Law Enforcement Personnel Use of Social Media in Investigations: Summary of Findings

Four out of every five law enforcement professionals use social media for investigative purposes.

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Background and methodology

Overview

Social media is rapidly changing the way law enforcement professionals operate both in identifying crimes as well as investigating crimes. LexisNexis® wanted to get a better understanding of law enforcement's use of social media, specifically with regards to the investigative process, for law enforcement efforts. To our knowledge, there is very little data available that addresses the role of social media in investigations. Our goal was to help educate individual and agencies and foster best practices for the law enforcement community.

Research Objectives

Assess the law enforcement community – particularly those involved in crime investigations – to understand the use of social media in law enforcement.

Understand acceptability thresholds for various types of investigative techniques using social media.

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

Methodology

An online study was conducted among the PoliceOne.com community in March 2012. LexisNexis was not identified as the sponsor. Respondents had to be law enforcement and users of social media. A total of 1,221 federal, state and local law enforcement professionals participated, representing a various mix of ages, geographies, experience levels, and ranks.

Executive summary

Among law enforcement users, social media is widely used for investigations, with four of every five law enforcement professionals using it for this purpose.

• Frequency of use is high as well, with nearly half using it at least weekly.

• Those respondents under age 55, more experienced investigators, and those in supervisory positions are significantly more likely to use social media for investigations.

• Agencies serving smaller populations and with fewer sworn personnel use social media more often, while state agencies tend to use it less than local and federal.

• Regionally, the Northeast leads the way in use.

Social media is highly valued and used in investigations. Its usage is expected to increase even more in the future.

There are three main barriers to using social media for investigations:

• Logistics
• Knowledge Levels & Training
• Perceptual Obstacles

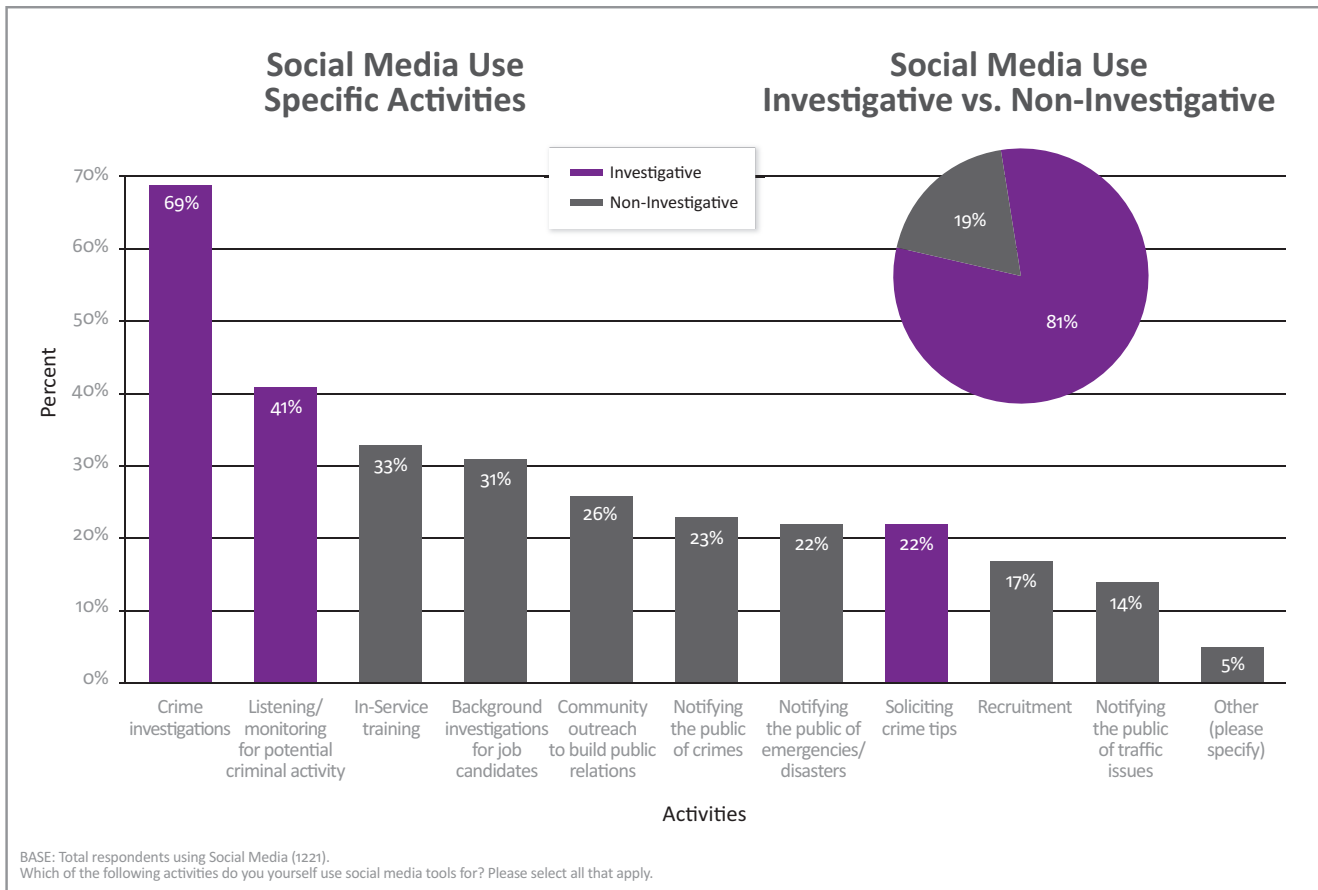**The top use of social media is for crime investigations, followed distantly by crime anticipation.**

- Identifying people and locations, discovering criminal activity, and gathering evidence are the top activities done via social media.

- Communal and personal sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, are the most used social media sites. Sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs, where users can better control their content, are used less often.

