



# Distributed Certificate Validation

## Abstract

This paper investigates the performance and availability issues associated with current validation architectures and presents a distributed validation approach that scales to 100s millions of certificates while reducing deployment costs by 60-80%.



## Scalable Validation for Large PKI Deployments

### Introduction

Worldwide, governments and industries are deploying large-scale, public key infrastructures with the intent of improving security and increasing efficiency. These programs include initiatives resulting from the US Homeland Security Presidential Directive 12 (HSPD-12), as well as smart card-based national ID programs in a number of countries around the globe. In each case, the number of certificates will be in the 10s to 100s of millions.

Ultimately the success of these programs will be based on the performance of the validation infrastructure, as experienced by the end user. These end users will quickly become disillusioned with the system if their PKE applications are slow, if they are forced to wait while the system performs security checks, or worst of all, if the system becomes unavailable due to a sudden surge of users, an information warfare attack (e.g., denial of service attack) or a physical disaster that destroys a critical part of the infrastructure. Scenarios such as these could result in end users refusing to use their PKE applications and resorting to conducting business transactions using alternate, unsecured means.

This paper investigates the performance and availability issues associated with the current validation architectures and presents a distributed validation approach that scales to 100s millions while reducing deployment costs by 60-80%.

### Validation Problem Statement

One area that has already been identified as having a significant impact on overall PKI performance is that of certificate validation. Since the security of any PKE transaction is based on the current status of the participants' certificates, this status (i.e., valid, revoked or suspended) must be checked for every user transaction. This results in certificate status checking being a high-volume operation. Further complicating the situation is that the source of status for each certificate must be secured and, to a large extent, centrally managed.

There are typically two validation approaches considered for use in medium to large PKI programs: Certificate Revocation Lists (CRLs) and Online Certificate Status Protocol (OCSP). It is universally recognized that a CRL approach will not scale to user populations above ~50,000 since these lists grow to unmanageable sizes (a problem experienced by the US Department of Defense Common Access Card Program). This makes CRLs an unacceptable choice for downloading to each relying party/end user in the system. Consequently, program planners are looking at the implications of deploying an OCSP-based validation system.

OCSP solves the payload size problem present in the CRL approach since it only sends the status information of the certificate in question (not the entire list), is inter-operable with CRL issuing Certification Authorities (CAs), and provides centralized certificate status management. However this approach dramatically increases the network traffic for data that is critical to each transaction. The result is a degradation of overall system performance and validation responder availability.

Concerns over performance and availability issues have raised several fundamental OCSP deployment related questions:

- 1. How many OCSP responders to deploy?**
- 2. Where to put the OCSP responders?**
- 3. How to deploy OCSP responders in geographically distributed environments (e.g., a tactical military environment or a global commercial enterprise)?**

Obviously the answers to these questions should be based on an architecture that will provide the best possible operational performance. The appropriate choice for this situation is a distributed architecture which puts certificate validation responders close to the users, regardless of their environment. Unfortunately, cost and complexity considerations often limit the possible answers to these questions.

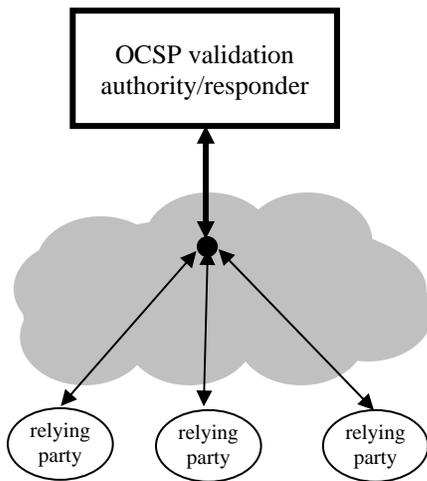
The reason cost and complexity play such a large role in the OCSP responder decisions is the following:

- Each OCSP server contains both the raw certificate status information and the secret key that is used to digitally sign each certificate response. The responses are signed to protect their integrity as they travel from responder to the relying party application. Therefore each deployed OCSP server needs to be housed in a secure facility and operated in a secure manner by trusted employees.
- Managing and coordinating such a deployment is both costly and complex. The cost of housing and operating a secure facility is significant, comparable to that required for a Certification Authority.

