

Miami begins “virtual policing” of residents

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22 January 2015

The Miami Police Department has rolled out a mass public surveillance system, according to a report published in the *Miami Herald* last week. The surveillance system, now known by its moniker, “The Virtual Policing Detail,” consists, in this initial stage, of 25 high-definition cameras spread throughout the city, but police officials intend to install hundreds more, especially in “high-crime areas.”

The cameras are largely centered on Biscayne Boulevard, one of Miami’s largest thoroughfares. The feed from the cameras is monitored at a control center consisting of twenty-eight large screen high-definition televisions and has the capacity to utilize up to 2,500 cameras. The next stage, according to the *Herald*, will involve installing 250 additional cameras throughout the city, to include the working class neighborhoods of Overtown, Model City, Brickell, and Little Haiti. The expansion will also include public housing, tourist areas and government buildings.

The city plans to link the cameras to the so-called “Shotspotter” system, a GPS-based system that allows police to triangulate the location of gunfire throughout the city. However, the “Shotspotter” system has already been used and discarded by several large police departments because of unreliability. The city also plans to connect the new cameras with the 144 existing red light cameras placed throughout Miami, so that police officers eventually will be able to monitor the live feeds directly from their cars.

The system uses the latest technology, capable of zooming in on the smallest detail. For example, a Miami police officer cited in the *Herald* article stated that the cameras could read the telephone number being dialed on an iPhone of a citizen being observed from hundreds of yards away. Though not yet equipped with facial recognition software, the technology is capable of reading 10,000 license plates an hour and is linked to a national database.

The initial cost of the program is listed as \$700,000, with the city of Miami paying half of that fee through three city agencies and the rest being covered by a grant from the Department of Homeland Security. City officials have claimed that the system is an effort to increase homeland security in Miami, despite the fact that camera placement is at least partially focused on low-income, high-crime neighborhoods.

The 2013 Boston marathon bombing and the recent Charlie Hedbo massacre in France were cited in the *Herald* report as justification for expanded public surveillance. In the former case, Boston police used the attacks to justify citywide house-to-house searches, in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution. In the latter case, politicians in France and throughout Europe have used the attacks as a pretext to demand sweeping new surveillance laws and arrests of scores of people throughout the continent on bogus anti-terror charges. In both cases the attackers were closely monitored by the intelligence agencies of their respective countries prior to the attacks themselves.

Already widespread throughout Europe, public surveillance systems in the United States have been on the rise, with large numbers of cameras in New York City, Boston, Orlando, Chicago and other major U.S. cities.

The city of Miami is one the most socially polarized areas in the country. The city has a population of 19.9 percent living below the federal poverty level, according to the Census Bureau, placing it second highest amongst the 25 largest metropolitan areas in the country. Additionally, Miami has the second lowest median income within that same category, with more than seven percent of the population making less than half the federal poverty level. Rents are amongst the highest in the country, with average citizens spending 43 percent of their income on rent. The median per capita income is \$23,174.

The new surveillance system has encountered weak resistance from local civil libertarians. The ACLU of Florida has not issued an official condemnation of the cameras, and its executive director, Howard Simon, has merely suggested that this is a case of “mission creep” by the Miami police department. The outgoing police chief, Manuel Orosos, has been equally dismissive of privacy rights, saying “everyone has a telephone now with a camera anyways.”



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