The role of social media in investigations will continue to become more mainstream, as 83% of current users expect to use it more over the next year and 74% of those not currently using it intend to do so in the future.
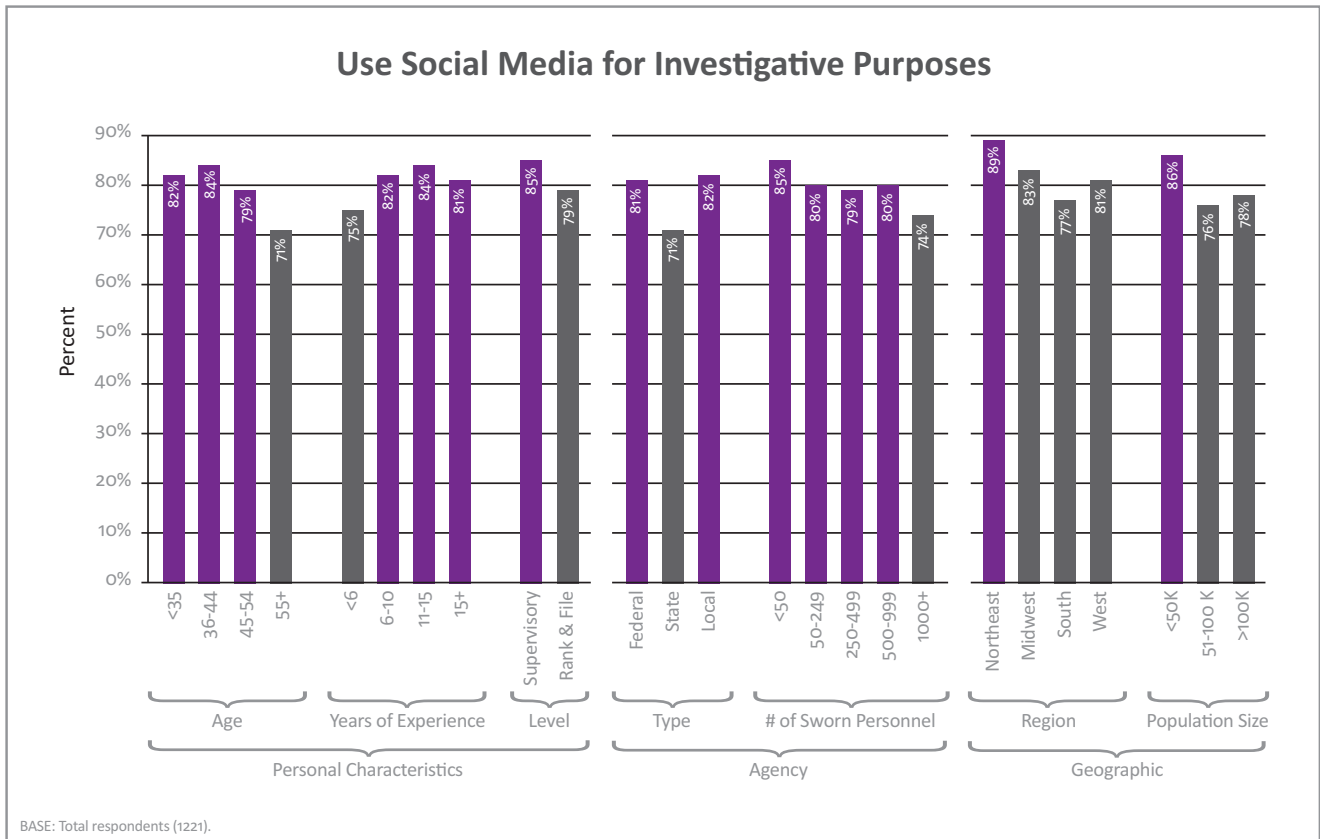
Barrier	Insights
Logistics	• Among non-users, a lack of access during working hours is a primary reason for non-use. This could be a result of permissions or accessibility to social media sites. • If accessibility-based, this ties into the need for mobility in the field. Prior user studies indicated that law enforcement professionals value portability and mobile devices, enabling the use of data in real time.
Knowledge Levels & Training	• A lack of social media skills is a primary reason for non-use. • One-third of law enforcement who use social media are uncomfortable with it, possibly due to a lack of training. Even those users who are comfortable are so because of self-initiated training. • Law enforcement professionals are predominantly self-taught in social media. Very few have had any formal training. Only 8% have received assistance from a vendor. • Agencies with less than 50 sworn personnel are the most likely to use social media in investigations, but the least likely to have received any formal training.
Perceptual Obstacles	• **Proof of Value** – One-third do not believe that social media increases the pace of investigations or assists in crime anticipation. • **Leadership Support** – Only half of law enforcement professionals in command positions support the use of social media. Contradicting this finding, those in supervisory roles are heavier users of social media than non-supervisory roles. • **Credibility** – Sixty percent of respondents indicate that social media information is not credible. However, 87% of the time, social media evidence holds up in court when used for probable cause to secure a search warrant.

Social media in investigations—overall market

Among those respondents who use social media, four out of every five law enforcement professionals use it for investigative purposes. The top use is for crime investigations, followed by crime anticipation.

Social Media Use Specific Activities

Social Media Use Investigative vs. Non-Investigative

Legend:
- Investigative
- Non-Investigative

Activity	Percent
Crime investigations	69%
Listening/monitoring for potential criminal activity	41%
In-Service training	33%
Background investigations for job candidates	31%
Community outreach to build public relations	26%
Notifying the public of crimes	23%
Notifying the public of emergencies/disasters	22%
Soliciting crime tips	22%
Recruitment	17%
Notifying the public of traffic issues	14%
Other (please specify)	5%

Pie chart: Investigative 81%, Non-Investigative 19%

BASE: Total respondents using Social Media (1221).
Which of the following activities do you yourself use social media tools for? Please select all that apply.

Those respondents under age 55, experienced investigators, respondents in supervisory positions and agencies serving smaller populations and with fewer sworn personnel, tend to use social media more often. Regionally, the Northeast leads the way in social media usage.

Use Social Media for Investigative Purposes

Percent

Category	Value
<35	82%
36-44	84%
45-54	79%
55+	71%
<6	75%
6-10	82%
11-15	84%
15+	81%
Supervisory	85%
Rank & File	79%
Federal	81%
State	71%
Local	82%
<50	85%
50-249	80%
250-499	79%
500-999	80%
1000+	74%
Northeast	89%
Midwest	83%
South	77%
West	81%
<50K	86%
51-100 K	76%
>100K	78%

Age | Years of Experience | Level
Personal Characteristics

Type | # of Sworn Personnel
Agency

Region | Population Size
Geographic

BASE: Total respondents (1221).

Non-users—social media in investigations

A lack of access to and limited knowledge of social media are the primary reasons for non-use. Very few respondents feel that the information itself is not of value. Three out of every four non-users intend to begin using social media for investigations in the next 12 months.

