

Anti-theft dots

Tiny tags enlisted to identify property

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Lt. Robert McManus showed off the newest crime-fighting weapon at San Diego State University police headquarters – a dot so small a grain of rice could push it around.

McManus – and police at other California State University campuses – says that these dinky dots, called DataDots, could offer a high-tech deterrent against the persistent thefts plaguing the urban 33,000-student campus.

The dots work like microscopic identification tags.

Students can buy them in the bookstore and apply them to their ever-increasing arsenal of expensive equipment: laptop computers, iPod portable music players, TVs, stereos, bicycles, skateboards and even textbooks.



RONI GALGANO / Union-Tribune
The DataDot shown on Lt. Robert McManus' finger works like a microscopic identification tag that SDSU students can apply to their ever-increasing array of expensive equipment.

The dots are a 21st-century version of the labels mothers would sew inside children's jackets.

The operating principle for the high-tech markers is that the bad guys can't see them, but the good guys can.

Campus police have a special microscope to read the coding, which leads officers to the rightful owner of stolen equipment.

"I can't tell you how many times I've pulled someone over where there's something suspicious, and he's got a bunch of car stereos and iPods in the trunk and I know they're stolen but I can't prove it, so there's nothing I can do about it," McManus said.

Theft is often a profitable business at a place with a transient population, as SDSU's statistics show.

Of the 30 laptops, copy machines and other electronic office equipment reported stolen in the past year, officials said none has been recovered.

Of the 259 property thefts reported last year, including iPods and car stereos, seven items have been found, McManus said. SDSU had 216 stolen books, bikes and cell phones reported over that period; 13 were recovered.

SDSU police do better with grand theft auto. They recovered 32 of the 61 cars stolen on or near campus last year.

To decode the dots, McManus peered through a special lighted scope about the size of a penlight flashlight that allows police to see the coding on each dot.

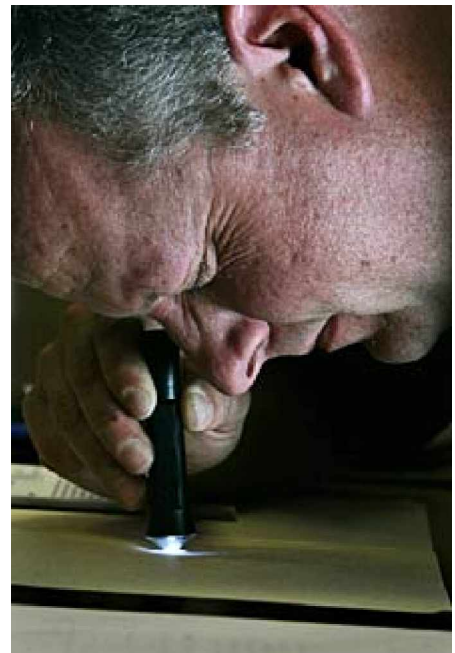
If the dots sound vaguely spylike, they are, said Steve Campbell of MicroID Technologies, the Western distributor of DataDots.

The technology dates to World War II when it was used in espionage, Campbell said from the company's Gold Country headquarters in Sonora. For example, experts then used jewelers' tools to engrave dots in the periods of sentences in messages sent to undercover operatives. The dots couldn't be decoded by the enemy.

The company started with the college market this winter on select California State University campuses. Already, the dots have been used by rental car companies and automobile distributors, Campbell said.

Dot kits sell for \$19.95 in the SDSU bookstore and come with a Q-tip style applicator that people use to swab the dots onto their most precious stuff.

They register their dot-kit identification number on the company's Web site, so if their laptop gets stolen and the police find it, the officers can wave a hand-held black light over the



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SDSU Police Lt. Robert McManus looked through a hand-held microscope to examine a DataDot for identification information.

computer to see if it has DataDots. If it does, they can use their scope to find the coded label and track the owner through the Web site.

It's too soon to tell whether the campus is going to go dot-ty because students were focused on buying books with the start of classes, Aztec Shops said.

"I'm not saying we're endorsing this technology 100 percent," McManus said. "But we'll give it a try and see if it helps."

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