

“FBI Crime Center” – National Geographic

May 2005



*Like the loops and whorls of the fingerprints on file there, the FBI's crime data center outside Clarksburg, West Virginia, is one of a kind.*

I tell the man driving the black, smoked glass SUV that I haven't had a minder since my days as a reporter in Baghdad before the first gulf war. He smiles, saying nothing. And before my Iraqi minder let me leave the country, I continue, he made me buy an expensive Saddam wristwatch from his brother's clock shop. "I hope it's cheaper getting out of here than Baghdad," I say.

Out the window I spy a couple of men in dark SWAT uniforms, bouncing across a field on ATVs. "Security," says my minder, whose name is Steve Fischer and who prefers the term "escort." As he wheels the big vehicle along the winding macadam, he explains that the grounds have a nine-mile perimeter and are patrolled by a bunch of these guys.

"How many are there?" I ask. "Can't tell you." Fischer smiles. We've already passed

through a guardhouse, where men in similar uniforms peered seriously at ID cards before waving us through. "And what's that?" I ask, pointing toward a satellite dish as big as a bus. "Can't tell you," he says.

"Iraq," I say, "was easier."

I've just entered one of America's most sensitive outposts, the headquarters of the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division (CJIS), in the low mountains of northern West Virginia. It's not missile silos or gold ingots that make CJIS (pronounced see-jus) secretive, but information. Hidden away in these gently rolling hills, barely a half mile from a busy interstate highway, is the world's most sophisticated depository of crime data, as well as the largest repository of fingerprints anywhere on the planet.



*Photograph by Nina Berman*

*On 986 acres (399 hectares) of undeveloped land in West Virginia, the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division (CJIS) was built from the ground up—from the sprawling office complex, to the 2,000 parking spots, to the road that connects the facility to the outside world. Although the center cannot be seen from the highway, its economic impact is certainly felt in the surrounding community. West Virginia University in nearby Morgantown has partnered with the FBI to offer the world's first degree program in forensic identification.*

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Ten miles (16 kilometers) northeast of the town of Clarksburg (birthplace of Stonewall Jackson) and 250 miles (402 kilometers) from Washington, D.C., it's here, thanks to the powerful West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, that the FBI put its National Crime Information Center, its Brady Act gun check headquarters, its Uniform Crime Reports

data center, its Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System, as well as super-sophisticated computers to keep it all humming.

"If Osama bin Laden tries to buy a gun at Wal-Mart, we'll know about it," says Fischer.

Most of the CJIS operations, including its nearly 3,000 employees, are in a sprawling, three-story building that rises, sphinxlike, on a landscaped hillside in the middle of a forest. Everyone who works here has a top secret clearance. There's no sign on the interstate that announces the complex, only a cryptic notice that Exit 124 will take you to Jerry Dove Drive (named after an FBI agent, a native West Virginian). Such caution is just the way the FBI wants it. And it's why I was never out of Steve Fischer's sights.

No one lives at CJIS, but it's a 24-7 operation with a day-care center, a 600-seat cafeteria, a bank, and a fitness center—although many employees make the whole place a fitness center, using their off time to engage in brisk, determined walks along miles of hallways under soaring atriums. It seems like an ordinary office park until I visit the post office, where mail handlers wearing plastic gloves sit under biohazard hoods in a sealed room. Or until I notice a plaque with the pictures of 34 "FBI Service Martyrs" killed in action—including Jerry Dove himself, slain in one of the bloodiest shoot-outs in the bureau's history, a Miami bank robbery arrest that went awry in 1986.

In the visitors center I hear the pop-pop-pop of gunfire, but it's only a simulated Firearms Training System demonstration for some local police—and as close to real crime as this center gets. (I take "the test," firing my Glock .22 at a screen where a suspected bank robber is going for a rifle and, after scoring three "disabling" shots, am pronounced "very trainable" by FBI Lt. Julian Galford.)

The real crime work here is done amid cubicles and in front of computer screens. "My job is to arrest the numbers and torture them until they confess," Sam Berhanu, an econometrician who runs the Crime Analysis Research and Development Unit, says with a laugh. "No Miranda warnings." Berhanu's unit helps produce the thick annual report, "Crime in the United States," that makes headlines every year as local crime agencies crow about (or hide from) their crime-fighting numbers.

Upstairs, Berhanu's boss, Michael Kirkpatrick (since retired), talks more like an accountant (which he is) than a crime buster (which he used to be). He describes CJIS's "core line of business," fingerprints, and "our customers," 700,000 cops. Those customers use CJIS's computers to get instant background information about suspects. And according to the daily "success stories" circulated via e-mail to nearly 400 fingerprint examiners, they are happy customers.

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*Since CJIS launched its electronic fingerprint database in 1999, ink-on-paper fingerprint cards are becoming nearly obsolete, though many remain on file. Old prints—of military and federal employees, as well as of criminals—are gradually being purged, but the process follows strict guidelines: Old cards are destroyed only if authorized by court order or if the person who had been fingerprinted is now age 85 or older, or is dead.*

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The fingerprint unit processes some 50,000 prints every day. With the help of computers that hold around 80 terabytes of information (a single terabyte is the equivalent of a shelf of books about 20 miles (32 kilometers) long), in minutes prints sent from the field are compared with those in its digital archives. And while most of the "hits" are for garden-variety criminals, the unit helped make the case against Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and the Washington, D.C., sniper suspects.

"Each of these little babies can process about 6,000 transactions per second," says Joe Mazzie, Data Center operations manager, pointing to a row of computers that look like double-wide refrigerators. "And we have 12." Mazzie, a local who traces his ancestry to Stonewall Jackson, has a head full of interesting numbers. Some of the busiest days for the gun-buying system, he notes, are Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. "Some people have very different ideas about what a romantic present is," he says with a wry smile.

As we leave, Steve Fischer motions down a hallway. "You ready to go to the gift shop?" he asks. "There's a sale on J. Edgar Hoover watches."

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