

Police, politicians push surveillance after Boston

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This Jan. 8, 1997 file photo shows a remote camera for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation oversees the traffic flow on the corner of Wilshire and Veteran in the Westwood area of Los Angeles. In small towns and big cities, police and politicians are pointing to the surveillance video that was key to identifying the Boston Marathon bombing suspects as a reason to bolster their own networks and get more electronic eyes on their streets. In Los Angeles, a councilman wants police to broaden their network by giving them access to traffic cameras used to monitor the flow of cars on the road. (AP Photo/Michael Caulfield,File)

(AP)—Police and politicians across the U.S. are pointing to the surveillance video that was used to help identify the Boston Marathon bombing suspects as a reason to get more electronic eyes on their streets.

Efforts include trying to gain police access to cameras used to monitor traffic, expanding surveillance networks in some major cities and enabling officers to get regular access to security footage at businesses.

Some in law enforcement, however, acknowledge that their plans may face an obstacle: Americans' traditional reluctance to give the government more law enforcement powers out of fears over privacy.

"Look, we don't want an occupied state. We want to be able to walk the good balance between freedom and security," said Los Angeles police Deputy Chief Michael Downing, who heads the department's counter-terrorism and special operations bureau.

The U.S. lags behind other countries in building up surveillance. One reason is the more than 18,000 state and local law enforcement agencies, with each determining its own policy. Another reason is cost: A single high-definition camera can cost about \$2,500—not including the installation, maintenance or monitoring costs.

The proliferation of cameras—both on street corners and on millions of smartphones—has helped catch lawbreakers, but plans to expand surveillance networks could run up against the millions of dollars it can cost to install and run them, experts say.

Whatever Americans' attitudes or the costs, experts say, the use of cameras is likely to increase, whether they are part of an always-on, government-run network or a disparate, disorganized web of citizens'

smartphones and business security systems.

"One of the lessons coming out of Boston is it's not just going to be cameras operated by the city, but it's going to be cameras that are in businesses, cameras that citizens use," said Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum. "You'll see the use of cameras will skyrocket."

Part of the push among law enforcement agencies is for greater integration of surveillance systems. For decades, law enforcement has contacted businesses for video after a crime. An integrated network would make that easier, advocates say.

Since the Boston bombings, police officials have been making the case for such a network.

In Philadelphia, the police commissioner appealed last week to business owners with cameras in public spaces to register them with the department. In Chicago, the mayor wants to expand the city's already robust network of roughly 22,000 surveillance video.



This Wednesday, April 24, 2013 photo shows transportation engineer associate Aberer Kliefe working at the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control Center in downtown Los Angeles. In small towns and big cities, police and politicians are pointing to the surveillance video that was key to identifying the Boston Marathon bombing suspects as a reason to bolster their own networks and get more electronic eyes on their streets. In Los Angeles, a councilman wants police to broaden their network by giving them access to traffic cameras used to monitor the flow of cars on the road. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

And in Houston, officials want to add to their 450 cameras through more public and private partnerships. The city already has access to hundreds of additional cameras that monitor the water system, the rail system, freeways and public spaces, officials said.

"If they have a camera that films an area we're interested in, then why put up a separate camera?" said Dennis Storemski, director of the mayor's office of public safety and homeland security.

In Los Angeles, police have been working on building up a regional video camera system that would allow their network to be shared with nearby cities at the flip of a switch, Downing said.

"First, it's a deterrent and, second, it's evidence," Downing said, adding, "it helps us in the hunt and pursuit."

Law enforcement experts say police need these augmented systems because the bystander with a smartphone in hand is no substitute for a surveillance camera that is deliberately placed in a heavy crime area.

"The general public is not thinking about the kinds of critical factors in preventing and responding to crimes," said Brenda Bond, a professor who researches organizational effectiveness of police agencies at Suffolk University in Boston. "My being in a location is happenstance, and what's the likelihood of me capturing something on video?"

There are questions about cameras' effectiveness. A 2011 Urban Institute study examined surveillance systems in Baltimore, Chicago and Washington and found that crime decreased in some areas with cameras while it remained unchanged in others. The success or failure often depended on how the system was set up and monitored.

Amie Stepanovich, director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center's Domestic Surveillance Project, said the most concerning was an integrated network of cameras that could allow authorities to track people's movements.

Such a network could be upgraded later with more "invasive" features like facial recognition, Stepanovich said, noting that the Boston surveillance footage was from a private security system at a department store that was not linked to law enforcement.

In many cases, the public may not be aware of the capabilities of the technology or what is being adopted by their local police department and its implications, said Peter Bibring, senior staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

Unlike private security systems monitored by businesses or citizens' smartphones, Bibring said, a government-run network is a very different entity because those watching have "the power to investigate, prosecute and jail people."

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