

RESEARCH REPORT

2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey

A Joint Publication by the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Urban Institute

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The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.



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The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) is a professional association for law enforcement worldwide. For more than 120 years, the IACP has been launching internationally acclaimed programs, speaking on behalf of law enforcement, conducting groundbreaking research, and providing exemplary programs and services to members across the globe.

Today, the IACP continues to be recognized as a leader in these areas. By maximizing the collective efforts of the membership, IACP actively supports law enforcement through advocacy, outreach, education, and programs.

Through ongoing strategic partnerships across the public safety spectrum, the IACP provides members with resources and support in all aspects of law enforcement policy and operations. These tools help members perform their jobs effectively, efficiently, and safely while also educating the public on the role of law enforcement to help build sustainable community relations.

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Survey Highlights

- Law enforcement agencies use social media for a wide variety of purposes. Reportedly, 91 percent use it to notify the public of safety concerns, 89 percent use the technology for community outreach and citizen engagement, 86 percent use it for public relations and reputation management, and 59 percent have contacted a social media company (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) to obtain information to use as evidence.
- Agencies have a wide range of experience using social media. Approximately 5 percent of departments have used social media for over a decade, and a similar percentage adopted it only within the last year.
- Agencies use very different tones on social media. Of those surveyed, 29 percent always or almost always use an informal tone, 45 percent sometimes use an informal tone, and 26 percent almost never or never use an informal tone.
- Public information officers are the people most often in charge of managing agency social media accounts. This responsibility is also given to a wide range of other people, such as community policing officers or civilian personnel, depending on the department.
- Of the agencies surveyed, 55 percent have content approved by a central group before being posted online and 44 percent do not.
- Some of the greatest barriers faced by agencies using social media are adapting to new trends, measuring the impact of their use of the technology, and training personnel to use social media effectively.
- How long an agency has used social media is not a significant factor in determining how they use the technology. However, agency size is correlated with different outcomes for who is responsible for managing the agency's online presence and the tone used in online posts.

2016 Social Media Survey

Background

Social media use has grown rapidly among police departments, which use the technology to improve community relations, gather intelligence, and shape emerging narratives. In 2015, the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommended that law enforcement agencies adopt model polices and best practices for technology-based community engagement that increases community trust and access. In response, the Urban Institute (Urban) and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) partnered for the seventh annual survey of law enforcement's use of social media to understand how police agencies are utilizing the technology. Drawing on IACP's knowledge of the current state of practice as well as research by Urban staff, this collaborative survey focused on understanding the various ways agencies use social media, the tone of their online presence, their barriers to success, and their future needs.

Method

The 2016 Social Media Survey was designed to build on the findings of previous social media surveys and fill gaps in knowledge on how law enforcement agencies use the technology. In developing the instrument, authors scanned the literature on police use of social media, met with key stakeholders and practitioners, and reviewed previously completed social media surveys. Researchers reached out to law enforcement officials who manage agency social media accounts for their input and to find further areas of research. The IACP sent the survey to its US membership via e-mail. A total of 539 law enforcement agencies representing 48 states and the District of Columbia participated in the survey. The 2016 Social Media Survey builds on current practitioner-oriented knowledge while creating new findings on how law enforcement agencies use the technology.

Agency Characteristics

Agencies that responded to the survey represent a diverse sample of departments. Most participating agencies serve small- to medium-sized jurisdictions, have less than 50 full-time officers, and are local police departments. Sheriff's offices, university police agencies, and highway and state patrols are also represented. The responding departments came from all regions of the United States. The tables below show the characteristics of participating agencies.

Jurisdiction population	Percentage	Count
Under 2,499	5%	25
2,500-9,999	25%	133
10,000-24,999	25%	134
25,000-99,999	29%	157
100,000-999,999	14%	78
1,000,000 or more	2%	12

Agency size by full-time sworn personnel	Percentage	Count
1-9	9%	51
10-24	28%	150
25-49	21%	113
50-99	17%	94
100-499	18%	95
500 or more	7%	36

Agency type	Percentage	Count
Local police	90%	487
Sheriff's office	5%	27
University	3%	16
State	1%	5
National or foreign ^a	1%	4

Note: Two Canadian agencies responded to the survey.