Reasons Why Social Media Isn't Used in Investigations

- Unable to access during working hours
- Don't have enough knowledge to use
- Don't have enough time to use
- Lack of support from those in command
- Agency policy
- Don't personally believe information is useful

- 37%
- 33%
- 17%
- 17%
- 12%
- 4%

Percent

Reasons

Expected Change of Use in Next Year

(Increase: 74%)

- Stay about the same 26%
- Significantly increase 41%
- Somewhat increase 33%

BASE: Not used for investigative purpose (233).
Why do you not use media in your investigations or crime monitoring activities? Please select all that apply.
Even though you don't currently use, how do you anticipate that your use of social media for investigations and crime monitoring activities will change in the next year or so?

Users—social media in investigations

The value of social media in investigations, both now and in the future, is clear. Law enforcement professionals also have no concerns around the ethics of creating fake virtual identities as an investigative technique.

Beliefs in Social Media Use

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
Generally, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about social media, when you are investigating/monitoring/soliciting information on crimes?
1-7 scale, top 3: agree, bottom 3: disagree.
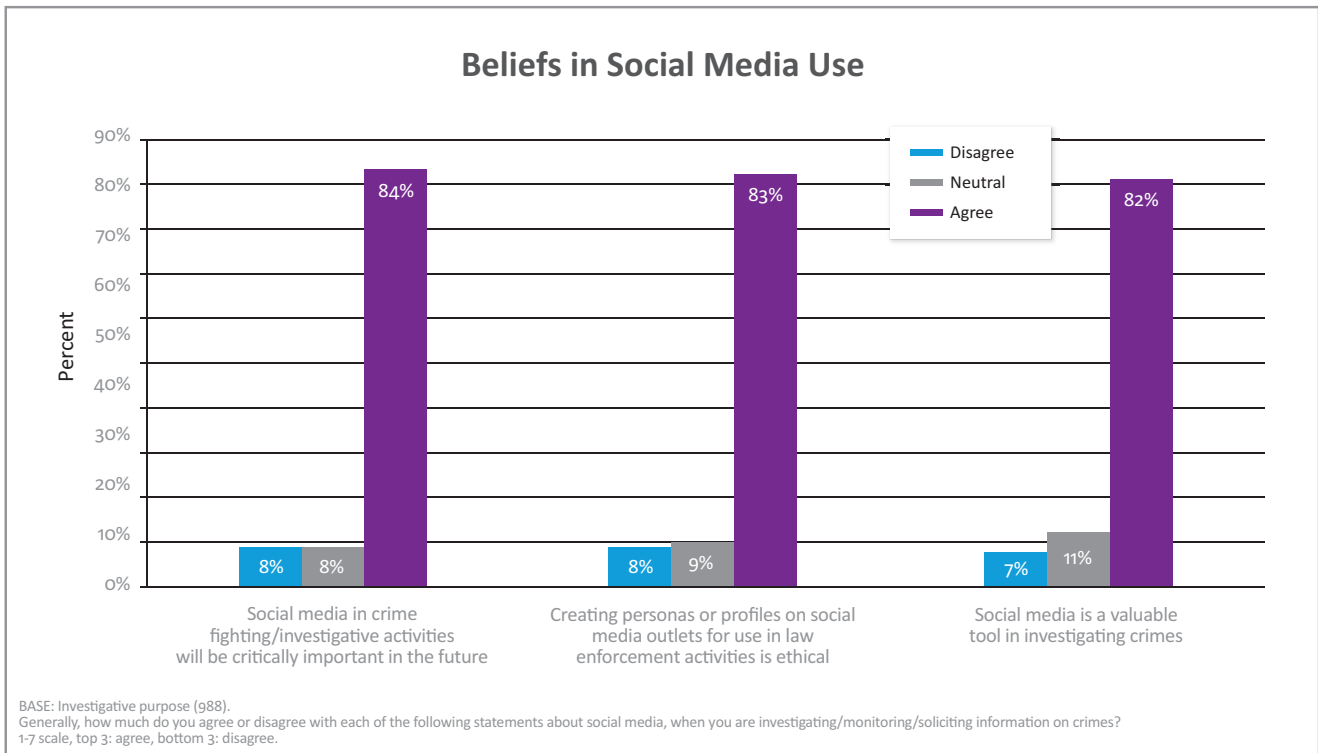
The value of social media in helping to solve crimes more quickly, and assisting in crime anticipation, is not widely recognized yet.