As a result, the answers often given to the three questions above are:

1. Limit the number of responders deployed
2. Restrict where the responders are deployed
3. No good answer for the geographically distributed environment since it will be expensive to secure and difficult to manage multiple remote responders.

The above discussion can be summarized as follows: Concern over CRL security results in a centralized OCSP architecture which significantly limits the system’s ability to scale. Consequently both performance and availability needs will suffer.



**Figure 1: Centralized OCSP Architecture**

*In traditional OCSP validation there is one “authority” which communicates directly with all relying applications to provide them with validation proofs. This centralized approach can result in poor performance, weakened security, and a single point of failure.*

## Performance Improvements using a Distributed Architecture

Achieving high performance and high availability in an environment where there are millions of users, all getting data from a single or limited source, has already been studied and solved in the commercial world. The answer is to deploy a distributed architecture. Email is a good example of a distributed architecture. Another example is that used by commercial companies that deliver web content worldwide.

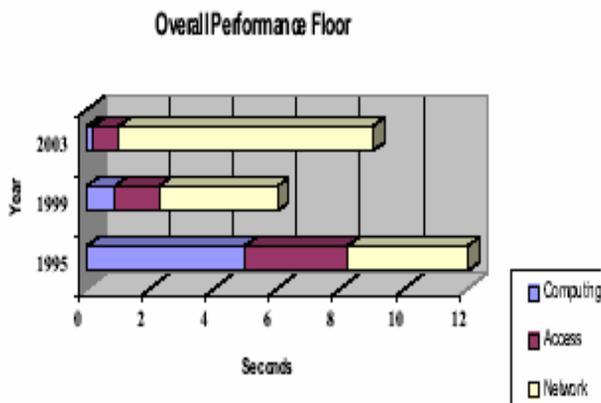
One such company is Akamai Technologies, Inc. Akamai hosts web content for over 1,400 of the world’s leading e-businesses on a globally distributed network of more than 15,000 servers in 68 countries. They found that a major performance factor is “the single point-of-failure of the first mile where the Web applications interface with the Internet, and the limitations of the routing and switching equipment that make up the backbone of the Internet”. Akamai addressed this problem by moving the content closer to the end users. Performance improvements using this approach have been measured by Akamai’s customers at over 400%.<sup>1</sup> While Akamai does not have the same security concerns that a validation system must address, there can be little argument that the distributed approach will provide the best possible performance and availability. How this can be achieved and still meet the security requirements is discussed below. First let us substantiate the performance claim.

<sup>1</sup> Technical paper, “A Distributed Infrastructure for e-Business – Real Benefits, Measurable Returns”, Akamai Technologies, Inc., ©2000.

A recent independent analysis of Internet performance issues<sup>2</sup> concluded that performance, as perceived by the end user, drops as the network becomes congested or as the distance to the data source increases. In fact, even with recent improvements in processor speeds, optimization of TCP usage, and migration to 1 Mbps or higher access lines, the actual measured performance has remained constant due to increases in network delays. These delays are caused by heavier network usage and increased distances to servers. Figure 2 below shows that the percentage of the delay in delivering content from a central server to an end user due to network delay increased from 33% in 1995 to 69% in 1999 and is forecasted to reach 84% in 2003.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of this study is that:

**“There is no substitute for getting the content closer to the user.”**

While this study is focused on delivering web content to browsers over the Internet rather than certificate validation to PKE applications, the conclusion is still relevant.



**Figure 2: Increase of Network Delay on the Internet**

*Network delay is the largest and fastest growing component of network performance degradation.  
Data © 2000 Sevcik*

## The Solution – Secure Distributed Validation

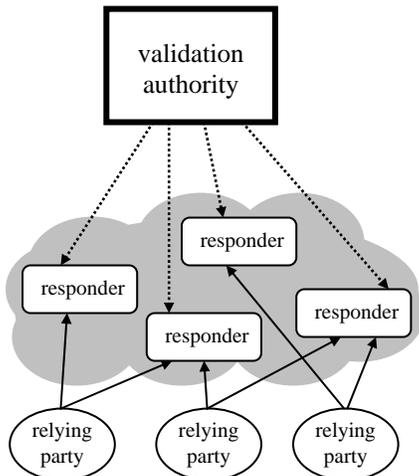
In a distributed validation approach there are no constraints limiting the number of certificate status responders and no restrictions on the environments in which they can be placed. This is achieved by:

- pre-computing status “proofs” for each individual certificate, and
- protecting the integrity of these proofs so that they can be freely distributed

<sup>2</sup> Sevcik, Peter, “Performance Issues facing the World-Wide Web”, *Business Communications Review*, Volume 29, Number 9

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

Figure 3 shows a distributed validation architecture where multiple validation responders have been located close to the end user relying party applications without any constraints as to the environment in which they can be placed. To accomplish this, these servers must contain no secret information.