Agency region ^a	Percentage	Count
Northeast	22%	117
Midwest	30%	161
South	28%	153
West	19%	103

Notes: The Northeast states were Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The Midwest states were Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The South states were Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. The West states were Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

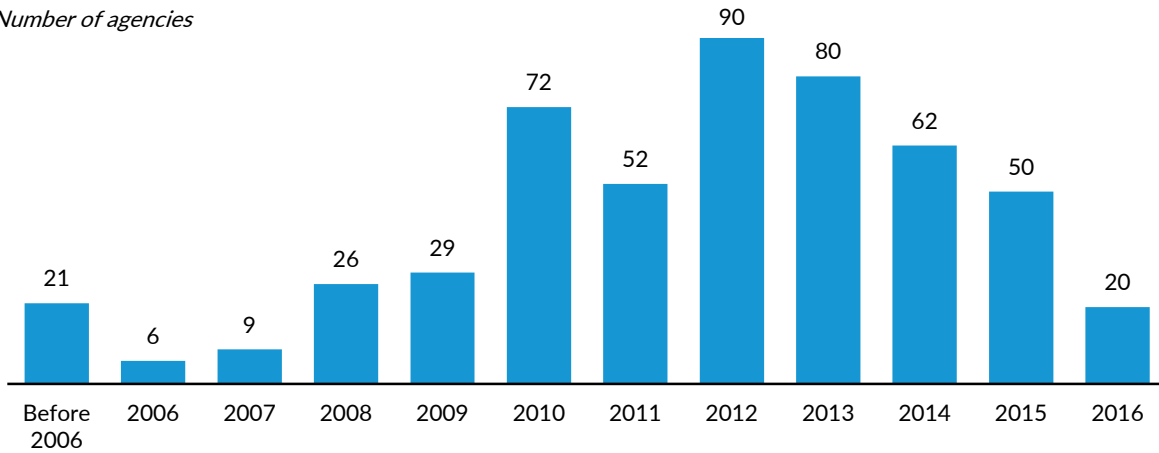
Social Media Use

Respondents were asked questions on how they use social media and their reasons for using the technology.

FIGURE 1

Year Agency Started Using Social Media

Number of agencies



Agencies have a wide range of experience using social media (figure 1). Roughly one in five agencies reportedly started using social media as part of their official operation in 2012. Approximately 5 percent of agencies have used social media for over a decade, and a similar percentage of agencies adopted it only within the last year.

FIGURE 2

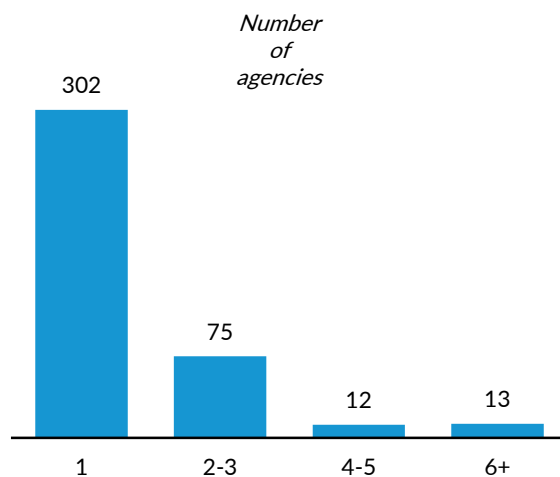
What Does Your Agency Use Social Media For?



Law enforcement agencies use social media for a wide range of activities (figure 2). More than 80 percent of agencies with a social media presence use it to notify the public of safety concerns, engage with the community, manage their agency’s reputation, or notify people of noncrime issues (e.g., road closures, emergency information). Agencies continue to use the technology for other purposes, including recruiting and vetting new applicants (58 percent), communicating with other government agencies (29 percent), and training (6 percent).

