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### Cops and Bloggers

August 11, 2014 07:01:06 am

By Steven Yoder

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## TCR at a Glance

### Report: New Urban Hispanic Communities Face Violent Victimization

**NEW & NOTABLE** AUGUST 14, 2014

A Bureau of Justice Statistics report finds growing Hispanic metropolitan communities experience more violence than small and well-established...

Joy Baker, 47, is an unlikely sleuth.

A Minnesota turkey farmer's wife and mother of two, she quit her public relations job in 2011 to investigate and blog about an assortment of mysteries. Now she's turned up valuable new leads in one of the country's most frustrating unsolved child abductions.

And her work on the case shows how crowdsourcing criminal investigations, when done well, might help police crack unsolved crimes.

In October 2010, while on the way to shop in St. Cloud, 50 miles from her home in New London, Baker decided to drive to the spot where 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling was [taken](#) in 1989.

On a warm October night sometime after 9 p.m., Wetterling, his younger brother Trevor, 10, and his friend Aaron Larson, 11, were on bikes and a scooter headed back from a video store a mile away. They'd gotten halfway to the Wetterling home and were on a dark stretch of road when a masked gunman stepped out of a farm lane.

He told the three to lie face down in the ditch. Then he ordered Trevor Wetterling and Larson to run away and not look back or he'd shoot them.

As Trevor Wetterling sprinted for home, he glanced back and saw the masked man dragging off his brother. That was the last anyone has seen of Jacob Wetterling.

Police sped to the scene but could find nothing more than tire tracks in the dirt and Wetterling's footprints. The FBI came the next day, and 340 National Guard members later joined the search.

Photos of Wetterling went up in stores and at truck stops throughout the Midwest. Over the years, police have followed 40,000 to 50,000 leads.

Investigators did identify a 12-year-old boy named Jared who had been abducted and molested in the nearby town of Cold Spring 9 months earlier. The suspect's description and methods matched those in the Wetterling case. But beyond that, no solid leads turned up, and the case remained stuck.



Photo by Anonymous Account, via Flickr

## OJP: There's Almost No Research on Body-Worn Cameras

**NEW & NOTABLE** AUGUST 13, 2014

A review by the federal Office of Justice Programs finds just five studies from the U.S. and England on the effectiveness of police body-...

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## Behind the Courthouse Door

AUGUST 12, 2014

A DOJ-funded project to examine how well county courts perform gets a trial run in Wisconsin—with revealing results.

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## Cops and Bloggers

AUGUST 11, 2014

Could crowdsourcing crack a 25-year-old child kidnapping case?

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## The Crisis of the Aging Prison Population

**NEW & NOTABLE** AUGUST 8, 2014

The aging population incarcerated in our nation's prisons has exploded over the past two decades, but a new report from the Osborne Assoc...

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## DOJ: Change Federal Sentencing Guidelines

**NEW & NOTABLE** AUGUST 7, 2014

In a detailed letter to the US Sentencing

After her 2010 trip past the crime scene, Baker asked her readers to help find new clues.

She was skeptical of her chances, noting on the blog, “I’m not so vain to think I might be able to discover something that the world’s best forensic investigators may have missed.”

Still, she dug into the case and posted what she found, which encouraged people to come forward with ideas. She drove the route of the boys’ bike ride and posted a detailed [map](#). She interviewed Jared (who doesn’t use his last name in interviews). She convened a meeting between two key people in the case—a neighbor whom the police had labeled a “person of interest” and another who’d gotten to the crime scene before the cops.

She got readers to chime in on what they knew about a party spot in the woods near the abduction site.

And she [posted](#) photos of the makes and models of three cars seen near the site that police could never clear as belonging to someone in the neighborhood. She even interviewed the people who saw them. Readers sent in ideas and questions, and she responded to the best ones on the blog.

## A New Lead

Then last August, while doing research on another topic, she chanced across a 1987 [article](#) in the small weekly *Paynesville Press*. Paynesville lies about 30 miles southwest of the Wetterling abduction site, and the front-page piece documented sexual assaults on five boys over the course of about a year by a man whose voice, description and modus operandi matched those in the Wetterling and Cold Spring cases.

