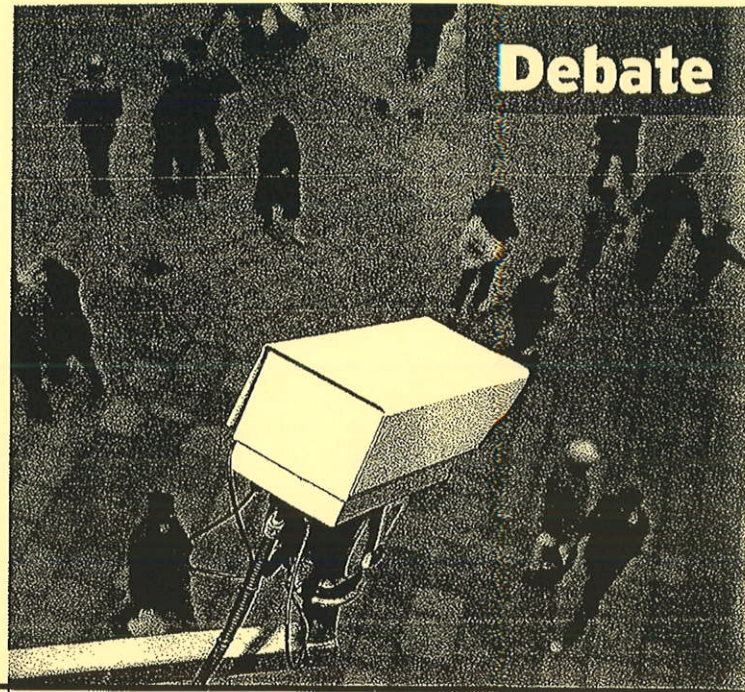


Are Public Surveillance Cameras a Good Idea?

More cities are monitoring their streets and public spaces

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YES Within hours of the Boston Marathon bombing last April, authorities began sifting through video surveillance footage.

These images, along with cellphone videos, proved instrumental in quickly identifying two suspects and capturing them before they could carry out any more attacks.

This case demonstrates how effective surveillance cameras can be in keeping the public safe. Many buildings already have private security cameras that cover surrounding public areas, capturing images that can be shared with law enforcement. Installing more public safety cameras simply enhances our ability to protect people.

In San Francisco, crimes such as burglary and vehicle break-ins declined 30 percent in areas where cameras were installed, and many cases, including homicides, have been solved by analyzing video footage. In Denver, authorities use public surveillance cameras during storms to determine where emergency help is needed.

The benefits of cameras far outweigh the risks of possible misuse.

Opponents argue cameras invade privacy and police may use them to target innocent people. To address these concerns, we have rules in San Francisco requiring cameras to be aimed only at public spaces, never private places. Plus, we're not allowed to monitor cameras in real time; they are used after the fact, as an investigative tool. And they're turned off during protests and other events involving freedom of speech.

The benefits of the responsible use of cameras far outweigh the risks of possible misuse. When a tool such as a camera can keep people safe, it makes sense to use that tool to its maximum effectiveness. •

—GREGORY P. SUHR
Chief of Police, San Francisco, California

NO The benefits of surveillance cameras are often exaggerated and their drawbacks ignored.

Surveillance cameras don't stop terrorist attacks. They can be helpful in solving an attack afterwards, as they were in Boston, but even that benefit can be overblown. When a man put a car bomb in New York's Times Square in 2010, there were 82 city-owned cameras in place and lots of camera-toting tourists, but none of it helped. The man was caught using old-fashioned investigative techniques. In fact, the video footage led the police to investigate several innocent people.

At the same time, cameras have important drawbacks. The A.C.L.U. doesn't have a problem with cameras at high-profile events and places, but we don't want to see all our public spaces being constantly monitored and recorded. And we especially don't want to see centralized monitoring by the government. When you walk down the street, you expect that the people around you might look at you; you don't expect that someone will follow you, recording all the places you go, for days or months at a time. That's what a cameras-everywhere policy would make possible.

It would also create the risk that the cameras would be abused, either by individual officers spying for personal reasons, or by government agencies monitoring people because of their political beliefs or their ethnicity.

Research shows that when people feel they're being watched, they alter their behavior and feel more pressure to act "normal." We don't want our country to turn into an uptight, conformist place where the chilling effects of constant surveillance prevent people from being themselves. •

—JAY STANLEY
American Civil Liberties Union

Cameras could be used to wrongly monitor people for their political beliefs.