FIGURE 3

How Many Official Twitter Accounts Does Your Department Have?

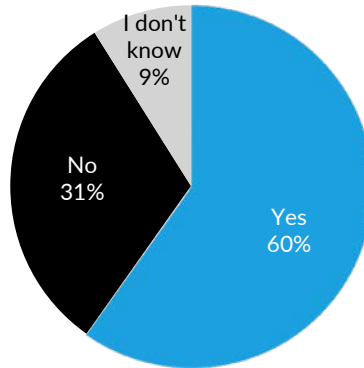


Though the majority of law enforcement agencies use only one Twitter account as a part of their official operation, 19 percent regularly use more than one account (figure 3). These agencies often use multiple Twitter accounts to reach certain audiences, such as victim advocates, or to have different tones on the platform, such as when a chief has his or her own account focused specifically on community engagement.

The majority of law enforcement agencies across the United States have contacted a social media company, such as Facebook or Twitter, to request online information to use as evidence in a legal setting (figure 4). This finding is consistent across agencies of varying sizes and levels of experience with social media engagement.

FIGURE 4

Has Your Agency Contacted a Social Media Company for Evidence?



Social Media Management

The survey included questions that related to social media policies, including the internal management of social media and the types of engagement allowed through the online platform.

Of the law enforcement agencies surveyed, 80 percent employ social media policies that guide how officers use the rapidly changing technology (figure 5). Another 11 percent are currently developing such policies, indicating that more agencies will soon have guidelines managing their online presence.

FIGURE 5

Does Your Agency Have a Written Social Media Policy?

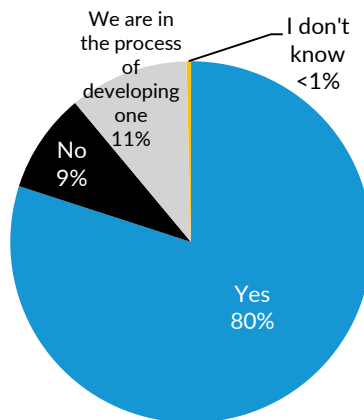
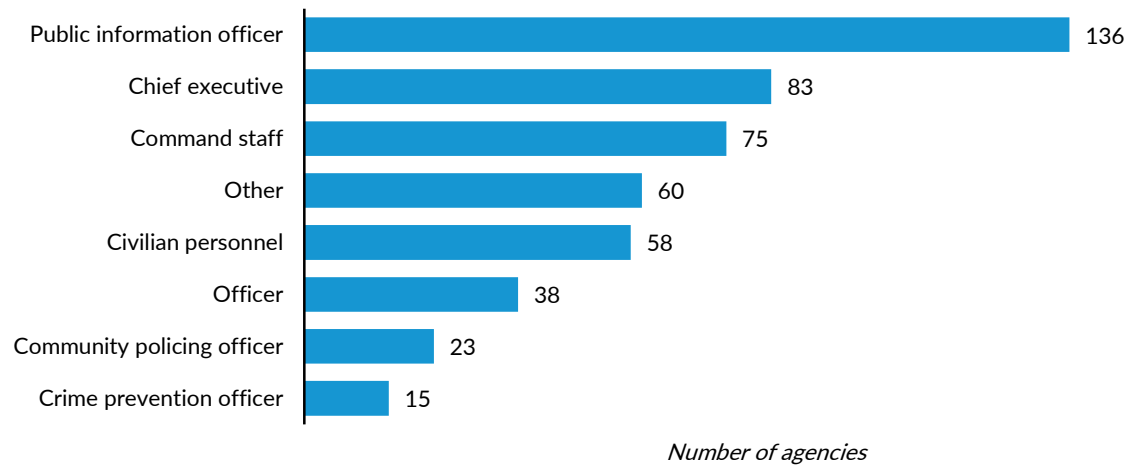


FIGURE 6

Who Is Primarily Responsible for Managing Your Agency's Social Media Accounts?

