

Police partnerships with Amazon Ring raise alarms about racial bias, privacy

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As nationwide protests force a deep examination of police tactics and funding, technology companies say they are re-evaluating their

relationship with law enforcement as well. Amazon has halted police use of its facial recognition technology for one year and the website Nextdoor has stopped forwarding tips to police.

Now, privacy groups and activists are scrutinizing the relationships between Amazon and local [police](#) departments that allow law enforcement to request access to [video recordings](#) from doorbell cameras installed in private homes.

Amazon's expanding network of law enforcement "partners" for its Neighbors app remains intact, an arrangement that critics say is designed to boost sales of its Ring cameras and capitalize on fears of property crime. Social media and news channels are filled with stories of package thieves and other incidents captured on Ring cameras, which acts as a form of marketing for the products.

Seeking access to video footage and crime tips, law enforcement agencies in Elk Grove and Rocklin, and sheriff's offices in El Dorado and Placer counties have each signed on to be partners. The Roseville Police Department is considering a partnership, too.

The Neighbors app attracts the same kind of conversations as Nextdoor. Many conversations are indeed about property crime, missing pets, and community disturbances. It also allows residents to make snap judgments about people they don't recognize and promptly alert police.

At a time when Black Lives Matter and other activists are demanding cities cut back on police spending, the agreements with Amazon motivate the kind of profiling that contributes to harmful encounters with police, privacy groups and activists say.

"They encourage a kind of vigilantism and racism in the use of the Neighbors platform that is deeply troubling," said Mohammad Tajsar, an

attorney for the ACLU of Southern California. "And that will hurt poor people, homeless people and people of color who are innocents and have done nothing wrong other than being captured by cameras owned by wealthier homeowners."

No money typically changes hands between Amazon and the law enforcement agencies. But privacy experts say the agreements could also give the impression that the government favors Ring camera products over all others.

Some cities have gone so far as subsidizing the purchase of Ring cameras for residents, and local police departments and Amazon often coordinate messaging when the partnerships are announced and agencies agree to increase users of the website.

This is one of many red flags, experts say.

"All of this creates an incentive system where police are out on the street promoting a for-profit company," said Matthew Guariglia, a researcher at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. He added that if a police department then recommends buying cameras, residents could have reasons to doubt their intentions.

"This creates uncertainty about whether your neighborhood is unsafe or police are just operating under some shadowy agreement with a for-profit company," Guariglia said. "You shouldn't have that ambiguity about why police are telling you to install surveillance cameras on your house."

Amazon has grown its roster of partners to more than 1,300 agencies nationwide.

The city of Rocklin received its first pitch in November 2018, records

show. A Ring official sent an email to Police Chief Chad Butler after he'd attended a law enforcement conference in Orlando. The company offered him 5 free Ring devices and access to its new neighborhood watch app.

Butler forwarded the email to one of his captains: "Is this something that would be beneficial to us? It's free."

Butler gave the free devices away in a raffle, according to police department spokesperson Scott Horrillo. Rocklin became a partner about 7 months later. Horrillo said they have not sided with one video doorbell company over others.

"We're not endorsing any product. My understanding is even though this is Ring, anybody's camera can send or share video with people in their neighborhood or city," Horrillo said. "It's just another way of fighting crime."

In Elk Grove, tips from cameras have not solved any crimes

The Elk Grove Police Department became a partner last July after a string of video doorbell thefts.

"It was obviously a platform our community members were posting videos on and sharing with other community members," said Jason Jimenez, a police department spokesperson. "What we found is there are times that people posted a video but did not report the crime. Or maybe it was some suspicious activity that (a) community member felt."

The department wanted to be aware of all those incidents, he said. Now, almost one year since joining, Jimenez said the tips from the Neighbors app have not led to any solved crimes.

True to form, the Neighbors app in Elk Grove is filled with suspicions that are often either inconclusive or wrong.

A month ago, a video was posted in which a woman walks up to the front door of a house from the street and glances around the porch for a few seconds before walking back toward a group of women pushing strollers. The video was titled "Package thief?"

The comments started out reasonable: "She might be looking for her package, lately Amazon (has been) delivering to the wrong house and UPS. It happened to me twice," said Neighbor 2.

"No way is she looking for 'her' package!," Neighbor 7 posted.

"Yeah, probable package thief ... they come in all shapes and sizes and appearances ... Most do their best to appear innocent," Neighbor 10 added.

"I'll leave a box full of s—t next time," said Neighbor 13.

And on and on it went. Weeks later, the original poster returned with the verdict.

"This was not a package thief this time. This was my daughter and we got an alert our package was dropped off but it wasn't there ... I'm sorry we startled you!"

Do video doorbells lower crime?

Ring operates with the mission to "make neighborhoods safer." Video doorbells heighten awareness but it remains to be seen if they lower crime. Small scale studies of communities in Utah and California have tried to answer this question but the results are either contested by

academics or lack rigor.

"There is no empirical evidence that suggests they are helpful. The only evidence that they have is a case study in Los Angeles," said the ACLU's Tajsar. "That study has been debunked by a group of researchers at MIT."

