

# SEEING THROUGH SURVEILLANCE

A GUIDE FOR POLICYMAKERS

Surveillance is not safety. In recent decades, surveillance has increased exponentially. Public safety has not. As AI-powered surveillance looms larger and rights are under attack in many communities, the stakes are even higher to have the necessary resources to make informed decisions about surveillance.

It is on our elected leaders to keep communities safe by responsibly evaluating surveillance technology. This guide will help.

## REMEMBER WHO SURVEILLANCE MOST HARMS

- **Surveillance fuels racial injustice.** Surveillance technologies compound the over-policing and over-incarceration of Black and Brown communities, leading to biased government scrutiny, dangerous in-person encounters, false arrests, and police violence.
- **Surveillance endangers abortion rights.** Now that the Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade*, local surveillance systems could be coopted to identify, track, and criminalize people who travel to receive care.
- **Surveillance threatens immigrant communities.** No local surveillance database is ever fully insulated from ICE's reach — if information is collected, others can demand it.
- **Surveillance chills free speech and suppresses social activism.** Surveillance systems undermine First Amendment expression and are easily weaponized against social activism.
- **Surveillance entrenches economic injustice.** Surveillance systems have an outsized impact on people living on the economic margins.

## BEWARE OF SURVEILLANCE THAT FAILS TO INCREASE

### PUBLIC SAFETY

Surveillance is big business — multi-million dollar operations look to get rich off lucrative government contracts. Surveillance products rarely work as advertised.

- **Automated license plate readers.** Studies have found both a high error rate and low efficacy for “hits” connected to crime. In California alone, multiple people have been wrongly held at gunpoint due to errors.
- **Predictive policing.** An intensive investigation of 23,631 predictions made by a prominent predictive software company found it to be “terrible at predicting crimes,” yielding a success rate of as low as 0.1%.
- **Video cameras.** A 2019 systemic review of 40 years of video surveillance showed that it had “no significant effects” in combatting violent crime.

## LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Surveillance should not be the first approach to public safety. There are alternative solutions that produce results without causing harm:

- **Streetlights, not CCTV.** In a controlled study of streetlights in New York public housing developments, increased lighting levels led to a 36% reduction in nighttime outdoor crimes, including murder, robbery, and aggravated assault.
- **Speed bumps, not speeding cameras.** Speed bumps and other traffic calming techniques have been shown to be effective for traffic safety for a fraction of the cost of cameras, and without the civil rights concerns.
- **Trees, not tracking devices.** Research in Philadelphia found that vacant lots that were “cleaned and greened” — for a cost of just \$5 per square meter — had a 29% drop in gun violence in neighborhoods below the poverty line.

## DO YOUR DUE DILIGENCE, KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK AND ANSWER

All surveillance systems must be examined with a critical eye. When you discuss public safety issues that might involve surveillance, you need to ask:

- **Do you know about all the existing surveillance systems in your community?**
- **Does the public have the chance to review, debate, and reject surveillance technology before it moves forward?** Is the entire community represented in these discussions about public concerns and needs, potential interventions, and costs?
- **Do you know all of the risks of surveillance?** What are the financial costs, information security issues, liability concerns, and threats to civil rights? Have you conducted a Surveillance Impact Assessment?
- **Do you have all the information you need, including about alternatives to surveillance?** Have you engaged diverse members of the community in evaluating public concerns and needs? Have you conducted an evidence-based inquiry into the actual effectiveness of surveillance and the possibility of alternative solutions?

**READ THE FULL GUIDE**

SEEING THROUGH SURVEILLANCE:  
Why Policymakers Should Look Past the Hype

[ACLUNC.ORG/SEETHROUGHTHEHYPE](https://aclunc.org/seethroughthehype)