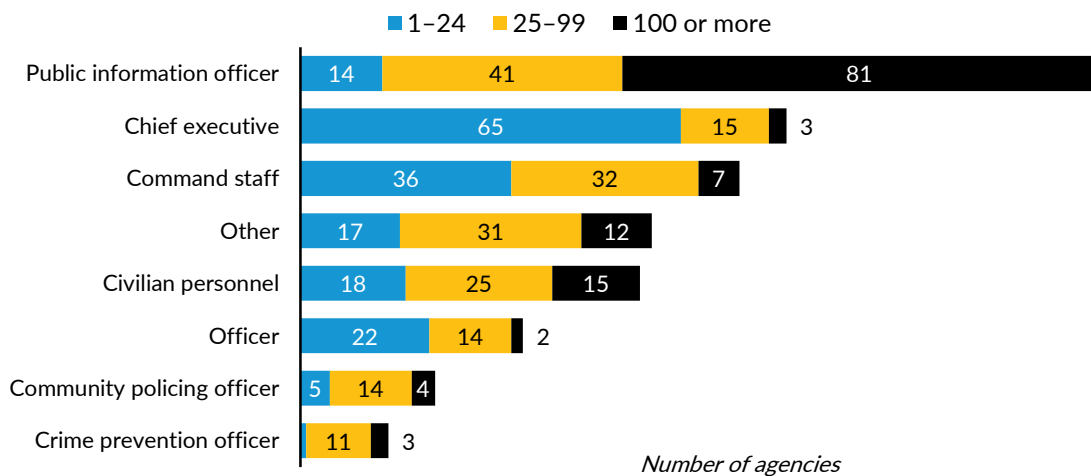


Most commonly, the people in charge of managing agency social media accounts are public information officers (25 percent), followed by chief executives (15 percent) and members of the command staff (14 percent)(figure 6). Many departments distribute the work of managing their social media presence to other staff, including crime prevention officers (3 percent) and civilian personnel (11 percent), presumably on top of their current responsibilities. Most “other” responses were detectives, specific types of civilian personnel, or combinations of multiple staff members.

FIGURE 7

Primary Social Media Manager Varies by Agency Size

Size determined by number of full-time sworn personnel

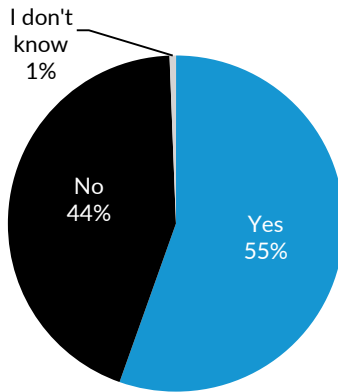


Larger agencies, defined as having 100 or more full-time sworn personnel, are more likely to delegate the management of social media accounts to public information officers than smaller

agencies (figure 7). Smaller agencies had their social media presence managed by a wide range of staff, including the chief executive, command staff, or civilian personnel.

FIGURE 8

Is Social Media Content Approved by a Central Group?



Agencies are split on the centralization of their social media presence: 55 percent have posts approved by a central group and 45 percent do not (figure 8). One of the strengths of social media compared to other technologies is it facilitates two-way communication between agencies and community members, allowing law enforcement to quickly gain followers and engage the public in conversation. The majority of agencies (86 percent) respond to user questions on their social media accounts (figure 9). One in seven agencies (14 percent) self-reported that they do not respond to any questions on social media.

FIGURE 9

Does Your Agency Respond to User Questions?

