

Automated License Plate Readers: Myth *vs.* Reality

***Myth:* If you're not doing anything wrong, you shouldn't be worried about being tracked by ALPRs.**

Reality: Our concern about ALPRs is not that they are being used to, say, catch a car thief (although we are concerned when they improperly label an innocent person as a car thief). Our concern is that in the process of tracking down a legitimate car thief, the government is vastly overreaching and creating a massive national database that tracks all of us all day long.

In one city, a resident discovered that on average, his city's ALPR system (operated by Flock Safety) was tracking him four times a day. That means law enforcement nationwide can track him everywhere he went, including if he had gone to a medical clinic, drag performance, substance abuse recovery meeting, protest, gun show, etc. Even though you're doing nothing wrong by visiting any of these, in the wrong hands, this information could be used to target you or people you associate with.

We can't trust every government agency nationwide to use this data in a constitutional way. There are countless reports of ALPR databases – especially Flock databases – being misused. In one case, a police officer used an ALPR database to stalk an ex-wife. In another, it was used to track a woman who had an abortion. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has also used ALPR data to track people down in order to deport them.

***Myth:* I'm already being tracked in many other ways, like through my phone. This additional tracking through ALPRs doesn't matter.**

Reality: It's bad enough that private companies are tracking you so that they can, for example, persuade you to buy more goods and services. However, when it's the government tracking you, it's worse. A corporation can't harass, threaten, and arrest you based on the data it collects, but law enforcement can. And when you are going somewhere, it is far easier to leave your phone at home than your car.

***Myth:* ALPRs help community safety.**

Reality: ALPRs, like all surveillance technologies, do not prevent crime or keep people safe. While in some cases, ALPRs have helped to capture criminal suspects (who aren't smart enough to change cars), their limited effectiveness in this area does not justify their cost or undermining the privacy of everyone in your community. Law enforcement often claim that since Flock cameras were installed in their community, crime in the community has gone down. But there is little conclusive evidence that can connect ALPRs to reductions in crime. The fact is that crime has been dropping for decades all across the country. It's not because of Flock cameras. While the benefits of ALPRs are questionable, the harms of the mass data collection and tracking that ALPRs facilitate are not.

***Myth:* License plates are in public view, so it's not a problem for ALPR cameras to take pictures of them.**

Reality: It's true that if you're driving or parked in a public space, your license plate is in public view. Anyone can look at it and take a picture. ALPRs, however, take "public view" and put it on steroids. They take thousands of images a minute and pour them into a massive database for anyone with access for it to see. Suddenly your license plate is in "public view" in Texas and Florida and everywhere else, and not just in real time, but for as long as the data is retained.

***Myth:* Cities “own” the data collected through Flock ALPR cameras in their city.**

Reality: Flock Safety is very careful to say that cities ‘own’ the data that is collected by their ALPR cameras, but their standard contract also gives Flock a “non-exclusive, worldwide, perpetual, royalty-free right and license” to use that data pretty much as it wishes. In any event, if other law enforcement agencies can search the database at will, who “owns” the data doesn’t really matter. Flock ALPR data is widely available and can be seen and used by Flock customers anywhere.

***Myth:* ALPR cameras capture only license plate data, so it’s not a big deal.**

Reality: The problem with mass surveillance devices like ALPRs is that they usually expand beyond their original stated use. So it’s not surprising that Flock Safety is rapidly expanding its ALPRs’ capabilities. The company is now using AI to allow law enforcement to search through ALPR data even more quickly with even more detail. Searches could encompass descriptions of anything captured by one of their cameras—including vehicle occupants, bumper stickers, and bystanders.

Imagine if a police officer stood on your street writing notes every time you drove by. All the details about your car (make, model, color, bumper stickers, etc.), as well as details about visible occupants and pedestrians—how many, demographics, what they’re wearing, etc. Now imagine there’s an army of police officers doing this on every block all the time. This is the surveillance world that Flock is building.

***Myth:* Our city officials know best and wouldn’t use a system that they hadn’t carefully vetted.**

Reality: In some cases, police chiefs sign a contract with Flock and don’t make it public or get approval of their city council. And even a city council vote is only as good as the research council members put into their vote. Sadly, the most common reason behind your local police department’s decision to use Flock ALPRs is because a neighboring police department uses them. Too often, city officials are more familiar with Flock’s marketing materials than the terms of the contract they signed.

Even when city officials try to do the right thing, Flock has demonstrated disturbing practices. In Evanston, Illinois, city leaders ended their contract with Flock when they discovered ICE had gained access to their data. Flock took down the cameras but then, unknown to the city, put them right back up. City officials had to send Flock a cease-and-desist letter to get rid of the ALPRs once and for all.

The system works for Flock and its venture capitalist investors, not for us.

For more information, check out the ACLU of Iowa’s Protect our Privacy: Stop Government Surveillance campaign at www.aclu-ia.org/campaigns-initiatives/stopsurveillance.