The publication MIT Technology Review tried to reproduce a study of a Los Angeles neighborhood that claimed crime fell by 55% over six months after the devices were installed. The initial study was conducted by Ring but researchers could not replicate the result, concluding that burglaries in the area studied actually increased.

In another study of West Valley City, Utah's second-largest city, an analyst found that burglaries fell over a one-year period after installing Ring doorbells. But the community without them—the control group—was found to be safer.

The mixed results leave little evidence that cameras make communities safer.

Ring officials did not answer the question when asked if the company had any proof its doorbells help lower crime. A spokesperson said Ring devices and the Neighbors website "have helped resolve crime and safety incidents" and allowed communities "to share valuable information in times of crisis."

"Ring will continue in support of our mission while maintaining our commitment to user privacy, security and control," Ring spokeswoman Morgan Culbertson said in an email. She then listed a handful of incidents throughout California where the technology helped nab criminals.

The lacking evidence hasn't stopped residents like Pauly Parker, who lives in East Sacramento with his wife, from buying them. An IT professional by day, Parker said he bought a Ring doorbell after a "slow escalation" of thefts in his neighborhood along Folsom Boulevard.

The last straw was when a thief stole bikes worth thousands of dollars from his neighbor. Parker worried about his own collection of music equipment.

With the Ring cameras, Parker is now alerted when a person walks onto his driveway or porch, sometimes looking around and checking under ledges—for something—when he's not home. When that happened recently, Parker said he was able to announce himself through the doorbell even though he was not home. Soon after the interaction, the man walked away.

"Almost daily I'm getting notifications. It seems to be escalating, although most of them are uneventful—people coming up the driveway, taking a look, and then walking back down the driveway," Parker said. "It really gives us an immediate and tangible grasp about what's going on when we're not here."

'Key talking points' for police agencies

A common facet of the agreements is a three-page memo of "key talking points" that details how agencies should announce the partnerships. It includes a section on social media messaging and "success metrics" pegged at increasing both users of the Neighbors app and responses from people who are already members.

The Elk Grove Police Department received the talking points, too. Jimenez, the department spokesperson, said their announcement on social media was no different than when the city joined Nextdoor.

"They have rules; you're agreeing with their rules," Jimenez said of the contracts.

"I don't know what they (Amazon) get. But the Ring platform is essentially no different than any of the other social media channels out there—Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. You have people sharing videos on those platforms all the time," Jimenez said.

Ring officials said the same thing; how the agreements help police adhere to its terms and conditions, particularly limiting access to the agency's staff.

Critics disagree. They say the focus on results shows how the company is entangling local governments in its business plan instead.

"This is a deliberate and intentional corporate ploy to dramatically increase the market share of Ring in communities that it would otherwise have a much more difficult time to get access to," said Tajsar.

Tajsar said some communities have subsidized the purchase of Ring cameras under the impression it will lower crime.

"These partnerships really ought to be resisted by community members," Tajsar said. "Police departments really need to take more seriously the problems associated with Ring devices."

Some cities, like the Roseville Police Department are still on the fence after fielding several requests to join and meeting with Ring officials, said police spokesman Rob Baquera.

"We are open to partnering with any trusted platform that helps increase communications," Baquera said, adding that Ring has set itself apart by creating an online community. "If there was another platform doing the

same thing we would also consider joining."

Still, Baquera said they're going in with their eyes open.

"Any time we're operating with a privately held company we absolutely keep the concept in the back of our mind there may be some linkage or further process for a profit margin down the line," Baquera said.

What is Amazon's next move?

Amazon has moved swiftly into new industries before, disrupting and then dominating them.

Surveillance technology could be next. With the Ring devices and the Neighbors app, Amazon is on common ground with [law enforcement agencies](#) who have an increasing interest in video footage.

Companies pay millions to advertise products like video doorbells to consumers. Critics say the arrangement turns police departments into unwitting salespeople for Ring, boosting the brand's image in communities through their own government.

Andrew Ferguson, a law professor at the University of the District of Columbia who studies police use of surveillance technology, said the agreements show a preference for Ring over other companies.

"There is an open question about whether police should be favoring a private platform that offers a service, maybe a valuable service, but isn't doing it out of the goodness of their heart," Ferguson said.

Tech companies, he said, make these products inexpensive or even free because the data collected from them is far more valuable in the long run.

Civil liberties and [privacy groups](#) like the Electronic Frontier Foundation have criticized the company for its apparent lack of security on Ring cameras and the Neighbors app.

The group found that Amazon was also selling user data to advertisers. Another group of researchers was able to reveal the precise location of website users, showing that their information was vulnerable and could be easily exposed. Hackers were able to breach a live feed of a Southern California home.

In February, Ring said it would no longer allow multiple login attempts, require two-factor authentication and stop most third-party advertisement tracking. The company later said it would allow users to turn off [law enforcement](#) calls for video in the settings.

Some agencies like the police department in Roseville take solace in some of the improvements.

"The piece that we appreciate is that a private resident has to self-select and push their information if they want," said Baquera, the Roseville police spokesperson. "They push it out and they have the options to share the information if they want."

Guariglia said those moves still aren't enough.

"How many people are going to go into their features and deliberately turn them off?" Guariglia said. "And it doesn't matter because the police can send a warrant to Amazon and get your footage without you knowing."

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