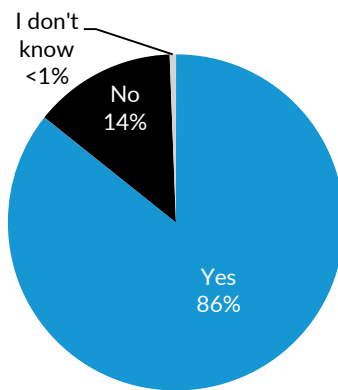
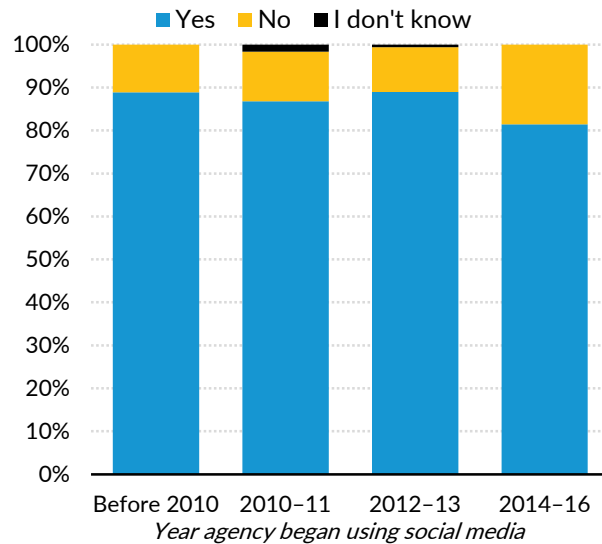


FIGURE 10

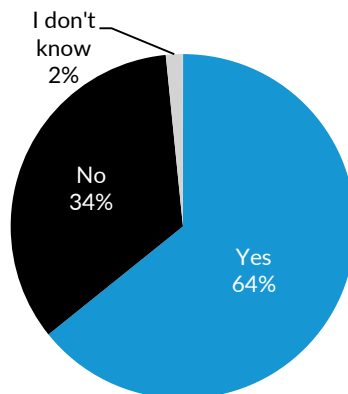
Most Agencies Respond to User Questions, Despite Variations in Experience



Though how long agencies have used social media varied greatly across the sample, different levels of experience had little correlation with how agencies use the technology (figure 10). The majority of agencies that adopted the technology only recently respond to user questions at a similar frequency (82 percent) compared with agencies that have used the technology for over six years (89 percent). Other variables, such as if the agency responds to negative comments, also showed little variation by the amount of experience the department has using social media.

FIGURE 11

Does Your Agency Respond to Negative Comments?

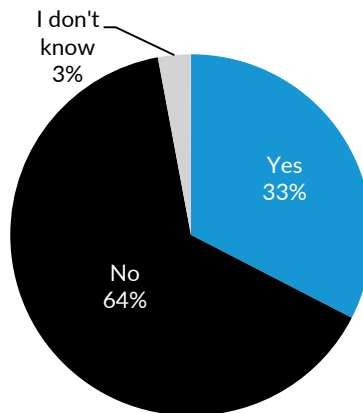


Though 86 percent of agencies respond to user questions, only 64 percent respond to negative comments (figure 11). Approximately one in three agencies (34 percent) self-reported that they do not

respond to any negative comments posted on their social media pages. Of the almost two-thirds that do respond, stakeholders noted that they often respond to comments on a case-by-case basis by considering the content of the comment and the social network of the community member.

FIGURE 12

Has Your Agency Set Goals Related to the Use of Social Media?



One in three agencies (33 percent) have identified specific goals by which they measure the success of their resources spent on social media (figure 12). Common metrics include number of likes, new connections made, or number of two-way interactions on a specific platform. However, 64 percent of agencies self-reported that they do not have specific goals related to the use of social media.

