

Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs)

Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs) are mass surveillance systems that capture images of license plates, convert them into searchable vehicle location data, and aggregate the results into centralized databases. Police and private entities can search these databases to track vehicles across time and location, often without a warrant or any suspicion of wrongdoing.

Please Note: Automated traffic enforcement systems (like red light and speed cameras) use similar plate-reading technology to ALPRs but often operate under narrower legal design. Many states require deletion of traffic footage that show no violation and bar sharing data with outside agencies. ALPR mass surveillance networks, by contrast, are built to retain and share data on every passing vehicle regardless of suspicion.

ALPRs are Invasive Mass Surveillance Technology

ALPRs are typically marketed as a narrow tool for specific purposes, such as recovering stolen vehicles. However, by logging a car's location over time, police can learn highly sensitive information about your life – including where you work and live, the doctors you visit, and the religious services you attend.

While some law enforcement agencies may maintain their own cameras and databases, most rely on private companies. These companies facilitate law enforcement access to their databases across agencies, jurisdictions, and states—without a warrant. Some ALPR companies contract directly with agencies, like ICE, but federal agencies can get access to ALPR data even without a contract. Among the largest of these companies is Flock Safety. Flock's ALPR cameras are used by more than 5,000 police departments across 49 states.

Operating across state lines with minimal oversight and zero warrant requirements, these expansive surveillance networks pose serious risks to our privacy and civil liberties. These multijurisdictional databases automatically pool and share location data to track vehicle movements nationwide, creating a system that is 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 marketed as silver bullet solutions, ALPR systems are error-prone and unreliable—so much so that cities across the country are now rejecting ALPR contracts outright. Congress should follow suit by refusing to fund its expansion and mandating strict limits, such as requiring warrants for historical data searches and prompt deletion of ALPR data.

Want more information? Please contact Director of Federal Affairs India McKinney at india@eff.org and Assistant Director of Federal Affairs Maddie Daly at maddie@eff.org.



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