(Asked whether police had previously linked the Paynesville and Wetterling cases, Stearns County Sheriff John Sanner told *The Crime Report* by email that he couldn’t comment on the details of the ongoing investigation and said the question “would be more for Twin Cities media.” WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, which has been covering the story, [credits](#) Baker with discovering the link.)

Baker told Jared, the Cold Spring victim, about what she’d found. He contacted Sanner to further discuss his case and its similarities to the other five. Then in January, Jared wrote a letter to the editor that ran in the *Paynesville Press* asking the five other victims, or anyone else with information, to contact the sheriff.

By June, all five had come forward, and tips were pouring in to Sanner’s office. Baker was getting 30,000

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### Out of Prison, But No Place to Go

AUGUST 6, 2014

Programs to provide housing for the formerly incarcerated can help reduce recidivism. But demand exceeds supply.

views a day on her site and has gotten more than a hundred comments, tips, and private messages, which she's passed along to police. The sheriff's department now is closely investigating the Paynesville cases.

But citizen involvement in crime cases has raised some justified skepticism.

In the aftermath of the April 2013 [Boston marathon bombing](#), online amateur detectives became suspicious of missing Brown University student Sunil Tripathi and posted a link to a news story about him. Others identified a spectator—17-year-old Salah Eddin Barhoun—as a possible culprit and posted his photo.

Neither, it turned out, had anything to do with the event. But a Facebook post by the Brown student's family was besieged with hateful comments. Barhoun said he was afraid to go out for days.

That episode highlights what can happen when citizen sleuths don't work with police.

"It's important for any kind of initiative [by citizens] to be coordinated with law enforcement so that conflicting information or approaches aren't simultaneously being put out there," says Nancy Kolb of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

That's easier to control when law enforcement is ahead of the public on social media and is soliciting tips.

In that respect, Baker was perhaps the ideal amateur investigator, even though she doesn't blog about crime. The Wetterling case is the only one she's looked into. At the end of many of her posts, she included the sheriff's phone number. And she passed to police all of the tips that she got.

Almost all police agencies are now using social media to get the public involved.

In a [survey](#) released last year by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, some 86 percent of law enforcement agency respondents reported using social media in criminal investigations, and 80 percent acknowledged that it helped them solve crimes.

And at a presentation at the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences this year, researcher Lee Wade of Middle Tennessee State University noted that one police agency reported social media helped investigators solve about 10 percent of their cases.

Still, many could be doing a better job on social media, says one expert.

## Trusting Cops To Listen

Police need to have an online presence before they need help—they can't wait until there's a breaking case, says Lauri Stevens of Laws Communications, who trains agencies on using social media. When people trust that cops will actually listen to them when they provide information, they'll get more help, she argues.

Agencies that don't respond to queries or comments on social media or that have policies prohibiting them from following anyone could be actually doing more damage.

"It could cause social media to backfire on them, in that it could reinforce the stereotype that the police are out here, but they don't talk to people," she says.

Cops also probably can't control one element of social media—whether or not the amateur sleuths who respond are careful with their facts.

Baker posts only every few weeks, in part because it takes time for her to check information and run her descriptions of interviews by her sources in the Wetterling case. Whether her efforts will end up helping police solve it remains to be seen. The abductor and people who know him (or her) may have died.

But it does offer one template for what citizen involvement in a crime investigation can achieve, even in a case that's a quarter-century old.

"Police agencies are starting to figure out that [with the Internet and social media] we've got an opportunity now to put information about cold cases in front of so many more people even though they happened 10, 20, 30 years ago," says Stevens.

"I think the notion of using social media to solve crimes that are very old is only going to grow."

*Steven Yoder writes about criminal justice, immigration, and other domestic policy issues. His work has appeared in Salon, The Fiscal Times, The American Prospect, and elsewhere, and he's working on a book about the impact of sex offender registries on registrants' families. Online at @syodertweets. He welcomes comments from readers.*

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