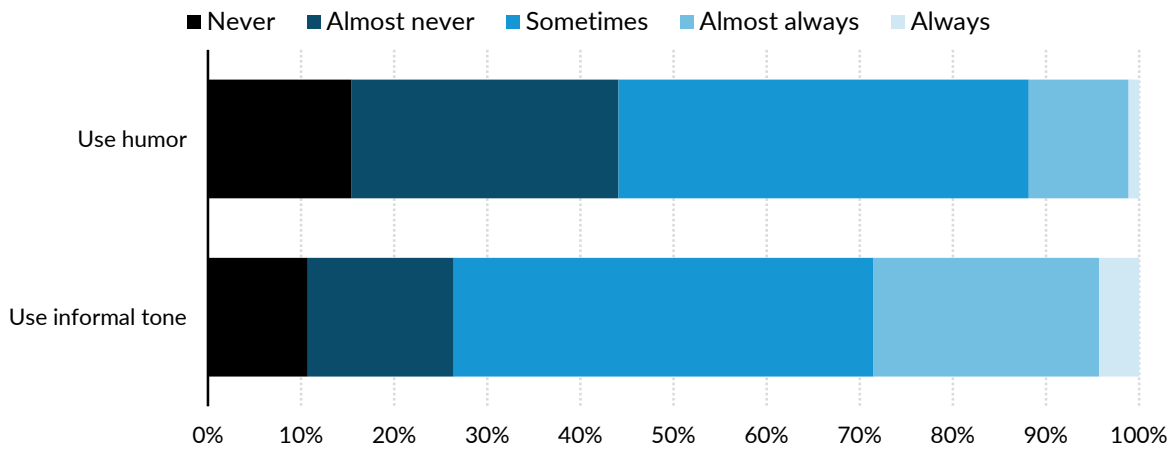
Tone on Social Media

Law enforcement agencies were asked to self-identify the different tones and strategies they use to engage community members on their online platforms.

Agencies differ in the tone of their social media presence (figure 13). Similar shares of respondents almost never or never use an informal tone (26 percent) or always or almost always use an informal tone (29 percent). Agencies self-reported using humor less frequently than informal tones; however, 85 percent of responding agencies reported using humor at least some of the time while posting.

FIGURE 13

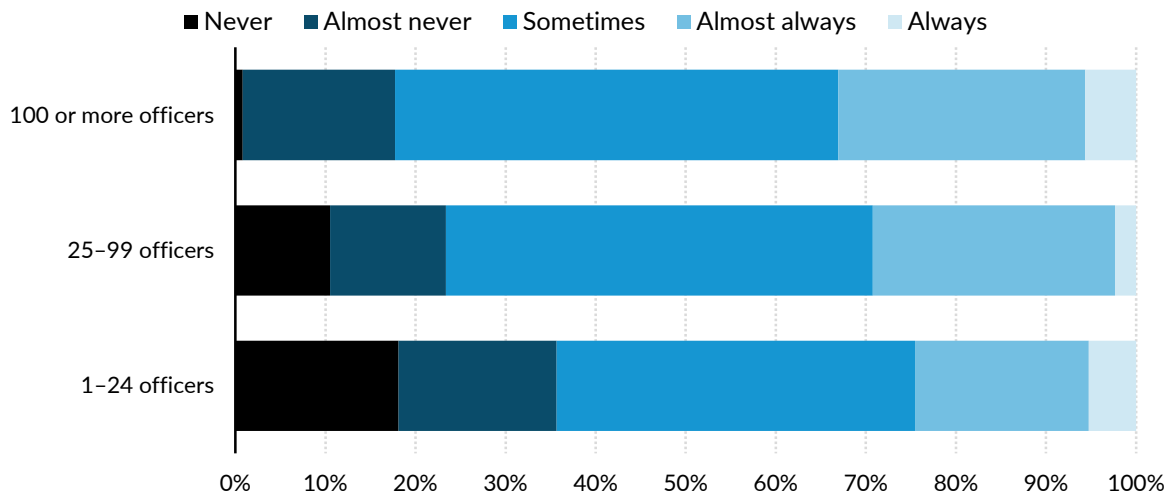
Does Your Agency Use Informal Tones and Humor on Social Media?



Larger agencies are more likely to use informal tones compared with their smaller counterparts. Thirty-three percent of large agencies always or almost always use informal tones compared with 25 percent of small agencies (figure 14). Law enforcement agencies with over 100 officers were much less likely to never or almost never use an informal tone (just 18 percent) compared with agencies with 25–99 officers (23 percent) or 24 or fewer officers (36 percent), showing how agencies of different sizes follow divergent social media strategies.