**Figure 3: Distributed Validation Architecture**

*In distributed validation there is one authority which controls the release of validation proofs and multiple (unlimited), “secretless” responders that provide these proofs to relying applications.*

### CoreStreet’s Secure Distributed Validation Design Principle

*The design principle of secure distributed validation is the **separation of security sensitive data and trusted operations** from the **delivery process** of providing certificate status to relying party applications.*

In this approach the validation authority contains all the sensitive data and performs all trusted operations. This can be done using a single validation authority which simplifies the securing of its operations and centralizes its management. Periodically the validation authority pre-computes individual, time-bounded status proofs,<sup>4</sup> the publishing periodicity being determined by local policy (e.g., hourly, daily ...). The integrity of these proofs can be protected by a digital signature, as is done in traditional OCSP. These proofs can therefore be freely distributed since they:

- **Do not require secure channels for transmission,**
- **Do not require secure storage.**

<sup>4</sup> The validity period for these validation proofs can be any length and is determined by policy.

The architecture depicted in Figure 3 reflects the fact that responders in a distributed validation approach are no longer security sensitive and can be placed close to end user relying party applications in unsecured, office type environments.

## Benefits of Secure Distributed Validation

The benefits of the distributed validation approach are numerous. They include:

- 1. Truly scalable:** true scalability is achieved by separating the delivery process from the security sensitive operations associated with certificate validation. The barriers to true scalability – performance, availability, security and cost have been eliminated.
- 2. High availability:** high availability is now achieved because end user applications have access to a local responder. This is analogous to placing email servers on local area networks to be close to end users for improved availability.
- 3. High performance:** the distributed validation architecture takes advantage of the lessons learned in the commercial content delivery world by decreasing the distance between a relying party application and a responder, eliminating a choke point at the OCSP validation authority/responder, the largest cause of poor performance.
- 4. Improved survivability:** the single point of failure threat has been significantly reduced. Distributed denial of service attacks are virtually eliminated by the deployment of multiple, geographically dispersed responders.<sup>5</sup> Even physical destruction of the validation authority itself will not disrupt the system since responders will continue to operate for some period of time which will allow for a “recovery” period during which a backup validation authority can be brought on-line.<sup>6</sup>
- 5. Cost effective:** since responders do not require secure communication, housing or operation there is little cost associated with deploying them in a widespread fashion. In addition, industry standard web server platforms can be used, dramatically reducing the cost of deployment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On October 21, 2002 a “distributed denial of service” attack was launched against the 13 “root servers” that provide the primary roadmap for almost all Internet traffic. The attack, the largest such attack to date, failed because of the distributed nature of the Internet root server architecture. Five of the root servers withstood the attack and remained available for legitimate Internet traffic throughout the strike.

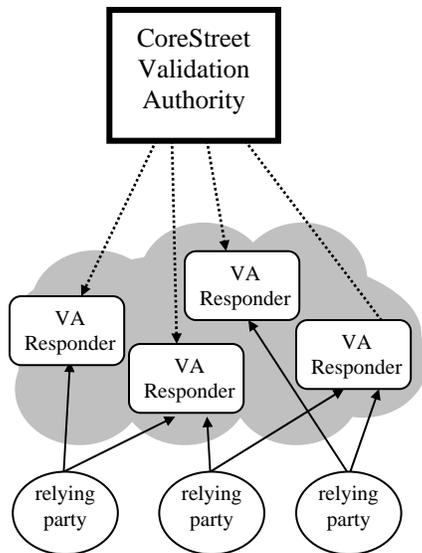
<sup>6</sup> For example, if the validity period of the validation proofs is 24 hours and new validation proofs are released every 12 hours, each responder can continue to operate for at least 12 hours after a validation authority has been disabled or destroyed.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B for a quantitative deployment cost comparison.

6. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** each responder can support more than one validation authority. This allows independent authorities to retain complete control over their domain (i.e., without relinquishing any trusted operations or data to another authority) while sharing a common delivery infrastructure.
7. **Improved global reach:** responders can now be located in the far reaches of the globe without introducing poor performance at the end user due to distance dependent network delays.
8. **Military tactical environment solution:** since responders do not hold any security sensitive data they can be located in tactical environments where the threat of being overrun is real. The architecture is also ideal for rapid deployment scenarios as adding and deleting responders is quick and easy.
9. **More secure:** three elements of security have been significantly improved over the traditional OCSP validation model:
  - a. Requests for Certificate status go only to responders, not to the validation authority. Since the validation authority does not allow any inbound communication from the outside world the threat of an intrusion or outside attack is virtually eliminated.
  - b. Denial of service threat is effectively mitigated by deploying multiple redundant responders using commercial load balancing techniques.
  - c. Scaling the validation system to serve increasingly larger user communities does not require distributing security sensitive data or trusted operations to multiple locations. Therefore the ability to securely manage this operation is greatly enhanced.

## The CoreStreet Approach

CoreStreet's Validation Infrastructure provides a distributed certificate validation solution that can support user populations in the 100s of millions with high availability, high performance, improved security, and lower deployment costs. The CoreStreet Validation Infrastructure employs the distributed validation architecture described above.



**Figure 4: CoreStreet Distributed Validation Architecture**

*CoreStreet's distributed validation architecture solution provides guaranteed scalability without sacrificing performance, availability, security or cost.*

Validation proofs are periodically generated at the Validation Authority (VA) and distributed as digitally signed files (via an intermediate server) to the VA Responders. A single VA server running on an Intel or Sparc platform can comfortably support a population of 10 million users with daily proofs. Larger populations can be supported by simply adding larger and/or additional VA platforms. Each VA Responder is capable of receiving OCSP requests for the status of a certificate and returning the appropriate response. Since this operation is a simple table lookup, the response is returned in ~2 millisecond. This is a significant improvement over traditional OCSP where each response must be signed before it is delivered to the relying part application.<sup>8</sup>

### Additional CoreStreet Benefits

CoreStreet's distributed validation implementation offers the following additional benefits over traditional OCSP validation:

- 1. Off-line validation:** because the CoreStreet validation proofs are unforgeable and unalterable, they can be presented to the relying party from any source – including

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for relevant deployment parameters.

by the user himself. This provides great flexibility for applications that are difficult or impossible to connect to a network. For example, a user could retrieve his validation proof for the day using his Common Access Card and then present it, along with his certificate, to a disconnected application. The application can then locally authenticate and validate the user.

- 2. Minimum bandwidth solution:** CoreStreet's low bandwidth solution, the MiniCRL offers a factor of 30x size reduction over a traditional CRL making it ideal where there are severe bandwidth limitations from the Validation Authority to the VA responders.
- 3. Dynamic privilege management:** CoreStreet's Distributed OCSP allows for the dynamic management of multiple privileges associated with a single certificate without having to reissue or modify that certificate in any way. In addition, CoreStreet's technology allows these privileges to be managed by independent, autonomous authorities. Distribution of these privileges is accomplished by leveraging the Distributed OCSP infrastructure.

## Format Selection

CoreStreet's validation proofs offer secure credential validation for a wide variety of applications.

**Distributed OCSP** – these digitally signed proofs offer the simplest integration based on their compatibility with existing protocols and standards. CoreStreet's Distributed OCSP proofs are completely compatible with the IETF OCSP standard, are syntactically constructed as standard OCSP responses and can be used by any standard compliant OCSP relying party application. Depending on signature algorithm, key length, and the optional inclusion of privileges, OCSP responses range in size from 150 and 350 bytes, and can be processed and verified in fewer than ten milliseconds on a typical computer. A digital signature solution offers excellent scalability to tens of millions of independent credentials and hundreds or thousands of responders.

