activity, closing cases and ultimately solving crimes.

### Demographic Profile of Survey Participants

	2012	2014
<b>Age</b>		
<35	21%	35%
35-44	39%	35%
45-54	29%	24%
55+	10%	7%
<b>Years of Experience</b>		
<6	15%	23%
6-10	13%	17%
11-15	22%	21%
15+	50%	39%
<b>Agency Type</b>		
Local	80%	84%
State	13%	12%
Federal	7%	4%
<b>Region</b>		
West	29%	26%
South	35%	41%
Midwest	22%	19%
Northeast	14%	13%
<b>Population Size</b>		
>100k	42%	35%
51-100k	17%	18%
<50k	41%	47%

To cite results of this survey, please reference as:

LexisNexis® Risk Solutions. (2014). [Survey of Law Enforcement Personnel and Their Use of Social Media].  
[www.lexisnexis.com/investigations](http://www.lexisnexis.com/investigations).