



million
ONE JAIL AT A TIME.
story

E3S3 Why Detroit Might Be the True Test of Why Cameras Don't Make Cities Safer

A Reporter Sonia Paul takes us to Detroit, where 80 % of residents are Black, and examines the tools, models and methods changing the nature of policing in the city — from the rise of live-streamed surveillance to facial recognition technology. She investigates their impact on residents, and implications for overpoliced communities of color across the country.

A PODCAST BY

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The Story

Keeping Watch on the Technology
That's Watching Us

“Now we've gotten to the point where these systems are integrating with each other and rooting their determinations based on already biased data that comes from other systems.”

-Tawana Petty, data and technology researcher

Project Greenlight was launched in Detroit in 2016 as a public-private-community partnership to lower crime using surveillance. Businesses that partner with the police put green light signage outside of their storefronts; surveillance footage is sent to police in realtime, 24/7. Businesses that participate in the program can expect to get a quicker response from police and the overall logic of the program is that it reduces crime by creating a sense that the police are always watching. Police Captain Aric Tosqui says Project Greenlight allows officers to respond in new, effective ways to reports of crime in their city.

But critics like data and technology researcher Tawana Petty say the data collected by such surveillance systems is dangerously biased and can result in false convictions. And while many believe in the ability of Project Greenlight to lower crime, the program lacks rigorous studies to determine whether, and how, it works.



Project Greenlight signage on Monroe St. in the Greektown section of Downtown Detroit, a popular club and nightlife spot. Photo: Nick Hagen

The Mission

Create Oversight to Determine
How Surveillance is Being Used
and Stop Abuses



“Okay, the placebo effect, you can take two pills. One is a real pill. one is a sugar pill, and because you're being told this is an aspirin, “oh, I feel better.” so when my brother sees the green light, “oh, I feel better.” Even though the placebo effect, it doesn't really mean instantaneously, if something happened, the police would show up. You're not really safer, you just feel safer.”

-Thompson Curtis

Surveillance is an ever-expanding phenomenon in our society. And while some of its uses may be positive, the flaws of AI technology, along with the pace of expansion defies the ability of the public to monitor potential abuses. Groups like the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP) are working to educate communities about the problematic implications of surveillance, especially when used by law enforcement.

The mission? Fight discriminatory uses of surveillance to protect the rights of citizens, whether they're simply going about their lives, or protesting police abuse.

The Strategy

Amplify Public Awareness through Education, Create Legislation to Combat Discriminatory Uses of Surveillance



Photographed in Downtown Detroit, Eric Williams is a Senior Staff Attorney at Detroit Justice Center.

“In the one sense, it's just an extension of the police, which means whatever problems you had with the police, you're now just doing virtually....”

- Eric Williams, Detroit Justice Center

Education: When it comes to surveillance, and the rapidly evolving technologies that accompany its use, education is the first step. The Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (STOP), along with other groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), are building public awareness about the extensive existence of surveillance and the harmful ways it's used to target specific communities, such as Muslims, African Americans, immigrants, and people of color. STOP has conducted presentations with universities, informal activist collectives and Fortune 500 companies to provide tips on staying safe as a protester, understanding what digital information is collected about you from social networking sites, and the ethical and legal problems associated with AI surveillance. Protesters can find one of their toolkits [here](#). As Albert Fox Cahn of STOP says, “you can't mobilize people to outlaw something until they understand what it is.” Which leads to the next step.

Legislation: Call your local lawmaker and demand an end to facial recognition policing. There are legislative bills in the works in many parts of the country to combat this potentially discriminatory use of surveillance.

Post Responsibly: One of the most personal, practical steps you can take is to consider what photos you post to social media, both of yourself and of community events like protests, in which others might be identified. If you do wish to post photos, consider changing your account settings to “private.” Such posts can be used by police to target protesters as part of ongoing surveillance campaigns.

Resources

Learn more about the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project:

<https://www.stopspying.org/>

Read about the facial recognition software being used in Detroit's Project Greenlight:

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2017/10/30/detroit-police-facial-recognition-software/107166498/>

And about the first documented case of a false arrest due to the faulty use of facial recognition technology:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/technology/facial-recognition-arrest.html>

Learn more about the many ways that surveillance is being used:

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/privacy-technology/surveillance-technologies>

The Project Greenlight green light on top of the Dubois Apartment building in Midtown Detroit. Photo: Nick Hagen



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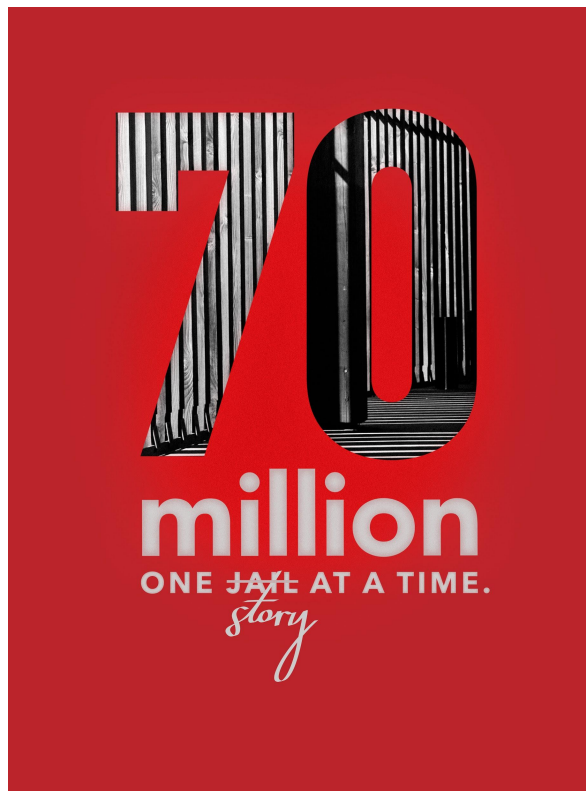
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