

How police surveillance technologies act as tools of white supremacy

January 13 2020, by Constantine Gidaris



Although surveillance technologies appear to be race-neutral, modern police surveillance technologies do not operate outside racial bias. Credit: ShopSpotter

A 2019 surge of gang-related shootings in Toronto motivated the Ontario government to [commit \\$3 million to double the number of Toronto Police surveillance cameras in the city](#). The Toronto Police could now go [to 74 cameras from 34](#).

Before that, in the summer of 2018, a spike of gun violence across the

city led Toronto Mayor John Tory to urge Toronto Police and city council to adopt a new technology called [ShotSpotter](#). Already in place across major cities in the United States, ShotSpotter is a real-time audio recording system that uses acoustics in public spaces to [detect, locate and automatically notify](#) police of gunfire.

But police [surveillance](#) technologies tend to be reactionary and focus on street-level crimes. Despite the [increased likelihood](#) of discovering drugs on [white people](#) rather than Black people, the usual offender stereotype allows police to disproportionately stop and target Black people.

By adhering to racial stereotypes that categorize certain behaviours of Black youth as criminal—simply standing on street corners or being out late at night —police often [see youth engaged in these activities as potential criminals](#).

After a few months of deliberation, the Toronto Police and city council abandoned the idea of ShopSpotter, citing numerous [legal and privacy concerns](#). Neither, however, expressed any concern for the ways that ShotSpotter could have been used to exacerbate racial disparities in policing.

News reports frequently characterize technologies [as benign instruments of policing designed to help reduce crime](#). Rarely, though, are they seen as weapons that sustain the [white supremacist ideology](#) —the foundation for the institution of policing. According to Sandra Bass, director of the Berkeley Public Service Center, police upheld a legal, formal and informal social order that was premised on a way of "[keeping the Negro in his place](#)."

A history of criminalizing Blackness

Acts of racialized policing and surveillance emerged out of slave patrols

in the American South during the mid-to-late 1800s. These patrols consisted of mostly white volunteers who took it upon themselves to control, regulate and punish slaves who ventured [beyond the plantation](#). During this time, the Ku Klux Klan also emerged alongside local and state [Jim Crow laws](#), which legalized racial and residential segregation.

These informal slave patrols evolved into the more formal police apparatus widely recognized today, enforcing Jim Crow laws until 1965.

In Canada, a similar policing ideology took shape through various mechanisms of segregation. As scholar Robyn Maynard details in her book, [Policing Black Lives](#), policing evolves out of a desire to protect the white settler state from the fabricated criminal dangers of Blackness.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, anti-Black hysteria equated Blackness with [pathological criminality](#). Maynard explains that the hyper-surveillance and over-policing of Black communities served to maintain "[white dominance across all aspects of Black life](#)."

This exclusion also included restricting or eliminating Black folks from accessing education, employment and housing.

North American-wide government cutbacks to social programs in the 1980s intensified racialized policing and surveillance tactics. These cuts along with new policies drew attention to the [enduring myth of Black criminality](#). Black people were perceived by the state as "[lazy and idle](#)" and "[scapegoated as freeloaders and possible criminals](#)."

Policing race with technology

Since then, little has changed in the policing of race. Blackness is still viewed as a problem to be contained. Evidence of this is the disproportionate rates of [Black incarceration](#) in Canada.

Black people are also over-represented as victims of violent and deadly encounters with Toronto Police as a [2018 report](#) by the Ontario Human Rights Commission details.

The practice of carding—used by the Toronto Police since the 1950s—has unfairly targeted Black people. Years of data shows that young Black men have been stopped and carded "[2.5 times more than white males](#)," despite only making up about [four percent](#) of the city's population.

Crucially, carding has been [proven to be an ineffective](#) solution to gun violence.

Although surveillance technologies appear to be race-neutral and lack [human bias](#), modern police surveillance technologies do not operate outside racial and discriminatory systems. Many surveillance systems repeatedly demonstrate [racial and systemic bias](#).

And yet, closed-circuit television cameras have repeatedly [failed to deter or reduce serious crime](#), including gun violence. As sociologists Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong have argued, surveillance cameras are not merely about reducing crime. Their research out of London, England, shows that Black youth have been "[systematically and disproportionately targeted](#)" by camera operators for no other reason than race.

Not tools but weapons

Like carding, police surveillance technologies such as ShotSpotter can become part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, Toronto Police and city council did not significantly consider in which neighbourhoods ShotSpotter would be deployed by police.

Michael Bryant, executive director and general counsel of the Canadian

Civil Liberties Association, feared ShotSpotter would have ended up in lower-income, [racialized neighbourhoods](#) already targeted by police.

Technologies used by police are not unbiased solutions to crime. For Black communities especially, police can represent the very embodiment of crime itself, linked to extensive histories and ongoing acts of racism, oppression and violence.

Among the police's exhaustive list of lethal and non-lethal weapons, automated surveillance technologies must be further scrutinized. These technologies allow the [police](#) to continue to exercise and enforce stealthy but harmful methods of discriminatory policing.

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