

DOJ Warns Calexico Police: Fix Institutional Problems Before Adopting Surveillance Tech

By Camille Ochoa

Law enforcement agencies should not expand their electronic surveillance capabilities until they have addressed core problems of corruption, incompetence, poor oversight, and inadequate training.

Echoing concerns long raised by EFF, that's the message the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) sent the Calexico Police Department (CPD) following a years-long investigation into alleged corruption by officers.

The shocking state of affairs in the California border town was laid bare in a scathing report released by the DOJ last month. Prompted by a 2014 incident in which a Calexico resident was allegedly kidnapped and beaten by police officers, the DOJ's Community Oriented Policing Services found department-wide corruption and incompetence. One of the most notable examples of unethical department culture includes spending roughly \$100,000 in seized assets on surveillance equipment (such as James Bond-style spy glasses) in order to dig up evidence of dirty deeds by city council members and complaint-filing citizens with the aim of blackmail and extortion. The DOJ also listed numerous operational oversights, including broken police radios in approximately half of the patrol cars, confusion regarding policies on use of force, and a total lack of record-keeping for equipment issued to employees.

Despite the well-known allegations, the Calexico city council approved the purchase of city-wide street cameras and automatic license plate reader technology in June 2015. Even in light of the CPD's shocking behavior, though, the city council did not make the impending implementation of these surveillance programs contingent upon the CPD adopting the 169 recommendations made in the DOJ report.

Mass surveillance devices, such as license-plate recognition systems that record the activity of vehicles and city-wide street cameras that record the activity of everyone and everything, have been approved for use despite a pervasive lack of basic law enforcement training, competence, and legality. The CPD will get to snoop on the city's inhabitants after decades of violating the public's trust.

Any police department like Calexico that experiences such gross reckless behavior and yet still allows its patrol officers to decide for themselves what their priorities are for their shifts instead of getting clear instructions and supervision—is a department that needs to be reined in. We should all be wondering (loudly) why city leaders are instead entrusting this entity with high tech spying gear that allows for mass data gathering.

During a Community Listening Session initiated by the DOJ last July, Calexico residents expressed their lack of trust in both the CPD and the city council, stating that corruption and political games have compromised actual policing and investigative work. Taking that into account in their report, the DOJ team recommended that the CPD make major institutional overhauls before focusing on new surveillance techniques:

“...[G]iven the personnel shortages, funding gaps, and significant organizational and technical deficiencies the organization is currently facing, the CPD needs to prioritize addressing these fundamental deficiencies while balancing the initial implementation of these [cameras].”

Calexico is a microcosm of this epidemic we are seeing throughout American communities—the belief that mass surveillance is a panacea for the corruption and ineptitude of those in power. In reality, though, data gathering cannot take the place of honest police work. The DOJ report is a message to police departments everywhere that having more cameras pointed at citizens does not mitigate the need for proper training, competent leadership, and community engagement.

The residents of Calexico should not be spied on by the same police department that routinely fails to abide by federal policing standards at every level.