Beliefs in Social Media Use
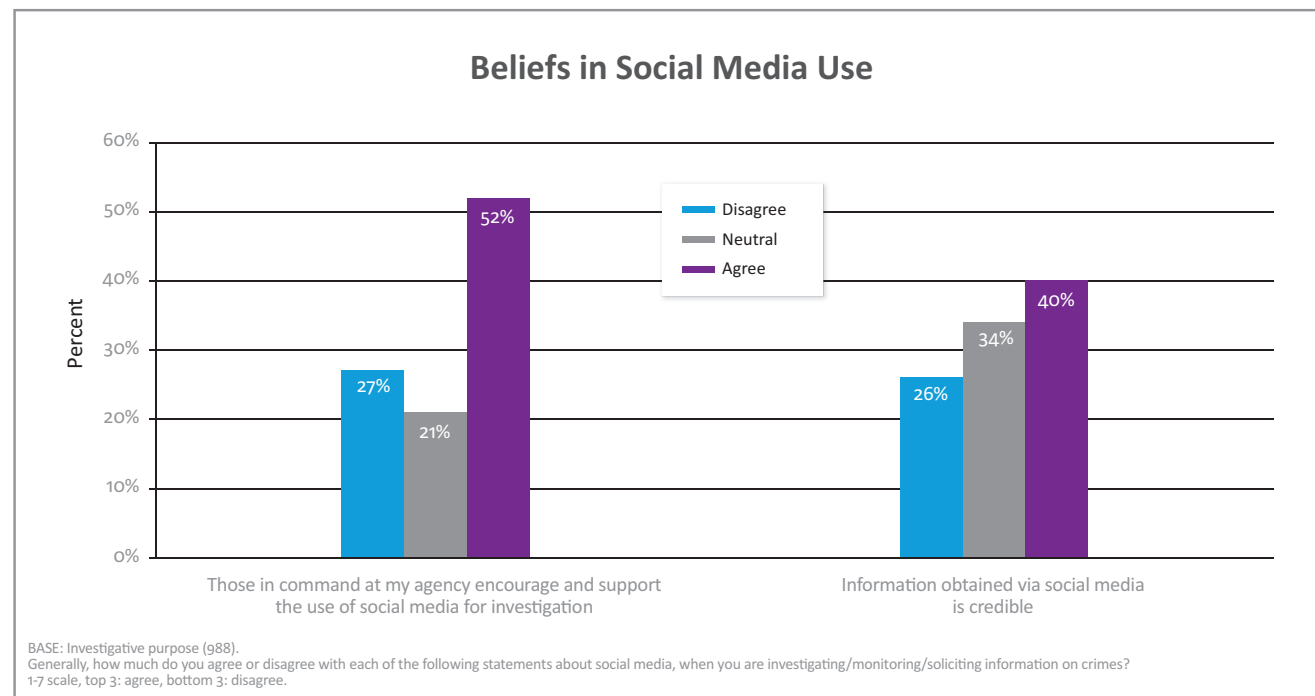

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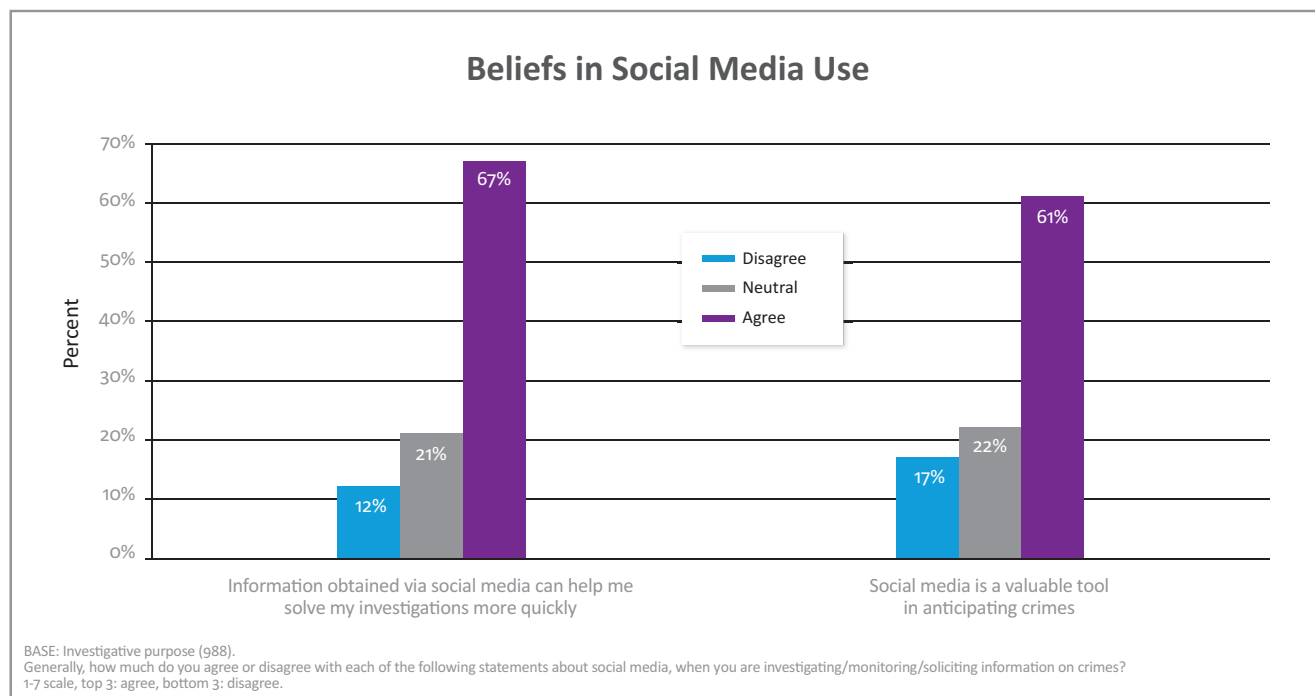
Only half of law enforcement professionals say those in command positions support the use of social media. Additionally, credibility of information obtained via social media is perceived to be low.

Beliefs in Social Media Use

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
Generally, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about social media, when you are investigating/monitoring/soliciting information on crimes?
1-7 scale, top 3: agree, bottom 3: disagree.

Two-thirds of law enforcement professionals state they are comfortable using social media, but they may not be using to its fullest potential due to a lack of formal training.

Beliefs in Social Media Use

Legend:
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree

Disagree: 14%
Neutral: 16%
Agree: 70%

I am very comfortable using social media for investigative purposes

(Y-axis: Percent, 0% to 80%)

