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For Decades, A Simple Trick Has Most Likely Helped Criminals Evade V.I. Police: Radio Scanners

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Police arrive at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on Friday, May 21, 2021 following a shooting incident in Estate Sion Farm that left one man dead and two others injured. By. ERNICE GILBERT, VI CONSORTIUM

Friday just before noon, a shooting incident [occurred in Estate Sion Farm](#) on St. Croix that resulted in the lockdown of a nearby elementary school, the death of one man along with two other victims who were injured. At the Juan F. Luis Hospital, where this reporter was covering [a Dept. of Tourism-related story](#), the incident and its aftermath was being relayed on an emergency responders radio, which was in the lawful possession of security personnel at the hospital. JFL was on lockdown, an action oftentimes taken by the hospital following shooting incidents that result in injury or death.

As the ambulances arrived at the hospital from the scene, family members of victims lined the road outside the medical facility.

On the emergency responders radio, the entire action could be heard — from police coordination in pursuit of suspects, including possible routes taken and routes being contemplated by police — to information on the actual incident such as how many victims were hit, who appeared to have survived, and what level of emergency response would be needed.

Ideally, this communication is kept amongst those in lawful possession of these radios, including law enforcement officers in a number of government departments and agencies, and other emergency personnel.

But with radio scanners that easily find the frequency of emergency responders and law enforcement cheap and easy to come by, and wide availability of apps that do the same, anybody can listen in — including those who engage in violent crime — and can use the information being relayed to evade police.

A growing list of states have encrypted their emergency communication, especially for police departments, with proponents of the move using documented cases where criminals have evaded police using the scanners as reason for their support.



Emergency personnel arrive at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on Friday, May 21, 2021 following a shooting incident [that left one man dead](#) in Estate Sion Farm on St. Croix. (Ernice Gilbert, VI Consortium)

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, where cases of the vast majority of [the over 860 people](#) who died through gun violence in the past 20 years have gone unsolved, anybody can manipulate a cheap scanner and listen in on all police and first responder communication.

Toby Derima, the police department's spokesman and former information technology employee at the V.I.P.D., said people have been using cheap scanners to listen in on police communication. Mr. Derima was responding to a Consortium query which sought to learn whether V.I.P.D.-owned scanners were being used by criminals to monitor police communication.

"As a former IT in the department I can tell you that when a radio is reported lost or stolen, it is turned off. We usually contact VITEMA and we have that turned off," Mr. Derima said [at a press briefing](#) earlier this month. He added, "However, it is no secret that people can purchase very cheap scanners and people have been using those devices to monitor what happens on the police radios. So it doesn't necessarily have to be an actual police radio that's out in the community."

Asked whether the police force could utilize encryption technology to better protect police communication, Police Commissioner Trevor Velinor said the V.I.P.D. has been in talks with the V.I. Bureau of Information Technology, or B.I.T., to implement technologies with the aim of strengthening the security of such communication.

"Yes, there are encryption available to enhance security of our radio communication, and so we have been in communication with B.I.T. for both the encryption end of it relative to security, which could also mean scrambling in addition to that, and also additional coverage areas that helps us to again enhance security of our officers and our community by and large," he said.

Asked for an update on progress, the commissioner said, "It's an ongoing discussion; there's been a lot of research on this issue, so that is something that we'll have to pickup with B.I.T. to find out what the status is."

Friday's homicide carried the territory's total for this year to twenty-one, with the overwhelming majority of the deaths — eighteen — occurring on St. Croix, followed by St. Thomas with two, and St. John with one.