



CAMERAS ALONE WON'T STOP CRIME

By William S. Sessions and Michael German

Originally featured in the [The Star Ledger](#) on August 19, 2007

Last week Newark Mayor Cory Booker announced a program that, when fully funded, will operate more than 120 public security cameras in his city. The program, known as the "Community Eye" program, is similar to urban surveillance programs in New York City and London. The Newark Police Department should carefully evaluate these cities' experiences and consider whether cameras will cure Newark's violent-crime woes. Newark's elected officials should assess whether it is wise or useful to encroach upon the private lives of those who live, work and travel in New Jersey's largest city.

It is tempting to believe that new technologies will keep us safe. Security cameras can see into the darkest corners on the darkest nights, and they don't need sleep or overtime pay. We have seen cities, large and small, turn to video surveillance as a panacea to keep our neighborhoods safe, but there is little evidence that these cameras are truly effective in preventing violent crime, and the potential damage done to individual liberty in these communities is immeasurable.

Law enforcement resources are not unlimited. When scarce security dollars are spent on unproven programs, it is often the tried-and-true, boots-on-the-ground policing methods that are cut back. Video surveillance programs can create a false sense of security that actually leaves local citizens less safe than before the cameras were installed.

Some proponents of extensive video surveillance claim that there are lessons to be learned from London's recent encounters with domestic terrorism. But what we have learned is that those events clearly demonstrate the limits of such systems. Those observations should cause Newark residents real concern as they invest in similar technology.

Newark officials should recognize that even the United Kingdom's 4.2 million surveillance cameras did not stop the July 2005 subway bombings. Last month's unsuccessful car bombings in London and the Glasgow airport attack weren't thwarted by cameras either. Sorting through hundreds of thousands of hours of footage -- consuming the energies of countless law enforcement agents -- ultimately proved useless in preventing such attacks. Indeed a recent study by the Home Office in London -- the British equivalent of our Department of Homeland Security -- found that, even though video surveillance accounts for nearly three-quarters of their crime prevention spending, the cameras have "no effect on violent crimes."

In our own cities, history has taught us that there is no substitute for the combination of good community policing, dogged investigations based upon probable cause and reasonable suspicion, and the cooperation of an informed populace.

We all recognize the government's duty to protect the public from terrorism using all lawful techniques, including video surveillance when it can be proven to be effective. However, such use should be governed by comprehensive guidelines. We are both members of the Constitution Project's Liberty and Security Committee, a bipartisan coalition of political leaders, policy experts and legal scholars that has issued "Guidelines for Public Video Surveillance." These guidelines demonstrate how it is possible for local governments to design these video surveillance systems to protect residents' privacy rights and civil liberties.

For example, permanent systems should only be adopted after a careful process that is open and publicly accountable. The Newark Municipal Council should be involved in designing and approving the system; it should not be developed solely by the police department.





Newark's law enforcement will be improved and strengthened by having clear written guidelines, codified in the ordinances and law, directing how and when it is appropriate to use the cameras, and how the data should be reviewed and stored. The system should not cover more geographic area than is reasonably necessary to achieve its purpose.

In most circumstances, individuals should not be automatically tracked without a warrant. The publicly developed rules should include protections to minimize the threat to privacy rights, by requiring "digital masking" to hide the identities of people caught on film who are irrelevant to any criminal or anti-terrorism investigation. Finally, a comprehensive set of legal remedies should be made available in the event the system is misused or abused.

Responsible and limited use of video surveillance can effectively supplement traditional law enforcement practices. But if our reliance on cameras comes at the cost of public safety and American liberty then we will have paid far too high a price indeed.

William S. Sessions is a former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation under Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and William J. Clinton. Michael German was a special agent with the FBI for 16 years and served as a counter-terrorism instructor at the FBI National Academy.