FIGURE 14

Larger Agencies Use Informal Tones More Frequently

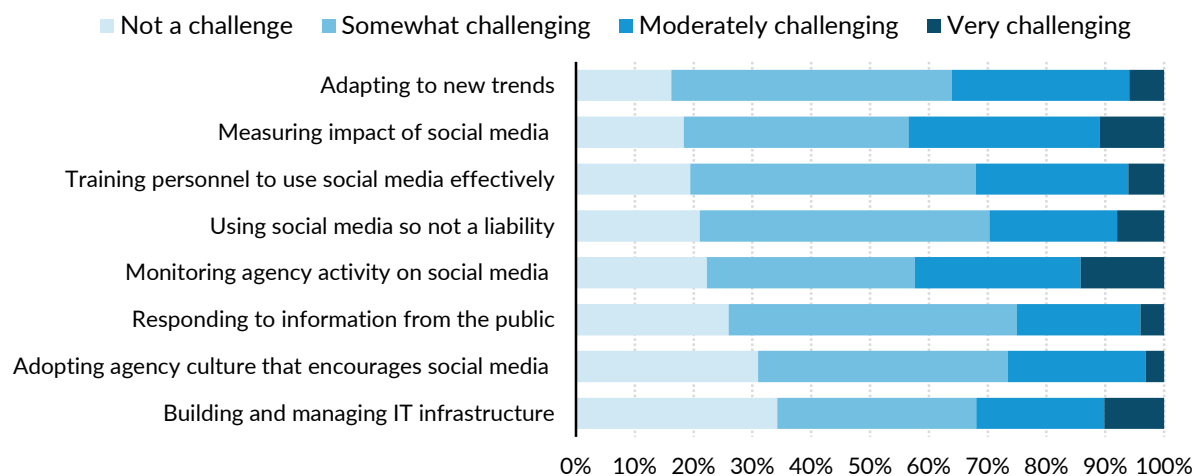


Barriers to the Successful Use of Social Media

Agencies were asked to evaluate whether certain elements of social media presented a challenge or a barrier to successful use of the technology.

FIGURE 15

How Challenging Is Each of the Following Issues for Your Agency?



Every responding agency faces multiple barriers when using social media. In particular, 84 percent of agencies find adapting to new trends online at least somewhat challenging, 82 percent believe measuring the impact of their social media presence is a challenge, and 81 percent find training personnel to effectively use social media to be difficult (figure 15). Fourteen percent of respondents find monitoring agency activity on social media to be very challenging, followed closely by the challenge associated with measuring the impact of social media (11 percent).

