

Security robots are at Philly Lowe's stores. Some have already nicknamed them 'snitchBOTS'

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Credit: Knightscope

Customers at Lowe's stores across Philadelphia have encountered an unexpected sight in the parking lots over the last month—a 5-foot-tall, egg-shaped security robot that makes a cosmic whirring sound as it glides across the pavement.

What seems to have surprised Philadelphians most about these new robots, aside from their very existence, is that they've managed to survive for several weeks in this city. Given Philly's sordid history with robots (particularly, hitchBOT), many on social media predicted they wouldn't make it past a few days.

Some have already nicknamed them "snitchBOT."

The K5 autonomous outdoor security robots, which are manufactured by Knightscope, a security tech company based in the Silicon Valley, are part of a pilot project to "heighten the security and safety of our locations," said Larry Costello, Lowe's senior manager of corporate communications.

Four Lowe's stores, in South Philly, Northeast Philly, Port Richmond, and West Philadelphia, began testing the robots in February. Others are being piloted in Washington state, North Carolina, California, and D.C. Costello said locations were selected "based on varying criteria and scenarios" but did not offer further details.

The K5 [robot](#) uses 16 microphones and a range of sensors, including lidar and sonar, to detect anomalies and report them in [real-time](#) to Lowe's central monitoring team. The robot also has four wide-angle cameras which take 360 degrees of high-definition footage.

Stacy Stephens, executive vice president and chief client officer at Knightscope, said the K5 is not meant to replace human security guards but to provide them with better situational awareness and give companies

evidence for criminal prosecutions. At the Lowe's in South Philly and Port Richmond last week, K5 robots were stationary outside the stores, with security guards parked next to them. People paid no mind to the robots.

K5s are equipped with thermal anomaly detection and "people detection" sensors to spot individuals "in places they should not be or times of day they should not be there," Stephens said.

He stressed that while the K5 can detect a human being, it does not have facial recognition.

"They can see a person, but not who it is," Stephens said.

The robots are able to recognize [license plates](#) and [mobile devices](#) if that information has previously been identified by Lowe's and entered into a database.

"We're looking for known threats, people to whom you've issued criminal trespass warnings, terminated employees, or domestic abusers," Stephens said.

The cosmic whir the K5 makes is a "patrol sound," to alert people who are visually impaired, and the robot is equipped with two-way communication that allows the user to deliver customized messages through it, Stephens said. People can also call for security by pressing a button on the robot's back.

What the 400-pound robot—which has been likened to everything from a Dalek on "Doctor Who" to a securitron from "Fallout"—does not have are weapons.

"I love the question because it's completely natural, but the robots are for

observing and reporting, they are not intended to be offensive in their abilities," Stephens said.

That doesn't mean their mere presence won't make some people uncomfortable.

"Having a large object moving around creates a sense of concern, an uncertainty about the capabilities it has," said Derek Leben, an associate professor of business ethics at Carnegie Mellon University who studies emerging technologies and artificial intelligence. "While that sense of uncertainty and concern can be an effective deterrent, at the same time it can erode trust, it can create a feeling of dystopia."

While Lowe's may have a legal right to film people in its [parking lots](#), Leben said it may be pushing the boundaries of a social contract.

"There's a real psychological sense that once you're outside of the store you're in a public space," he said. "It's not only a matter of inside vs. outside, it's also a device that can follow you around."

According to Knightscope's website, its robots are used by airports, hotels, police departments, casinos, and schools. Knightscope retains ownership of its robots, and the client pays about \$6 to \$9 per hour for an annual contract, Stephens said. He declined to say how much it costs to make each K5 unit.

Since their debut in 2015, K5 robots have made headlines when a toddler was hit by one at a Palo Alto mall (Knightscope claimed the child ran backward into it); when one fell into a fountain at a D.C. office building; and when a San Francisco SPCA retained one to patrol for vandalism and burglaries but was accused of using it to deter people experiencing homelessness from the facility.

K5 robots have been the targets of assault too. In 2017, an allegedly intoxicated man was accused of toppling one over in Knightscope's parking lot.

Stephens said he was aware of Philly's history with robots. In 2015, a hitchhiking Canadian robot named hitchBOT, which depended on the kindness of strangers to take it across the U.S., was beheaded when it reached Philadelphia. Its killer remains unknown, but its demise remains legendary in Philly.

"We have had people attempt to mess with our robots in a similar way that hitchBOT was and we have actually prosecuted those people to the fullest extent," Stephens said.

So far, no serious assaults against the K5 robots in Philly have been reported, though users on Philly's subreddit claimed to have seen one get hit twice by a car ("100% the robot's fault") and another get hit with a reflective plastic sleeve kids had pulled from a bollard in front of the store.

How effective the K5 is remains to be seen. Stephens pointed to information on Knightscope's website which indicates 911 calls have gone down in cities where the robot has been deployed, but a 2021 report from NBC News on the K5 found tangible results were hard to come by.

Costello, the Lowe's spokesperson, said the company is in its "test-and-learn phase" and has no results to share yet.

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