

License plate cameras can help police, but privacy concerns raise call for regulation

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On a Friday night this spring, surveillance cameras detected a stolen car driving through a Vernon Hills, Illinois neighborhood. Police were alerted, tracked the car to a nearby gas station, and charged the driver

with illegally possessing a stolen vehicle, drugs and a gun.

The arrest was a prime example of how automated license plate recognition, or ALPRs, can help catch criminals and possibly prevent crime, police Chief Patrick Kreis said.

"These cameras have helped us," he said. "Perhaps that prevented further wrongdoing."

Critics of the cameras note that only a tiny percentage of the billions of plates photographed lead to an arrest, and that the cameras generally haven't been shown to prevent crime. More importantly they say the devices are unregulated, track innocent people and can be misused to invade drivers' privacy.

The controversy comes as suburban police departments continue to expand the use of the cameras to combat rising crime. Law enforcement officials say they are taking steps to safeguard the data. But privacy advocates say the state should pass a law to ensure against improper use of a nationwide surveillance system operated by private companies.

Across the Chicago area, one survey by the nonprofit watchdog group Muckrock found 88 cameras used by more than two dozen police agencies. In response to a surge in shootings, after much delay, state police are taking steps to add the cameras to area expressways. In the northwest suburbs, Vernon Hills and Niles are among several departments that have added license plate cameras recently.

The city of Chicago has ordered more than 200 cameras for its squad cars. In Indiana, the city of Hammond has taken steps to record nearly every vehicle that comes into town.

Not all police like the devices. In the southwest suburbs, Darien and La

Grange had issues in years past with the cameras making false readings, and some officers stopped using them.

Unlike other cameras, which monitor traffic flow or issue speeding tickets, license plate readers are designed to record the plate number, make, model and color of every vehicle that passes, and often compare them to the National Crime Information Center or a local police "hot sheet," which may list stolen cars, suspended plates and people with outstanding arrest warrants or traffic violations.

Homeowner associations may also tie their cameras into the systems, which is what led to the arrest in Vernon Hills.

One of the leading sellers of such cameras, Vigilant Solutions, a part of Chicago-based Motorola Solutions, has collected billions of license plate numbers in its National Vehicle Location Service. The database shares information from thousands of police agencies, and can be used to find cars across the country.

The cameras often are mounted on police cars. But some departments have reported problems with that arrangement, noting the system may record addresses or other useless numbers, and may flag hits for vehicles going in the opposite direction, too late to stop them. So some officials prefer to mount the cameras on light poles, traffic light poles, or other stationary sites.

In Prospect Heights, cameras helped identify a car in a hit-and-run, leading to the arrest of the suspected driver, Chief Jim Zawlocki said.

Police there don't use the cameras for traffic enforcement, only using them when there is an incident prompting an investigation, such as a crime or a missing person.

"They're very beneficial when we're actively investigating something," he said.

In nearby Mundelein, police stopped using a license plate reader recently after several years. The chief said the system never worked as well as they'd hoped, often getting tripped up by outdated information. Another issue police identified is the long time it takes to get permission from the Illinois Department of Transportation to put a [camera](#) on a state route.

And in north suburban Highland Park, police looked into using the cameras, but the City Council has held off while seeking more information.

If the city were to use the cameras, City Manager Ghida Neukirch said, it would require tight restrictions, including only using the information with limited access for investigations, and deleting the information after 30 days.

"We are certainly sensitive to privacy concerns," she said. "It's imperative that any municipality have a detailed policy set forth on when it would be used, and have a reporting mechanism so the public understands how it's being used."

In a survey of law enforcement agencies using the cameras, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit watchdog, found that 99.5% of the plates were not under suspicion when scanned, and that police shared their data with an average of 160 other agencies.

Two big concerns the American Civil Liberties Union has always had about the cameras are that the information can be used to track the movements of the general population, and often is sold by operators to third parties like credit and insurance companies.

Then there is the potential for abuse by [police](#). One investigation found that officers nationwide misused agency databases hundreds of times, to check on ex-girlfriends, romantic rivals, or perceived enemies.

To address those concerns, 16 states have passed laws restricting the use of the cameras. The ACLU supported such legislation in Illinois and Indiana, but it failed to pass in either state. As a first step, the agency called for states at least to monitor what agencies are using the technology, and in what manner.

And local officials should have public hearings to decide if or how residents want such surveillance.

"There ought to be a discussion of how much surveillance a community thinks is appropriate," ACLU of Illinois spokesman Ed Yohnka said.

"We don't think it's a decision that ought to be solely left to law enforcement agencies."

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