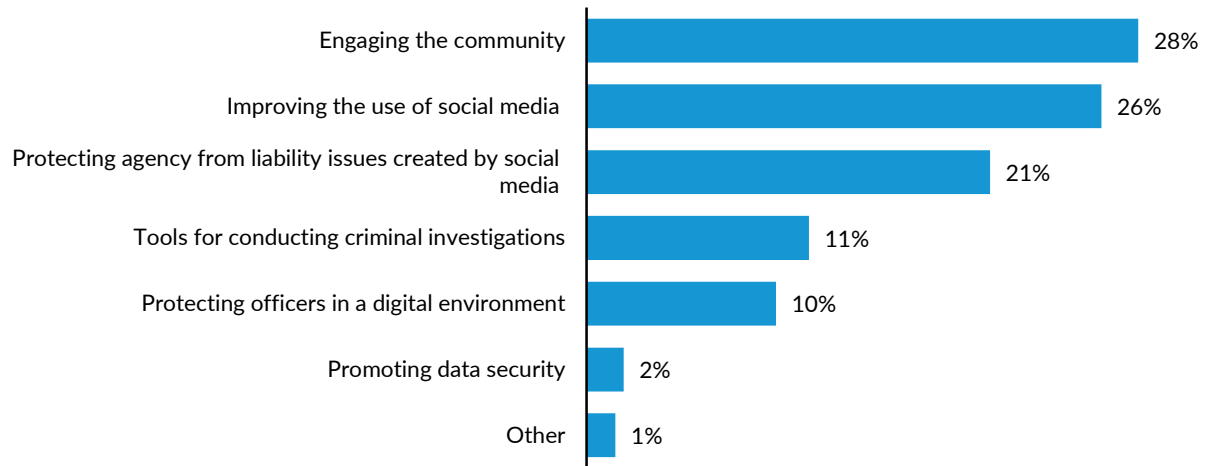
Social Media Needs

The survey asked multiple questions about tools and trainings needed to improve the use of social media.

Agencies are divided on the training topics they believe would most benefit their use of social media (figure 16). More than a quarter (28 percent) of law enforcement agencies believe that training on engaging the community would be most helpful, and 26 percent said guides that detail best practices for dealing with different social media platforms would be most helpful. Another 21 percent requested information on protecting themselves from liability issues.

FIGURE 16

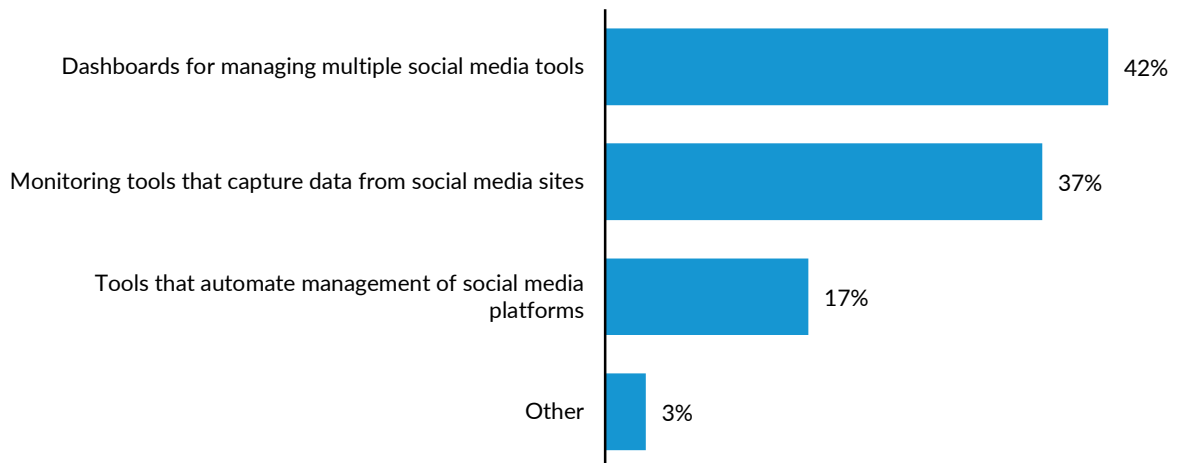
What Training Topics Would Be Most Valuable to Your Agency?



Dashboards for managing multiple social media accounts were the most requested social media management tools (figure 17). Dashboards allow agencies to coordinate all their social media accounts through a single interface, and monitoring tools allow agencies to capture what community members say about crime and policing in their community. Automated management tools develop key metrics on views and interactions across platforms and help law enforcement agencies build their social media influence.

FIGURE 17

What Social Media Management Tool Would Your Agency Be Most Interested In Learning More About?



Closing Remarks

Social media is becoming an increasingly popular tool that law enforcement agencies use for a wide range of activities from engaging with the public to gathering evidence for investigations. Social media has the potential to help agencies manage their own reputation and contact community members directly to bolster community-police relations. However, the technology also creates new challenges and training needs. Overall, this survey reveals that law enforcement agencies use social media in very different ways, suggesting a need to further understand how they use the new technology and what research, training, and resources can best support them in managing their online presences.

About the Authors

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