

Automatic License Plate Readers (ALPRs)

Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs) are surveillance systems that use high-speed cameras to capture images of license plates, convert them into searchable vehicle location data, and aggregate this information into centralized databases. Police and private companies—like Flock Safety—can search these databases to track vehicles across time and location, often without a warrant or any suspicion of wrongdoing.

ALPRs are Invasive Mass Surveillance Technology

By matching a car to a particular time, date, and location, and then building a database of that information over time, police can learn highly sensitive information about where you work and live, what doctor you go to, which religious services you attend, and who your friends are.

Private companies often own and operate these surveillance technology systems and facilitate law enforcement access to their databases across agencies, jurisdictions, and states. This includes access for federal agencies like ICE and DHS. Among the largest of these companies is Flock. Flock's ALPR cameras are used by more than 5,000 police departments across the country across 49 states.

Their expansive network tracking drivers across police and private networks operate with insufficient oversight and without a warrant—posing serious risks to our privacy and civil liberties. These multijurisdictional databases automatically share and pool data, tracking the movements of cars across cities and states. They are ripe for abuse.

Warrantless Search of Historical Data

One of many problems with ALPRs is that police officers often search ALPR databases—thus exposing a detailed record of our movements over time—without getting a warrant. EFF and the ACLU of Northern California have sued the City of San Jose to end this practice, arguing it violates the California Constitution.

Congress Can Step In

Like many mass surveillance technologies that claim to be a silver bullet solution, ALPR systems are error-prone and deeply problematic—so much so that cities across the country are now rejecting Flock contracts outright. Federal oversight is sorely needed to protect the public from the inevitable abuses of ALPRs by federal and local law enforcement.

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