

Stopping Drugs in the Mail

By Allan Turner and Becky Lewis

Stopping drug contraband in the mail is a full-time job for correctional facility staff. Inmates and others try every conceivable way to smuggle drugs into prisons and jails. Approximately 57 percent of people arrested used drugs within the 30 days prior to their arrest and approximately 53 percent reported using drugs or alcohol at the time of the offense. Experience dictates that even when offenders are in a correctional system, many will try to get drugs.

Correctional facilities are especially vulnerable to drugs entering through the mail room. Some of the methods used are simple; others are very sophisticated. Smugglers hide drugs in the folds of newspapers, pages of magazines, seams of a standard envelope or a container with hidden compartments.

The process of finding drugs is extremely labor-intensive. Technology can make the job easier and better. With funding from the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) Office of Science and Technology, the Department of Defense's Counterdrug Technology Development Program Office (COTDPO) is conducting a study to identify technology that would simplify the task of stopping drug contraband from coming in through the mail. The goal is to disrupt or prevent the drug supply from entering a correctional institution by identifying or developing a device and a process to screen mail and packages for drugs.

To determine which products might meet its criteria, the Defense Department conducted a marketing survey to locate products already on the market and then began a three-step research process. The first step involved testing the product to see "how well the technology found drugs," says Duane Blackburn, COTDPO deputy program manager. This led to the discovery that ion spectrometry scanners could find

mere nanograms of drugs. To visualize a nanogram, Blackburn says, consider a paper clip, which weighs approximately 1 gram. Divide it into a million pieces. Divide one of those pieces into a thousand pieces. Each of these pieces would be a nanogram.

For the second step, a scenario evaluation, COTDPO set up a mock prison mail room at the Thunder Mountain Evaluation Center in Fort Huachua, Ariz. Thunder Mountain, established to test methods of detecting large amounts of drugs coming through the U.S. Customs Service, may be the only place in the country that could provide the clean rooms and experience needed to create the mock mail room.

Before testing began, the Defense Department determined if mail picks up trace contamination in making its way through the U.S. Postal Service. "Keep in mind that even a clean envelope that you just bought at Wal-Mart could test positive for minute traces of chemicals that could be drugs," Blackburn says. Researchers sent a test mailing from a local post office and another mailing from across the country and compared the results with a control batch. They found no increase in trace contamination due to an envelope simply being mailed.

Next, researchers "spiked" test mail with drugs to find out how well various products located the contaminated letters. This batch always remained in the mock mail room. COTDPO tested scanners, X-rays and aerosol sprays that change color in the presence of drugs. The X-ray and spray products did not detect the presence of drugs in the small quantities typically smuggled through a prison or jail mail room. Scanners appeared to be the most promising devices, specifically, two commercially available ion mobility spectrometry scanners (one handheld and one desktop).

Concern remains that the scanner may show too many false positive

readings caused by trace amounts of drugs, and additional testing may be required. Both scanners can detect the presence of drugs in nanogram amounts; however, sometimes that may be too sensitive. For example, paper money in any major metropolitan area with a widespread drug problem is likely to test positive.

Final analysis of the research will likely suggest two options: Conduct a field test of the ion mobility spectrometry scanners in a correctional facility or test other, more expensive technologies such as mass spectroscopy, which has shown promise in also detecting chemical and biological agents.

COTDPO began testing products that use technology initially developed 10 to 15 years ago, which puts the devices within the economic reach of most correctional systems. Some correctional systems already use these products to test their mail. COTDPO staff spent one day observing the mail-searching process at the U.S. Penitentiary (USP) Leavenworth in Kansas. At this facility, the contraband detection process starts with staff picking up the mail at the post office. At USP Leavenworth, two X-ray checks are conducted to look for concealed weapons and large amounts of drugs. A hand search attempts to locate small amounts of drugs sent by those trying to avoid detection.

In addition, staff working in mail rooms open and examine each and every piece of nonlegal mail. Staff also search under stamps and address labels, and inside books and greeting cards. They look for, and find, nearly any type of drug that is sold on the street: cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, etc. While the amounts found may seem small to agencies that enforce drug laws in the general public, they are large enough to provide income, power and control when in the hands of inmates. For a product to be useful in decreasing the potential for such

sales, it needs to be inexpensive, reliable and easy to install and use. Further research will confirm if the technology exists.

For more information on the identification, demonstration and assessment of drug detection technology study, contact Allan Turner at (202) 616-3509; e-mail: turnera@ojp.usdoj.gov; or Duane Blackburn at (202) 305-8774.

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A Sweat Patch and Saliva Study

NIJ's Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program tracks trends in the prevalence and types of drug use among convicted arrestees in urban areas. The data collected by the program — through interviews, questionnaires and drug tests — play an important role in assembling the national picture of drug abuse in the arrestee population and have been a central component in studying the links between drug use and crime.

ADAM historically has used a urine test to determine positive drug rates among the arrestee population. As new technologies for drug testing become available, ADAM strives to use the best possible but least intrusive means of measuring drug use. In that light, ADAM will test the efficacy of using a noninvasive, fast-acting sweat patch and saliva samples to determine positive rates in a jail setting. The research is comparing and contrasting the benefits and limitations of urine, saliva and sweat as mediums for detecting drugs. Rigorous test and control procedures will be followed.

The ADAM program currently operates in 35 sites nationwide. In addition, ADAM staff provide technical assistance to domestic-affiliated sites, including Albany, N.Y., and international sites, including Australia, Chile, England, Malaysia, Scotland and South Africa. To learn more about ADAM, visit www.adam-nij.net. ♦