- Comfort level decreases with age
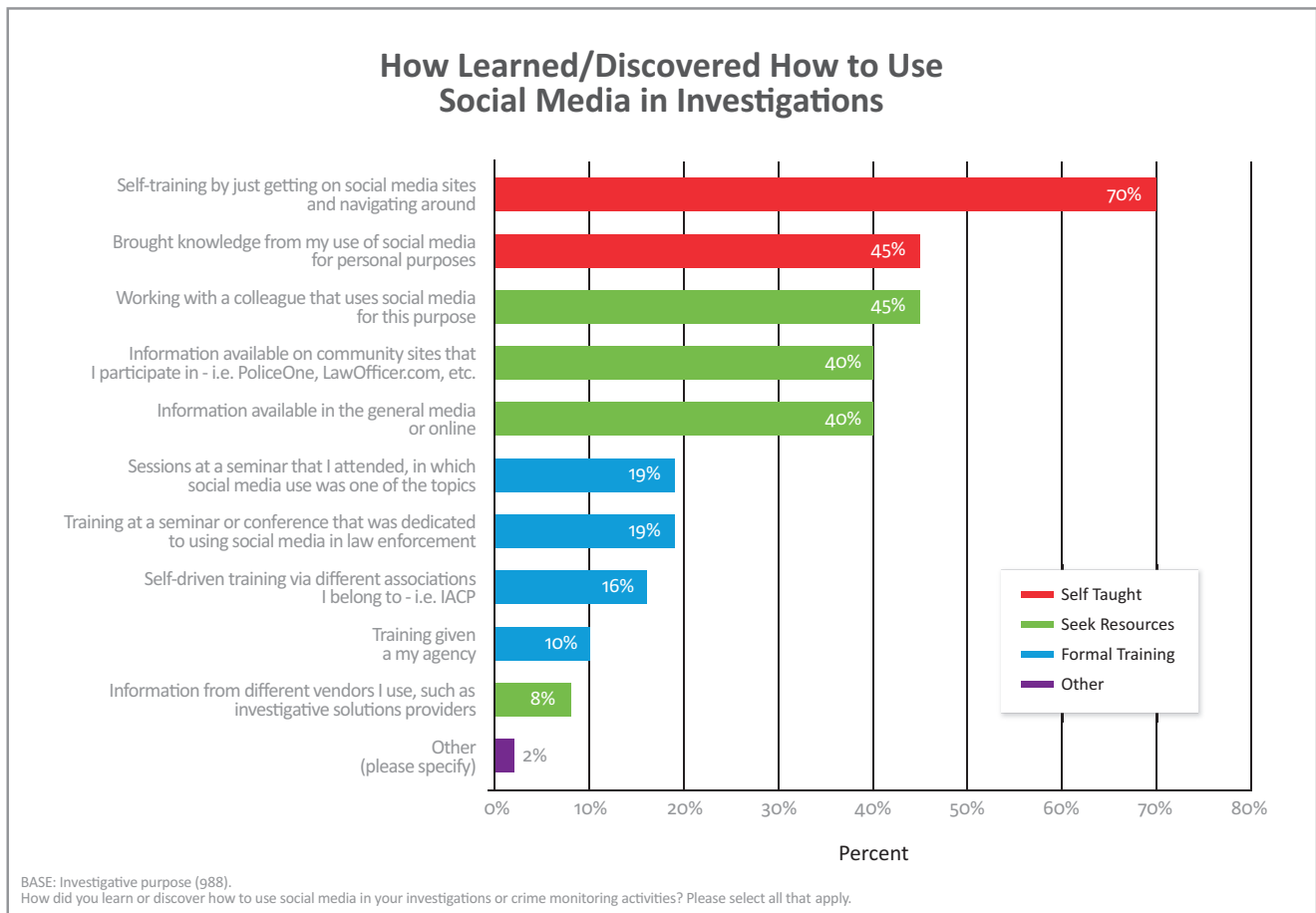 - 75% under age 35 agree, while only 62% over age 55 do.

- Those that are "comfortable" are more likely to be self trained (73% vs. 64%) or have learned by through their personal usage of social media (73% vs. 64%).

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
Generally, how much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about social media, when you are investigating/monitoring/soliciting information on crimes?
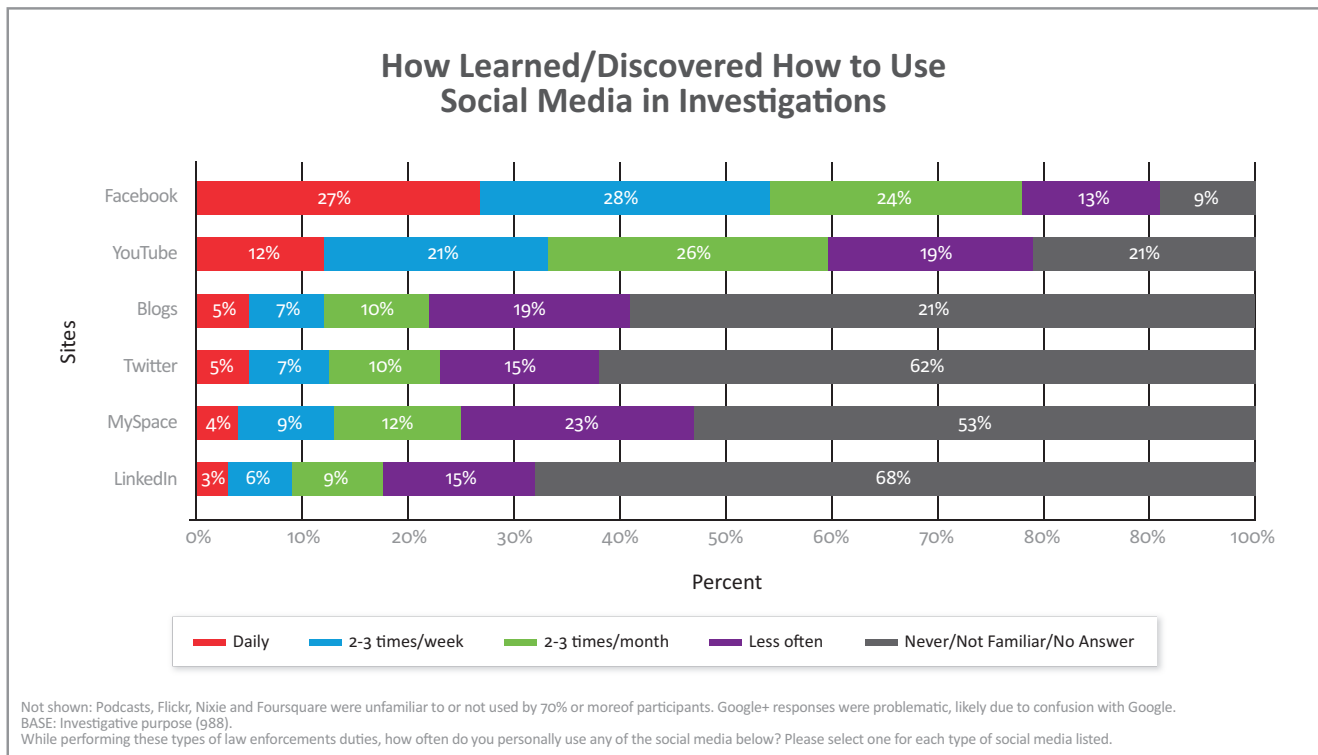1-7 scale, top 3: agree, bottom 3: disagree.

Social media is frequently used for investigations, with nearly half using it at least weekly. Additionally, use of social media will grow, with 83% expecting to use it even more over the next year.