**MiniCRLs** - provide even great scalability and performance for environments where the bandwidth from the Validation Authority to the VA Responders is limited, such as in the case of ship-to-shore communications channels. This approach is also ideal for a large number of users in low bandwidth broadcast environments. MiniCRLs represent the absolute minimum size (uses one bit per issued certificate) for conveying certificate status information. The effective size is reduced to approximately one-half bit per certificate using standard compression techniques. A segmentation technique is used to keep the size of the

data sent to client applications small. The MiniCRL approach uses a client side plug-in to interpret the certification status information.

Using either format, CoreStreet's Validation Infrastructure solution provides for unequaled availability, scalability, and security for mission-critical credential management.

## **Summary**

Secure distributed validation is not just a better way to provide certificate validation for a PKI deployment; it is the only solution that guarantees scalability without sacrificing performance, availability, security and cost. In addition it provides solutions for geographically dispersed commercial enterprises and tactical military and bandwidth limited operations that could not otherwise be achieved.

CoreStreet is the leading provider of real time credential validation. CoreStreet's validation infrastructure, which separates security sensitive validation operations from certificate status delivery, is unique among industry validation providers. CoreStreet offers system planners and implementers the first, truly scalable solution for certificate validation. Our unique technology also provides the ability to expand the use of credential validation to off-line, disconnected applications, low band-width scenarios and dynamically managed privileges – all built on a secure, cost effective foundation that is flexible, adaptable and scalable.

## Appendix A: CoreStreet Deployment Parameters

The following table provides relevant deployment parameters for the two approaches provided by CoreStreet’s Real Time Credential distributed validation solution. These parameters were developed under the following assumptions:

1. 1 million end users
2. Period of validity for validation proofs is 1 day
3. File compression of 50% for downloaded files
4. T1 transmission speeds from CoreStreet Validation Authority to “keyless” Responders
5. Signing key for Distributed OCSP is 1024 bit RSA

Times were measured using a single midrange Intel server with a hardware accelerator.

**Table A: CoreStreet Distributed Validation Deployment Parameters**

<b>Parameter</b>	<b>Distributed OCSP</b>	<b>MiniCRL</b>
Storage rqmts at CoreStreet VA	1 Gbyte	120 Mbytes
Processing time at CoreStreet VA (using an HSM)	~10 minutes	5 cpu minutes
File size sent from CoreStreet VA to VA Responders	14 Mbytes	90 kB
Download time to VA Responders	1.3 minutes	1 second
Storage rqmts at VA Responders	50 Mbytes	30 Mbytes
Size of proof sent to client	2.5 kB	3-4 kB
Relying application processing time	10 milliseconds	10 milliseconds

A typical Sparc CoreStreet VA server with a hardware security module can generate Distributed OCSP proofs for 1 million certificates in approximately 10 minutes. A single VA Responders can provide more than 2000 responses per second, allowing it to service millions of relying party requests per day. VA Responders can also simultaneously support Distributed OCSP and MiniCRL requests. This provides the capability of using a single system to mix and match validation approaches to meet multiple and distinct operational needs.

## Appendix B: Validation Approach Cost Comparison

*Note: Prices shown are for illustration purposes only and do not represent the current product pricing. For current information, please contact your CoreStreet representative. (See [www.CoreStreet.com/contact](http://www.CoreStreet.com/contact))*

In addition to improved security, one of the major differentiators of CoreStreet’s Secure Distributed Validation is its cost effectiveness. This appendix quantifies these cost savings by comparing the deployment and recurring infrastructure costs for providing the same level of validation service. Only those costs directly related to architectural choices are examined. For the purposes of this discussion “same level of service” is defined to mean deploying the same number of geographically dispersed responders to provide the same performance and availability to the relying party applications. Two different approaches are compared, traditional OCSP (T-OCSP) and distributed OCSP (D-OCSP). The infrastructure costs for deploying MiniCRLs are essentially the same as for D-OCSP.

