

Student researcher examines impact of digital arrest logs on arrestees' futures

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Camille Ingham, who recently graduated from Penn State Harrisburg with a master of arts in criminal justice, for her master's thesis partnered with the college's Center for Survey Research to assess how the

publication of digital arrest logs impacted the future success of justice-involved individuals, especially arrestees, across Pennsylvania. The study included how "digital punishment" affects an individual's ability to find employment or housing or even maintain social involvement after an arrest.

Through conversations with Siyu Liu, assistant professor of [criminal justice](#) and Ingham's research supervisor, Ingham wanted to determine what features on police websites may be important and impactful to learn more about the way they affect others.

"The publication of digital arrest logs has the potential to affect members of every community," Ingham said. "With the sheer number of people who are or have been involved with the criminal justice system at some point, millions of them could be subjected to their mugshots being posted online and have to deal with the detrimental social and economic effects that come with such publications."

More government units, including criminal justice agencies, are using the internet to share information. Police agencies are building official websites and social media presences as ways to improve transparency, accountability and [public participation](#). The services often feature crime-related information such as maps and statistics. Some [police departments](#) also provide a frequently updated digital arrest log that may include [personal information](#), such as a photo, the age, and the full name of each arrestee—information that, according to [research by Sarah. E. Lageson](#), could be weaponized against the justice-involved individuals featured on the sites as they aim to reenter society.

"As we know from existing literature, although not necessarily indicative of an individual's guilt, the ease of access to such public information can create additional difficulties for justice-involved individuals as they overcome the many hurdles to rebuilding their lives during re-entry

amidst the scrutiny of family, friends and employers," said Liu.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Pennsylvania is home to over 1,500 [law enforcement agencies](#), and these agencies have different policies for publishing digital arrest logs and often use outside web design and maintenance services. Ingham said that given the popularity of such services and the scale of this practice among law enforcement agencies, Pennsylvania deserves special attention when it comes to the adoption of digital arrest logs, where the large number of agencies can increase the publication of personal information across the state.

As a first step in her study, Ingham used data collected from the 2021 [Lion Poll](#), a statewide survey conducted by the center, to understand whether Pennsylvanians know that many local police agencies publish a detailed arrest log on their agency websites.

The data showed that just 34% of the sampled 1,044 adult Pennsylvanians know about the police publishing digital arrest logs. Males reported slightly more knowledge (36%) than females (32%), and respondents with at least one child in the household were more likely (39%) to know about digital arrest logs than those without (31%).

[Read a summary of the study findings here.](#)

Her research found that, while Pennsylvanians regard the digital arrest logs as somewhat useful, their reported knowledge about this information is limited. Ingham said that since crime-related digital footprints can impact justice-involved individuals for an extended period, regardless of whether an individual is found guilty or not, these findings question the true benefits of publishing digital arrest logs and suggest a need for further investigation.

"While these publications intend to protect the public, they are not necessarily effective in doing that given the low levels of public knowledge of digital arrest logs, and that is an important thing to consider when there may be more effective alternatives," Ingham said. "Members of the public should be aware of these publications that rely on their tax dollars that may be better spent in a more effective measure of public protection.

"Considering the limited awareness and use of digital arrest logs, public policy could look to determine alternative ways to disseminate important information to the public," Ingham said. "Resources may need to be redistributed in a way that best suits the needs of the community to promote transparency and crime-control efforts."

She said that crime information and prevention can take various forms, such as community policing, police town hall meetings, or even newsletters outlining important crime prevention information. "The needs of the community should be at the forefront of policy making before a potentially stigmatizing practice—such as publishing detailed arrest logs—is put in place. Finally, care should be given to justice-involved individuals and the costs they face related to these digital footprints."

While Ingham's research aims to explore public opinion on the knowledge and perceived usefulness of these digital arrest logs, she hopes to stimulate conversations about whether the posting of these logs meets the goals of e-government accessibility, transparency and accountability and whether the benefits of such publication outweigh the costs to justice-involved individuals.

Lion Poll methodology

The study uses data collected from the 2021 Lion Poll; an omnibus

survey conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Penn State Harrisburg. The Lion Poll utilizes a web panel methodology to collect data from 1,000 adult Pennsylvanians. Respondents received nominal compensation as thanks for their participation. To ensure that the results were not biased toward any particular location, age, or sex, quotas were utilized to guarantee that the final dataset would be representative of Pennsylvania's Census population by region and, separately, by age/sex combined categories. Upon agreeing to participate in the survey, respondents were asked a series of demographic questions, as well as a variety of public policy and general attitudinal questions submitted by other Lion Poll sponsors. Rigorous standards were employed to assure response quality, including utilizing screening questions, attention checks, and straight-lining checks to identify low quality respondents and prevent automated (bot) responses from being included in the final dataset.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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