Frequency of Use of Social Media in Investigations

(At least weekly: 48%)

- Daily 16%
- 2-3 times/week 32%
- 2-3 times/month 31%
- Less Often 21%

Expected Increase in Use Over Next 12 Months

(Increase: 83%)

- Significantly decrease 1%
- Significantly increase 39%
- Somewhat increase 44%
- Stay about the same 16%

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
In the past 12 months, how often did you use social media for investigations and crime monitoring activities: Would you say it was...
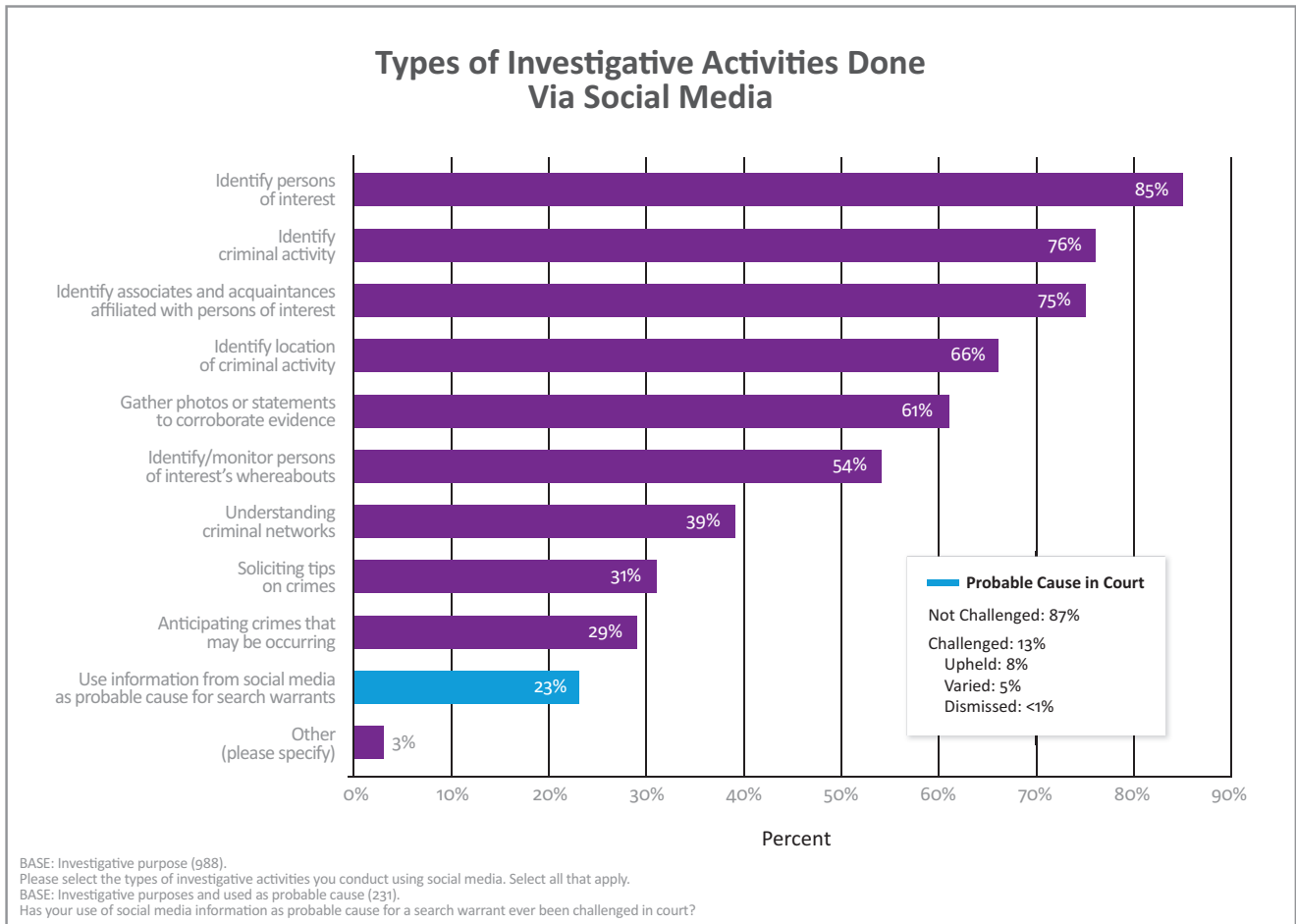
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Law enforcement professionals are predominantly self-taught in using social media for investigations and will seek out colleagues, associations and general media as resources. Very few have had any formal training.

How Learned/Discovered How to Use Social Media in Investigations

Category	Percent
Self-training by just getting on social media sites and navigating around	70%
Brought knowledge from my use of social media for personal purposes	45%
Working with a colleague that uses social media for this purpose	45%
Information available on community sites that I participate in - i.e. PoliceOne, LawOfficer.com, etc.	40%
Information available in the general media or online	40%
Sessions at a seminar that I attended, in which social media use was one of the topics	19%
Training at a seminar or conference that was dedicated to using social media in law enforcement	19%
Self-driven training via different associations I belong to - i.e. IACP	16%
Training given a my agency	10%
Information from different vendors I use, such as investigative solutions providers	8%
Other (please specify)	2%

Legend:
- Self Taught
- Seek Resources
- Formal Training
- Other

Percent

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
How did you learn or discover how to use social media in your investigations or crime monitoring activities? Please select all that apply.

Communal personal sites ,such as Facebook and YouTube are most used, whereas more tightly controlled sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs are used less often.

How Learned/Discovered How to Use Social Media in Investigations

Sites (y-axis), Percent (x-axis)

Site	Daily	2-3 times/week	2-3 times/month	Less often	Never/Not Familiar/No Answer
Facebook	27%	28%	24%	13%	9%
YouTube	12%	21%	26%	19%	21%
Blogs	5%	7%	10%	19%	21%
Twitter	5%	7%	10%	15%	62%
MySpace	4%	9%	12%	23%	53%
LinkedIn	3%	6%	9%	15%	68%

Legend: ■ Daily ■ 2-3 times/week ■ 2-3 times/month ■ Less often ■ Never/Not Familiar/No Answer

Not shown: Podcasts, Flickr, Nixie and Foursquare were unfamiliar to or not used by 70% or moreof participants. Google+ responses were problematic, likely due to confusion with Google.
BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
While performing these types of law enforcements duties, how often do you personally use any of the social media below? Please select one for each type of social media listed.

Identifying people, discovering criminal activity, and gathering evidence are the top social media activities.

Types of Investigative Activities Done Via Social Media

Activity	Percent
Identify persons of interest	85%
Identify criminal activity	76%
Identify associates and acquaintances affiliated with persons of interest	75%
Identify location of criminal activity	66%
Gather photos or statements to corroborate evidence	61%
Identify/monitor persons of interest's whereabouts	54%
Understanding criminal networks	39%
Soliciting tips on crimes	31%
Anticipating crimes that may be occurring	29%
Use information from social media as probable cause for search warrants	23%
Other (please specify)	3%

Probable Cause in Court

Not Challenged: 87%

Challenged: 13%
  Upheld: 8%
  Varied: 5%
  Dismissed: <1%

Percent

BASE: Investigative purpose (988).
Please select the types of investigative activities you conduct using social media. Select all that apply.
BASE: Investigative purposes and used as probable cause (231).
Has your use of social media information as probable cause for a search warrant ever been challenged in court?