### Assumptions:

1. Number of certificates being managed (millions)	10
2. Number of responders deployed	10 & 100
3. Minimum freshness time (update period in hours)	2
4. Key type	RSA
5. Key length (i.e., OCSP responder key)	1024

### Estimated traditional OCSP component costs:

1. T-OCSP responder hardware/site (includes HSM)	\$25,000
2. T-OCSP responder site security setup (one time/site) <sup>9</sup>	\$50,000
3. T-OCSP responder security operations (yearly/site)	\$50,000

### Estimated distributed validation component costs:

1. D-OCSP CoreStreet VA hardware (includes HSM)	\$113,000
2. CoreStreet VA site security setup (one time, single site)	\$50,000
3. CoreStreet VA site security operations (yearly, single site)	\$50,000
4. VA Responder hardware/site (no HSM needed)	\$3,000
5. T1 monthly rates	\$1,000

### Traditional OCSP deployment requires:

- Network connection to each deployed responder to receive periodic CRL updates
- Physical & electronic security protection for each deployed responder (estimated)
- Trusted operators using dual access control (cost is estimated)

### Distributed OCSP deployment requires:

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<sup>9</sup> While this cost will vary by site, \$50,000 is very conservative and could easily be 4 to 10 times more.

- One CoreStreet VA (the “back-end”) that needs physical and electronic security protection (cost is estimated, could be collocated with CA at little or no extra cost)
- Single set of trusted CoreStreet VA operators using dual access control (cost is estimated)
- Network connection from the CoreStreet VA to each deployed Responder
  - D-OCSP requires T1 speeds for deployments of more than ~ 10 million certs
- No secure storage, communications or operators for any of the deployed Responders
- Standard COTS servers for each VA Responder

#### Cost Calculations:

- T-OCSP setup costs = responder hardware + firewall + network setup + site security preparation
  - = (#Resp) x (\$25k + \$10k + \$2k + \$50k)
  - = (#Resp) x (\$87k)
- D-OCSP setup costs = CoreStreet VA hardware + firewall + fileservers + network setup + site security prep + responder(hardware + T1 setup)
  - = (1) x (\$113k + \$10k + \$10k + \$2k + \$50k) + (#Resp) x (\$3k + \$2k)
  - = \$185,000 + (#Resp) x (\$5k)
- T-OCSP recurring costs = leased lines (to download CRLs) + security personnel
  - = (#Resp) x {[#Mbytes/(T1 transfer rate)] x (\$T1) + \$50k}
  - = (#Resp) x {(140 Mbytes/187,500 bytes/sec) x \$12k + \$50k}
  - = (#Resp) x {(1) x \$12k + \$50k}
  - = (#Resp) x (\$62k)
- D-OCSP recurring costs = leased lines + security personnel costs
  - = (#Resp) x {[#Mbytes/(T1 transfer rate)] x (\$T1)} + (1) x (\$50k)
  - = (#Resp) x {(140 Mbytes/187,500 bytes/sec) x \$12k} + \$50k
  - = (#Resp) x {(1) x \$12k} + \$50k
  - = (#Resp) x \$12k + \$50k

Table B-1 provides a cost comparison for a deployment of 10 responders.

**Table B-1: CoreStreet Distributed Validation Deployment Parameters**

Cost Element	# Rspdrs	T-OCSP	D-OCSP
1 <sup>st</sup> year setup costs	10	\$870,000	\$235,000
Yearly recurring costs		\$620,000	\$170,000
Savings in first year (setup + ops)		\$1,085,000	
Recurring cost savings		\$450,000	
1 <sup>st</sup> year setup costs	100	\$8,700,000	\$685,000
Yearly recurring costs		\$6,200,000	\$1,250,000
Savings in first year (setup + ops)		\$12,965,000	
Recurring cost savings		\$4,950,000	

*Note 1: This comparison points out explicitly the cost difference in scaling up from 10 to 100 responders. While T-OCSP costs grow linearly, D-OCSP costs grow much more slowly.*

*Note 2: Because the D-OCSP proofs have been presigned, the responder to relying party response time is 20x faster for D-OCSP than for T-OCSP. This has not been factored into this calculation. Thus the savings are even greater than shown.*

It is clear from this comparison that CoreStreet's Secure Distributed Validation provides the flexibility needed to achieve high availability without incurring the significant cost penalty inherent in the traditional OCSP approach.

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## About CoreStreet

Governments and enterprises rely on CoreStreet products to improve security, speed, and efficiency in critical day-to-day applications, including PKI-based IT security, physical access control, and secure ID checking.

For more information, including detailed product and solution information and technical briefs, see [www.corestreet.com](http://www.corestreet.com)