

DATA PRIVACY & GOVERNANCE HUB

Flock Cameras & License Plate Readers

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Key Takeaways

- Automated license plate readers continuously collect real-time data on vehicles, not just those suspected of criminal activity.
- The cameras enable authorities and law enforcement to piece together the movements, habits, and patterns of individuals' lives over time.
- There's a lack of consistent regulation nationwide, meaning data-sharing practices vary widely, with federal and immigration authorities among those often accessing this information.
- The ACLU calls for more restrictive policies surrounding law enforcement's use of flock cameras, suggesting it may.

What Happened

The widespread use of automated license plate readers (ALPRs) has prompted various policy discussions regarding data collection, privacy protections, and transparency. These [devices](#) are “high speed camera and computer systems that capture license plate information on vehicles that drive by” and can be hidden in various places, like utility poles, or attached to a streetlight. The cameras have a long range, are found in over [5,000](#) communities nationwide, and continually capture data in real time. Privacy advocates have grown weary of the amount of information these systems collect and store and question their usefulness to law enforcement in criminal investigations. One of the most popular companies that produces these cameras, [Flock Safety](#), has publicly stated that local law enforcement agencies can choose whom they share the data with, and that this varies from department to department depending on whom they collaborate with.

Privacy and Governance Concerns

The ACLU strongly critiques the use of these cameras, stating that they are extremely powerful surveillance tools and are frequently used by federal agencies. They point to a stark [contrast](#) between collecting data on all passing vehicles and collecting data solely on people who may be suspected of breaking a law, suggesting a [potential violation](#) of the Constitutional protection against unreasonable searches and seizures. These cameras enable authorities and government officials to easily piece together the isolated movements, habits, and patterns of an individual's life over time. This is seen as an extraordinary violation of privacy by many and can provide great insight into people's lives, including which friends, medical professionals, churches, protests, etc., a person may frequent. In various [California municipalities](#), the town staff has voted to cut ties with the Flock cameras over concerns that the data is being used by immigration authorities. In Iowa, [local governments](#) have also issued a pause on their use, arguing that ALPRs "infringe on the privacy of drivers who have not violated any laws", with their information being "fed into a network of nationally shared databases."

Why It Matters / Policy Considerations

The [ACLU](#) calls for a policy response to the "lack of state regulation as to how this technology can be utilized," objecting to the status quo that is leaving millions of people's data vulnerable. With policies varying from city to city, there is also a need for consistency in their application and implementation to ensure that the data is used in a transparent, lawful way. The ACLU's policy proposal includes adopting policies that restrict the use of ALPRs to law enforcement only, ban the storage of data on innocent people and the sharing of license plate reader data, provide the plate data of vehicles registered to citizens, and require the reporting of any entity that utilizes ALPRs.