

Detroit Struggle to End Facial Recognition Spying

City Council to take up issue amid broad opposition

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Global Research, September 26, 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#),
[Police State & Civil Rights](#)

After a long-delayed vote by the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners (DBOPC), a resolution to essentially endorse the existing facial recognition technology being utilized in the city was passed by a margin of 8-3 at a meeting on September 19.

Three of the Commissioners who have exercised a more independent policy stance from corporate-imposed Mayor Mike Duggan voted against the utilization of this form of surveillance in a city which is approximately 80% African American.

Police Commissioners Willie Bell, Elizabeth Brooks, Shirley Burch, Lisa Carter, Eva Garza Dewaelsche, Evette Griffie, Annie Holt and Jim Holley voted in support of the policy. The three which voted in opposition were Willie Burton, Darryl Brown, and William Davis.

The City Council must now discuss and vote on the issue. This will provide the public an extended opportunity to engage the administration further on the matter which has drawn significant interest.

A vote by the Commissioners was carried out prior to any public comment on this issue or other concerns raised by the audience. After the vote, members of the public who were in attendance denounced the 8-3 decision along with expressing outrage over the fact that a vote was held before community members could weigh in on the topic.

The resolution approving the utilization of the facial recognition technology says that there are safeguards within the policy which would ban its use against minors, during demonstrations and for immigration enforcement. Nevertheless, the entire concept of utilizing such technology has drawn mounting opposition.

In events leading up to the Board of Police Commissioners vote, several important developments have occurred.

Detroit-based State Representative Isaac Robinson has submitted a bill to declare a moratorium on facial recognition technology pending further investigation. In addition, newly-elected Detroit-based United States Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib has also come out in opposition to the current policy which is being considered for usage in federally-funded public housing complexes.

[State Rep. Robinson said](#) during early September that: "My bill is a five-year moratorium. Let's have a pause so we can have a debate and discussion. We don't need Big Brother watching our every move."

Robinson believes that there is bipartisan support for the passage of such a bill in the State

House in Lansing. By a margin of 48-10, State Rep. Robinson claims that there is majority support for the proposed moratorium. There are similar efforts underway within the State Senate as well.

The Michigan ACLU has come out solidly against the policy filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request demanding records to reveal how the technology has been used over the last two years absent of any public oversight.

Rodd Mont of the ACLU [said](#) of the current situation:

“If they’re going to use the technology, then at least be accountable to use so that we know when you’re using it, what you’re using it for, what you’re doing what you’re collecting, and what the results of that are. Facial recognition is a very capable investigative tool, but that doesn’t really address the things that result in crime. Instead of spending millions of dollars on cameras and software, we’d rather see that money invested in our neighborhoods.”

Technology Has Been In Use for At Least Two Years

What has caused so much consternation among the public is the fact that facial recognition technology has been in effect for a period of time. The people of Detroit and its elected bodies such as the City Council, state representatives and senators along with several of the appointed and elected members of the DBOPC were not informed about the existing policy.

This came to light after the release of a study by the Georgetown University Center on Privacy and Technology which exposed the widespread surveillance being undertaken and its link with the so-called “Project Green Light” program which has been in effect since 2016. The Green Light project has been encouraged by the Duggan administration as a purported mechanism to reduce criminal activity.

Businesses and other establishments have been given incentives to install “real time” cameras which feed images directly into local police stations. There is also a broader monitoring command station where video images from several areas of the city are feed into a centralized location.

The software was purchased by the Duggan administration in July 2017 with tax dollars in excess of \$1 million. The Data Works Plus software emanating from Greenville, South Carolina is supposedly capable of processing over 100 real time video feeds operating from numerous areas of the city where the Green Lights cameras have been installed.

Nonetheless, it appears as if the participants in the Project Green Light program were not aware that the video feeds emanating from their locations are being manipulated by the Data Works Plus facial recognition technology. As unwitting enablers of this massive surveillance operation, the veracity of the Duggan administration and its supporters on the DBOPC is brought into further question by those who were convinced that the program was genuinely designed to enhance safety in Detroit communities.

Moreover, since the city of Detroit is overwhelmingly African American with a rising population of people of Latin American and Middle Eastern descent, the racial factors are important in assessing the social impact of facial recognition technology. The failure of the Duggan administration to adequately address the public outcry has further damaged its

waning credibility which has deteriorated as a result of various scandals involving the use of federal funds for housing demolitions and other matters.

The Center on Privacy and Technology study entitled “America Under Watch: Face Surveillance in the United States”, raises the ominous racial implications of the utilization of this spying methodology.

Detroit has been a target for many years being subjected to illegal and unwarranted attacks on its right to self-determination through the imposition of emergency management and bankruptcy by the State of Michigan at the aegis of financial institutions which have ensnared the municipality for decades in usurious credit schemes and bond issues.

“America Under Watch” [says](#) of its findings:

“The risks of face surveillance are likely to be borne disproportionately by communities of color. African Americans are simultaneously more likely to be enrolled in face recognition databases and the targets of police surveillance use. Compounding this, studies continue to show that face recognition performs differently depending on the age, gender, and race of the person being searched. This creates the risk that African Americans will disproportionately bear the harms of face recognition misidentification.”

Struggle Escalates to End Process

Many organizations have publicly denounced both Project Green Light and the Data Works Plus facial recognition technology. The chief legal advisor for the Detroit City Council has already issued a [statement](#) saying the municipal legislative body should reject the policy recommendation passed by the DBOPC.

A Detroit News article [emphasized](#) that:

“David Whitaker, director of the council’s legislative policy division staff, expressed in a Sept. 6 memo his concerns that police could abuse the software, and that white juries would be unable to render fair verdicts in trials with [B]lack defendants whose photos had been flagged by facial recognition technology.”

Detroit Police chief and Deputy Mayor James Craig immediately rejected Whitaker’s findings saying that his study was faulty even though the law-enforcement official who is an appointee of the Duggan administration has no credentials as a legal researcher. Duggan has contradicted himself on many occasions in relationship to this issue saying there was no need for public alarm and that he was also opposed to real time usage of facial recognition.

Yet it is Duggan and the political and economic interests he represents in Detroit which is behind the adoption of facial recognition technology. Consequently, it will be up to the mass organizations, progressive elected officials and legal organizations to wage the necessary struggle to eliminate the state-sanctioned usage of this spying software.

The City Council of Oakland, California has voted to ban facial recognition technology in this municipality. Other municipalities will undoubtedly follow the same pattern.

One distortion within the Georgetown University Center for Privacy and Technology report is that it references the use of facial recognition technology in the People's Republic of China (PRC) implying that this is somehow a policy which is ostensibly alien to the U.S. In fact intelligence agencies and law-enforcement entities have engaged in massive surveillance operations against people in the U.S. and abroad for well over a century.

African American social justice organizations and their leaders have been subjected to political repression which has resulted in the destabilization, disruption and dismantling of various movements throughout history. African American, Left-wing, Labor,

Environmentalists, Immigrant Rights and other progressive groups are still the focus of hostile propaganda, selective prosecution, unjust imprisonment, deportation and assassinations at the direction of the national security state apparatus.

Therefore, this campaign to abolish facial recognition spying must acknowledge the history of this policy and the danger it poses for oppressed people. Only the social transformation of U.S. society can eliminate this threat where genuine freedom of expression and association can become a reality embedded in the legal framework of the state.

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