Iris scans may prevent mistaken release of inmates

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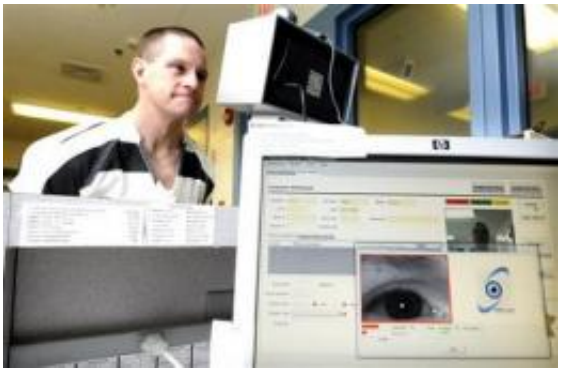

Inmate Charles Coney helps demonstrate the Inmate Recognition and Identification System (IRIS) scanner, Wednesday Feb. 24, 2010 at the Story County Jail in Nevada, Iowa. Dozens of prisons across the country are installing eye scanners that identify inmates to avoid mistakes like this week's accidental release of a Baltimore prisoner who was serving three life sentences. The Justice Department is paying for the scanners that also will be used to build a national database to better identify, register and track inmates. (AP Photo/Steve Pope)

(AP) -- A Baltimore inmate who bluffed his way out of prison probably wouldn't have tricked guards if they had eye-scanners such as those being installed at dozens of jails nationwide.

The federal government is paying for the scanners as part of an effort to build a nearly foolproof identification system to put a stop to such escapes.

"After this occurrence, we will be studying whatever we can do to make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen again," including iris scanners, said Mark Vernarelli, a spokesman for the Maryland Division of Corrections, which oversees the facility that mistakenly released Raymond Taylor.

Taylor was serving three life sentences for shooting his ex-girlfriend and her two teenage daughters. He impersonated his cellmate Thursday and was released. He was arrested the following day in West Virginia.

The eye-scanning program looks to put an end to such deception. The U.S. Justice Department has given a $500,000 grant to the National Sheriff's Association, which is doling out the money through $10,000 grants to about 45 agencies across the country that will create a national database that better identifies, registers and tracks inmates, said Fred Wilson, who is leading the association's effort.

Eye-scanners have been used for years by a few jails, the U.S. military, some European airports and private companies, but they remain rare, primarily because of the cost.

"While this technology has been around generally for 10 to 15 years, it just hasn't gotten into the mainstream yet," Wilson said. "You have to remember that the average law enforcement agency is very small and they can't afford this stuff."

Most of the $10,000 grants paid for the equipment and a small portion went toward training.

The sheriff's association teamed with Plymouth, Mass.-based scanner company Biometric Intelligence and Identification Technologies and picked the agencies from more than 400 that were interested in installing scanners. In picking jails, officials looked to spread machines across the

country and place them in spots with the technological know-how to use them.

The chosen agencies ranged from big operations like the Los Angeles County sheriff's department and Las Vegas metro police to small departments such as in Story County, Iowa, and Rutland County, Vt.

Officers at the Story County jail will start using their scanner soon.

"If we can get every state involved in this, that would be tremendous. Just like the fingerprint databases," Story County Sheriff Paul Fitzgerald said.

In Davis County, Utah, near Salt Lake City, Chief Deputy Bob Yeaman said his scanner will check prisoners whenever they come or go.

"It's probably every jail commander's worst nightmare to release the wrong person," Yeaman said.

For law enforcement, speed is the biggest advantage eye-scanning has over fingerprints.

The FBI has the fingerprints and criminal history of about 65 million people in its database. Sheriffs complain that a fingerprint search results can take hours or even days, but results are nearly instant with an iris scan.

"Within 15 seconds you can get an identification back on who this is," Fitzgerald said.

Scanning inmates is quick, too. A person simply looks into a camera, which uses infrared light to illuminate and map the iris. Each iris is unique and contains about six times more features than a fingerprint.

Despite its advantages, creating an iris scanning database could raise privacy concerns, said Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a public interest research group in Washington.

Rotenberg said prisons often are testing grounds for new technologies later used in the general public. What might make sense behind barbed wire could be seen as intrusive in the free world and it's hard to foresee what those problems could be, he said.

Fingerprints, though, will remain an important tool for agencies because scans have limitations.

One is that only the living can use the system because irises immediately break down when people die, and fingerprints will remain essential for investigators as evidence at crime scenes, said Patricia Lawton, senior development officer at Biometric Intelligence and Identification Technologies.

One person sold on the technology is Vincent Guarini, warden at the Lancaster County Prison in Pennsylvania.

In 1996, the prison became the first in the nation to install an iris scanner after, like in Maryland, an inmate claimed to be his cellmate and was released. He too was later caught.

"From then on, I said we would never, ever do this again," Guarini said. "And I want some kind of mechanism, technology, device whatever and take the human element out of it."