Stories from law enforcement illustrate how social media is useful to help solve crimes, from pinpointing criminals to obtaining proof of activity.

Evidence Collection

"It is amazing that people still "brag" about their actions on social media sites. Yeah, even their criminal actions. Last week we had an Assault 2nd wherein the victim was struck with brass knuckles. The suspect denied involvement in a face to face interview, but his Facebook page had his claim of hurting a kid and believe it or not that he dumped the item in a trash can at a park. A little footwork around the parks in the area led to the brass knuckles being locating and information about the Facebook post had him confessing during a followup interview."

Criminal Location

"I was looking for a suspect related to drug charges for over a month. When I looked him up on FB, and requested him as a friend from a fictitious profile, he accepted. He kept "checking in" everywhere he went so I was able to track him down very easily."

Criminal Identification

"YouTube was used to assist in an investigation for the recruitment of gang members and promoting gang violence. A video that had known gang members rapping about shooting cops and name officers was located and resulted in the arrested of subjects involved."

Criminal Network Identification

"Social media is a valuable tool because you are able to see the activities of a target in his comfortable stage. Targets brag and post illicit valuable information in reference to travel, hobbies, place visited, functions, appointments, circle of friends, family members, relationships, actions, etc. At times you can also get incriminating evidence in form of statements, pictures, and bragging."

These stories also illustrate how social media can be used to identify, anticipate, and prevent crimes.

Discover Criminal Activity and Obtain Probable Cause

"An 18-month old baby was abused by her adoptive parents. Pictures of baby showing injuries from abuse were placed on Facebook by adoptive mother. The pictures along with other information was used to obtain a search warrant to seize computers and other electronic media, which in turn provided us with additional pictures of the baby and the abuse. This case has not gone to trial yet."

Manage Potentially Volatile Situations

"Our most recent uses of social media have been in monitoring the potential civil disobedience/unrest anticipated in relation to contract negotiation impasse/strike and "Occupy" group activities. Monitoring organization efforts has helped us identify organizers quickly, allowing us an opportunity to make personal contact in "assisting them in organizing their event". These early contacts have resulted in avoiding many of the problems that other jurisdictions have experienced."

Criminal Monitoring

"I use it passively most of the time so that probationers are not aware that we use it. It is very useful to see who they are talking to and what about. Probationer's "friends" are good contacts because even when a probationer is smart enough not to post things about their activities, their friends will."

Crime Prevention

"Terroristic threat involving students in a local high school. Further investigation (utilizing Facebook) revealed the threats were credible and we conducted follow-up investigations which revealed a student intent on harming others (detailed emails and notebooks). The student was in the process of attempting to acquire weapons. It's my belief we avoided a 'Columbine' type scenario."
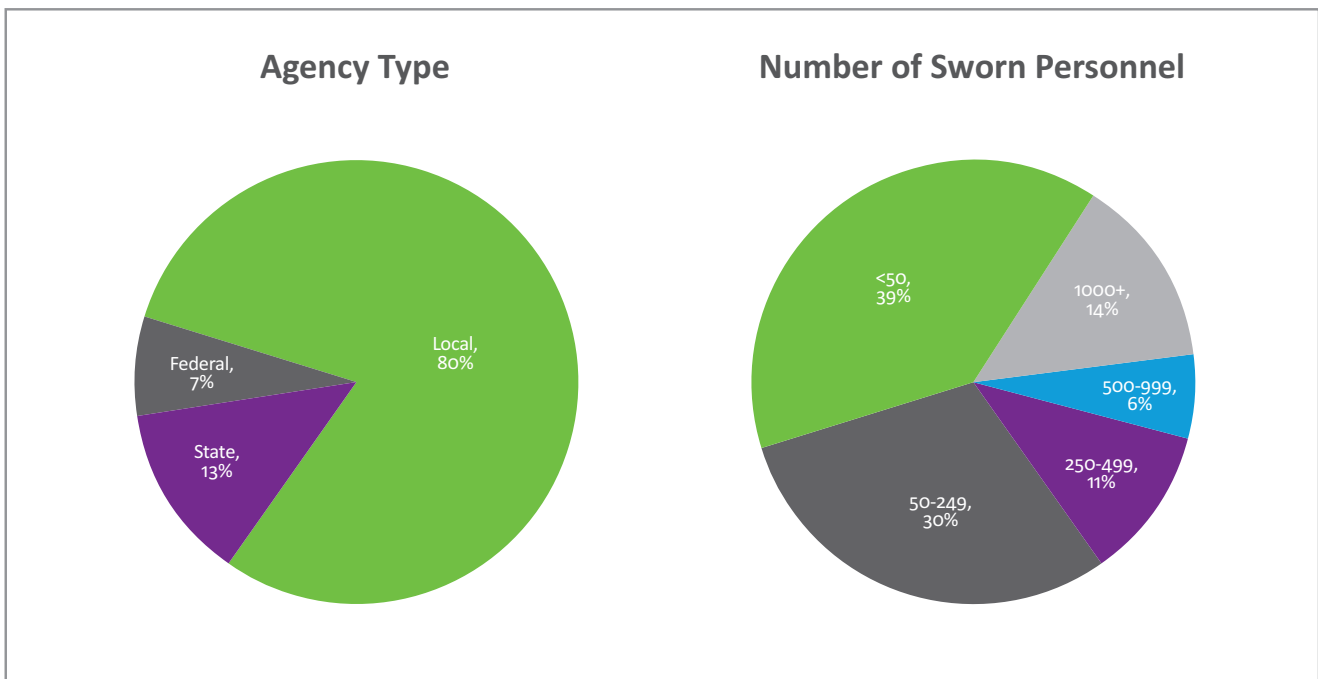
Conclusion

The role of social media in investigations will continue to grow as the criminals continue to use the social media channels to further their criminal enterprise and share their criminal escapades. Advances in technology will undoubtedly make it easier on law enforcement to leverage this data into their investigative workflow more efficiently and effectively. Training on these tools and technologies will also be critical to ensuring this data is used to its fullest potential and in a secure manner to protect the officer and the agency.

