

Building the infrastructure of a police state

# Detroit's facial recognition surveillance system exposed

By Kevin Reed  
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The Detroit Board of Police Commissioners decided on June 29 to postpone a vote on the expansion of its use of camera and facial recognition technology amid growing public outrage over the system that has been in place since 2016.

The decision to delay the vote followed a report the previous day in the *Detroit Metro Times* that the core surveillance technology—which is scanning and recording the activity of everyone in the city within sight of its extensive camera network at all times—was purchased for \$1 million and installed without any public review or discussion let alone a vote of the Detroit City Council or the Police Commission.

Earlier reports in the *Metro Times* exposed the use of the high-definition video cameras and face-scanning software by the Detroit Police Department (DPD) to identify and track the movements of individuals at “parks, schools, immigration centers, gas stations, churches, abortion clinics, hotels, apartments, fast-food restaurants, and addiction treatment centers.” The article also said that police can identify people in real time using “databases containing hundreds of thousands of photos, including mugshots, driver’s licenses, and images scraped from social media.”

Additionally, the report said the system is integrated with Detroit police body cams and the city’s highly touted “ground-breaking and crime-fighting” public-private-community partnership called Project Green Light Detroit. The program involves placing cameras—at a cost of \$4,000 per location—that stream live video to the DPD’s Real Time Crime Center at its downtown headquarters.

A web page at [detroitmi.gov](http://detroitmi.gov) dedicated to the Project Green Light hosts a map showing the location of nearly 600 surveillance cameras and says this infrastructure is for “improving neighborhood safety, promoting the revitalization and growth of local businesses, and strengthening DPD’s efforts to deter, identify, and solve crime.”

After the extent of the surveillance was exposed and public anger began to rise, Detroit Police Chief James Craig hastily called a press conference on June 27 in an effort to downplay the invasive nature of the system and justify its implementation.

Forced to admit that the artificial intelligence and biometrics system had been in place for the past two years without review, Craig became irritated. When questioned by the media about its legality, he said, “How come we never talk about the criminals?”

Chief Craig also said that the department had the right to detain people based on the technology because it constitutes “reasonable suspicion” that an individual identified by the system had committed a crime.

When asked about it, Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan has repeatedly refused to comment, even though he was a key decision-maker in signing the three-year contract with DataWorks Plus. The firm, located in Greenville, South Carolina, provides technology to more than 1,000 law enforcement agencies in North America and New Zealand.

DataWorks Plus specializes in hardware and software systems that integrate traditional police identification databases like mug shots and fingerprints with more-advanced biometric data such as iris- and tattoo-matching and voice and facial recognition analytics. According to the *Metro Times*, the city contract also allows for thousands of hours of surveillance video to be shared with third-party law enforcement vendors.

While the smaller circulation alternative weekly *Metro Times* has played a role in questioning the city’s surveillance operation, the two major daily publications—the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*—have engaged in a campaign to cover up the anti-democratic implications of the police program. Both papers have published multiple articles extolling the benefits of the system to the public and just recently began reporting on growing public concerns.

Among these *Free Press* and *News* coverage have been public relations pieces promoting the crime-fighting potential of Project Green Light and quoting Mayor Duggan and the president of the Black McDonald’s Operators Association on how it will bring a “safer environment” and “make criminals think twice before committing a crime” at a participating business.

Detroit’s 24-hour live video surveillance system was initially exposed on May 16 when Georgetown Law School’s Center on Privacy & Technology published a study called “America Under Watch: Face Surveillance in the United States.” This report compared pilot facial recognition programs in Detroit and Chicago to similar systems operated in the Southwest China city of Guiyang where “police are purportedly able to locate and identify anyone who shows their face in public—in a matter of minutes.”

The Georgetown Law report explains that Detroit signed a contract for the “FACE Watch Plus real-time video surveillance

software” that operates “not less than 100 concurrent video feeds.” The DPD’s face recognition policy, which was approved by the Board of Police Commissioners and went into effect on July 1, 2018, “may connect the face recognition system to any interface that performs live video, including cameras, drone footage, and body-worn cameras.”

The city contract with DataWorks Plus also includes a mobile app that Detroit police officers may use to run facial recognition searches on the city’s 500,000 mug shots. The system also provides access to Michigan’s Statewide Network of Agency Photos (SNAP), a database that includes driver’s license photographs.

In their analysis of the Detroit system, Georgetown Law explains that Project Green Light was essentially a Trojan Horse used to pitch businesses that are open late at night “as a way to deter crime and improve police response times to incidents at locales across the city.” However, by April 2019 the number of Green Light Partners had been expanded to many other locations including churches, schools and support centers that “reveal deeply personal information” about “religious, political or social views or activities” of people in a “noncriminal organization or lawful event.”

It was Georgetown Law that brought to light efforts by Detroit city officials to obscure the facial recognition aspects of the Project Green Light program. The study points out that neither the application to participate nor the agreement signed by private business partners with the city mention “the use of real-time face surveillance.”

The Georgetown Law study also reviewed the democratic and constitutional issues raised by video-based facial recognition technology in general, writing, “By enabling the secret and mass identification of anyone enrolled in a police—or other government—database, it risks fundamentally changing the nature of our public spaces.”

Among the constitutional violations of these technologies is a “chilling effect” on First Amendment free speech and peaceful assembly rights in public places under video surveillance and the Fourth Amendment prohibition against unreasonable searches and seizures by secretly monitoring and cataloging “every single movement” of someone across time.

The fact that Detroit’s secret surveillance system has been in place for two years and plans were well advanced for a major expansion behind the backs of city residents is a political warning to the working class about the complicity of the local media and Democratic Party in the buildup of the infrastructure of a police state. Not a word would have been said about the issue if the public had not been informed about it and begun demanding that the program be stopped.

For example, Police Commissioner from the Fifth District Willie E. Burton—who is an up-and-coming figure of Detroit Democratic Party politics with connections to presidential candidate Bernie Sanders—is just now calling for public hearings and a referendum on the facial recognition system following his enthusiastic endorsement of Project Green Light over the past two years.

Meanwhile, Rep. Rashida Tlaib, Democratic congresswoman from Michigan’s 13th District, which includes much of Detroit,

had said nothing about police surveillance of the city’s citizens until the Georgetown study was published.

Starting with a hearing of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform on May 22, Tlaib has been calling for a moratorium on the use of the technology “until we do something about it at a federal level.” In other words, she would approve the use of facial recognition systems under US government regulations approved by congressional Democrats and Republicans.

The selection of Detroit as a testing location for advanced systems of facial recognition has both a political and historical significance. Despite the decimation of its industrial base, Detroit remains a center of the American working class with a long history of class struggle against big business and the state. Detroit is the location of an urban uprising in the summer of 1967 in which federal troops and tanks were mobilized for the first time against the population of a major American city.

As the poorest large city in the US, Detroit bears the deep scars of betrayal by the trade unions since the deindustrialization of the Midwest and attack on working class living standards that began in the 1970s. It is significant that not one word has been uttered by the unions in Detroit over the erection of a surveillance network.

The ruling class are well aware of the seething anger and fighting capacity of the working class and youth today in Detroit and other cities and growing opposition to capitalism more generally. It is to this threat that the system of facial recognition software tied to real-time video surveillance of the public is being developed and deployed.

No confidence can be placed in any faction of the ruling elite—including the Democratic Party and their supporters among the pseudo-left groups, including the Democratic Socialists of America—to defend basic democratic rights. Only the independent political mobilization of the working class, through the building of workplace and neighborhood committees of action on the basis of the struggle against capitalism and for socialism, can stop the emergence of a police state.

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