

Prisoners 'to be chipped like dogs'

**Hi-tech 'satellite' tagging planned in order to create more space in jails
Civil rights groups and probation officers furious at 'degrading' scheme**

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Ministers are planning to implant "machine-readable" microchips under the skin of thousands of offenders as part of an expansion of the electronic tagging scheme that would create more space in British jails.

Amid concerns about the security of existing tagging systems and prison overcrowding, the Ministry of Justice is investigating the use of satellite and radio-wave technology to monitor criminals.

But, instead of being contained in bracelets worn around the ankle, the tiny chips would be surgically inserted under the skin of offenders in the community, to help enforce home curfews. The radio frequency identification (RFID) tags, as long as two grains of rice, are able to carry scannable personal information about individuals, including their identities, address and offending record.

The tags, labelled "spychips" by privacy campaigners, are already used around the world to keep track of dogs, cats, cattle and airport luggage, but there is no record of the technology being used to monitor offenders in the community. The chips are also being considered as a method of helping to keep order within prisons.

A senior Ministry of Justice official last night confirmed that the department hoped to go even further, by extending the geographical range of the internal chips through a link-up with satellite-tracking similar to the system used to trace stolen vehicles. "All the options are on the table, and this is one we would like to pursue," the source added.

The move is in line with a proposal from Ken Jones, the president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo), that electronic chips should be surgically implanted into convicted paedophiles and sex offenders in order to track them more easily. Global Positioning System (GPS) technology is seen as the favoured method of monitoring such offenders to prevent them going near "forbidden" zones such as primary schools.

"We have wanted to take advantage of this technology for several years, because it seems a sensible solution to the problems we are facing in this area," a senior minister said last night. "We have looked at it and gone back to it and worried about the practicalities and the ethics, but when you look at the challenges facing the criminal justice system, it's time has come."

The Government has been forced to review sentencing policy amid serious overcrowding in the nation's jails, after the prison population soared from 60,000 in 1997 to 80,000 today. The crisis meant the number of prisoners held in police cells rose 13-fold last year, with police stations

housing offenders more than 60,000 times in 2007, up from 4,617 the previous year. The UK has the highest prison population per capita in western Europe, and the Government is planning for an extra 20,000 places at a cost of £3.8bn – including three gigantic new "superjails" – in the next six years.

More than 17,000 individuals, including criminals and suspects released on bail, are subject to electronic monitoring at any one time, under curfews requiring them to stay at home up to 12 hours a day. But official figures reveal that almost 2,000 offenders a year escape monitoring by tampering with ankle tags or tearing them off. Curfew breaches rose from 11,435 in 2005 to 43,843 in 2006 – up 283 per cent. The monitoring system, which relies on mobile-phone technology, can fail if the network crashes.

A multimillion-pound pilot of satellite monitoring of offenders was shelved last year after a report revealed many criminals simply ditched the ankle tag and separate portable tracking unit issued to them. The "prison without bars" project also failed to track offenders when they were in the shadow of tall buildings.

The Independent on Sunday has now established that ministers have been assessing the merits of cutting-edge technology that would make it virtually impossible for individuals to remove their electronic tags.

The tags, injected into the back of the arm with a hypodermic needle, consist of a toughened glass capsule holding a computer chip, a copper antenna and a "capacitor" that transmits data stored on the chip when prompted by an electromagnetic reader.

But details of the dramatic option for tightening controls over Britain's criminals provoked an angry response from probation officers and civil-rights groups. Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, said: "If the Home Office doesn't understand why implanting a chip in someone is worse than an ankle bracelet, they don't need a human-rights lawyer; they need a common-sense bypass.

"Degrading offenders in this way will do nothing for their rehabilitation and nothing for our safety, as some will inevitably find a way round this new technology."

Harry Fletcher, assistant general secretary of the National Association of Probation Officers, said the proposal would not make his members' lives easier and would degrade their clients. He added: "I have heard about this suggestion, but we feel the system works well enough as it is. Knowing where offenders like paedophiles are does not mean you know what they are doing.

"This is the sort of daft idea that comes up from the department every now and then, but tagging people in the same way we tag our pets cannot be the way ahead. Treating people like pieces of meat does not seem to represent an improvement in the system to me."

The US market leader VeriChip Corp, whose parent company has been selling radio tags for animals for more than a decade, has sold 7,000 RFID microchips worldwide, of which about 2,000 have been implanted in humans. The company claims its VeriChips are used in more than 5,000 installations, crossing healthcare, security, government and industrial markets, but they have also been used to verify VIP membership in nightclubs, automatically gaining the carrier entry – and deducting the price of their drinks from a pre-paid account.

The possible value of the technology to the UK's justice system was first highlighted 18 months ago, when Acpo's Mr Jones suggested the chips could be implanted into sex offenders. The implants would be tracked by satellite, enabling authorities to set up "zones", including schools, playgrounds and former victims' homes, from which individuals would be barred.

"If we are prepared to track cars, why don't we track people?" Mr Jones said. "You could put surgical chips into those of the most dangerous sex offenders who are willing to be controlled."

The case for: 'We track cars, so why not people?'

The Government is struggling to keep track of thousands of offenders in the community and is troubled by an overcrowded prison system close to bursting. Internal tagging offers a solution that could impose curfews more effectively than at present, and extend the system by keeping sex offenders out of "forbidden areas". "If we are prepared to track cars, why don't we track people?" said Ken Jones, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo).

Officials argue that the internal tags enable the authorities to enforce thousands of court orders by ensuring offenders remain within their own walls during curfew hours – and allow the immediate verification of ID details when challenged.

The internal tags also have a use in maintaining order within prisons. In the United States, they are used to track the movement of gang members within jails.

Offenders themselves would prefer a tag they can forget about, instead of the bulky kit carried around on the ankle.

The case against: 'The rest of us could be next'

Professionals in the criminal justice system maintain that the present system is 95 per cent effective. Radio frequency identification (RFID) technology is unproven. The technology is actually more invasive, and carries more information about the host. The devices have been dubbed "spychips" by critics who warn that they would transmit data about the movements of other people without their knowledge.

Consumer privacy expert Liz McIntyre said a colleague had already proved he could "clone" a chip. "He can bump into a chipped person and siphon the chip's unique signal in a matter of seconds," she said.

One company plans deeper implants that could vibrate, electroshock the implantee, broadcast a message, or serve as a microphone to transmit conversations. "Some folks might foolishly discount all of these downsides and futuristic nightmares since the tagging is proposed for criminals like rapists and murderers," Ms McIntyre said. "The rest of us could be next."

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