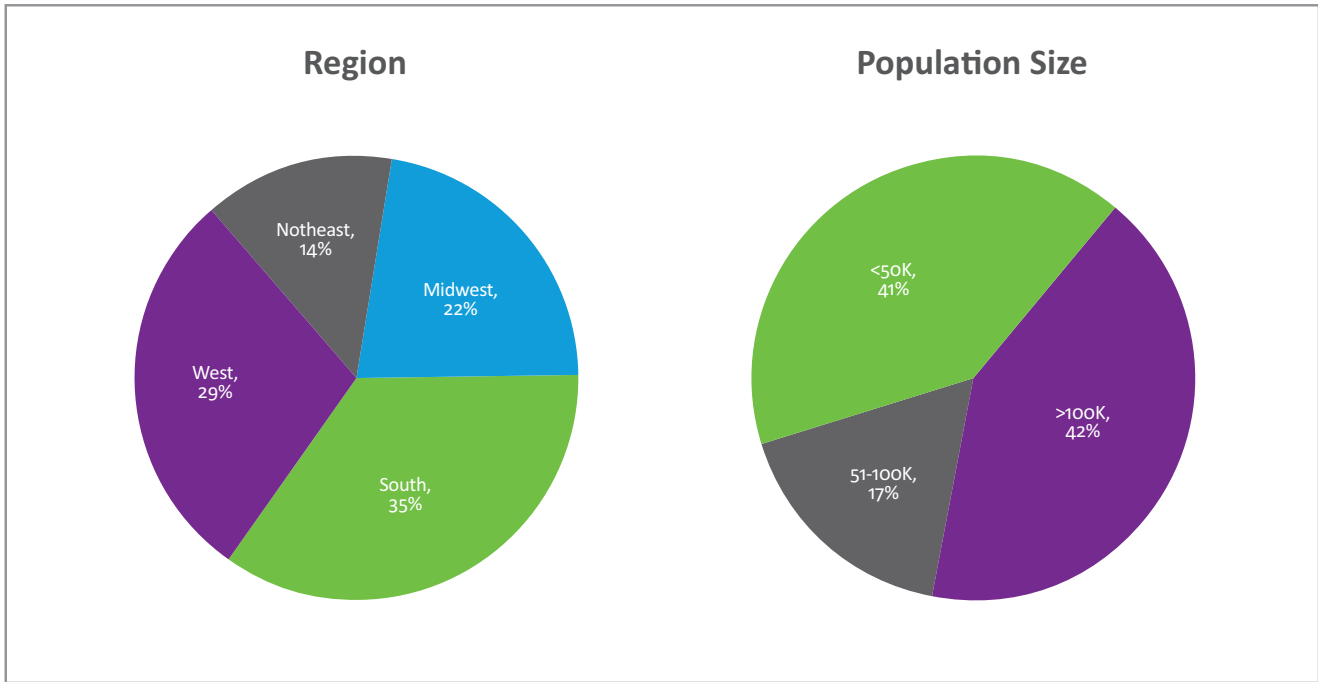# Appendix: Respondent Demographics

Personal Characteristics

Age

- 55+ 10%
- <35 21%
- 45-54 29%
- 36-44 39%

Years of Experience

- <6 15%
- 15+ 50%
- 6-10 13%
- 11-15 22%

Level

- Rank & File 55%
- Ancillary 6%
- Supervisory 39%
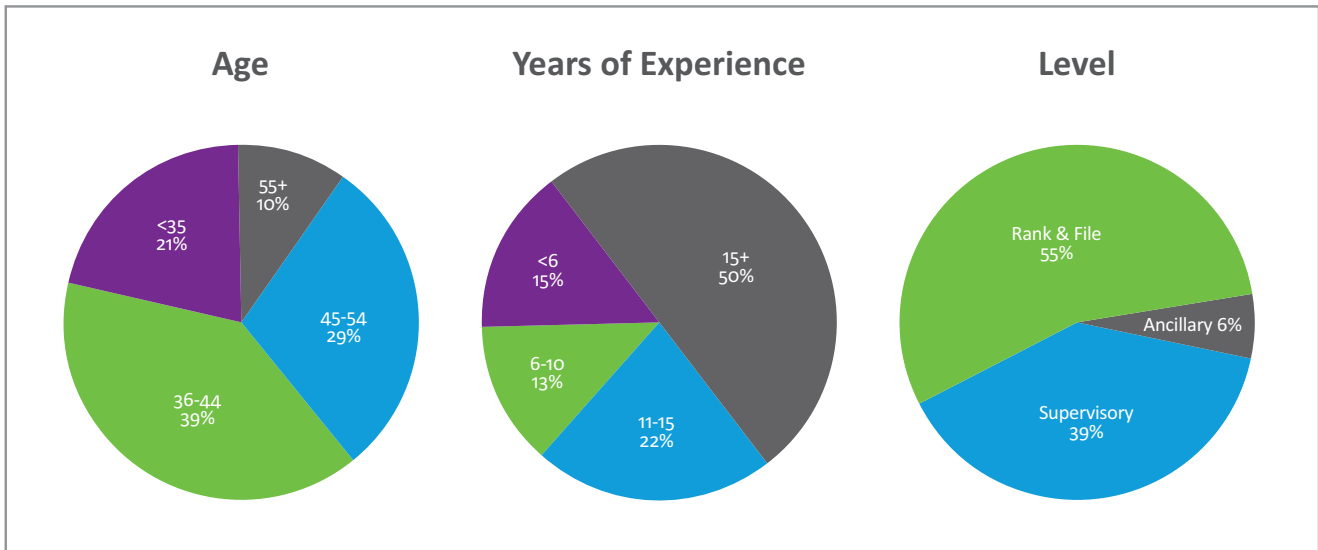
Agency Characteristics

Agency Type

- Local, 80%
- Federal, 7%
- State, 13%

Number of Sworn Personnel

- <50, 39%
- 1000+, 14%
- 500-999, 6%
- 250-499, 11%
- 50-249, 30%

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Law Enforcement Personnel Use of
Social Media in Investigations: Summary of Findings

Region

Population Size

Region pie chart:
- Notheast, 14%
- Midwest, 22%
- West, 29%
- South, 35%

Population Size pie chart:
- <50K, 41%
- >100K, 42%
- 51-100K, 17%

To cite results of this survey, please reference as:

LexisNexis® Risk Solutions. (2012). [Survey of Law Enforcement Personnel and Their Use of Social Media in Investigations]. www.lexisnexis.com/investigations.

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