

[Home](#) | [Issues](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contribute](#)

[Videos](#) | [Events](#) | [eNewsletter](#)

Camera-shy America Weighs Merits of Video Surveillance

SOURCE: Washington Press
July 25 2005

Americans are weighing the merits of an all-seeing network of 24-hour-a-day security cameras similar to the system which has aided Britain's recent terror investigations.

Britain's extensive network of video cameras allowed police to quickly beam pictures of the suspects in the recent London terror attacks across the globe.

But any bid to expand the fledgling US network of surveillance cameras could fall afoul of freedom and privacy guarantees in the US Constitution.

"The ethos we have in this country is that government leaves you alone unless it has good reason to suspect you of wrongdoing," said Jay Stanley of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

"Videotaping everything you do when you leave your apartment or house doesn't really qualify as leaving you alone."

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, some US jurisdictions have improved their rudimentary closed-circuit TV (CCTV) systems, branded by opponents as "spy" cameras.

"They are pretty scarce, as far as law enforcement CCTV is concerned. There are, of course, a lot of private CCTV networks," said Cedric Laurant, a policy analyst with the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC).

Chicago has around 1,200 cameras, there are more than 200 in Baltimore and there are 20 to 25 police cameras in Washington, as well as a network in Metro subway stations, trains and buses, according to EPIC, a Washington-based civil liberties research center.

New York City has a burgeoning network, and there are also cameras in New Orleans and on transportation systems around the country, but analysts say there is neither the depth nor coordination of coverage that there is in Britain.

Washington's system is only switched on for major events, like the July 4 Independence Day celebrations, though police have access to hundreds of cameras used by the Metro subway system and transportation networks in an emergency.

Washington Mayor Anthony Williams sparked debate over CCTV following the first round of London attacks on July 7, which killed 56 people.

"I have always been for broader use of cameras. I do not think that cameras are this big, mortal threat to civil liberties that people are painting them out to be," the July 14 issue of The Washington Post quoted Williams as saying.

Opponents of broader camera use cite figures from various British surveys which cast doubt on the idea that the systems reduce crime.

They also point out that CCTV cameras did not deter the London terror attacks.

In the United States, a country with an inbred distrust of government, the question is: "Who watches the watchers?"

"I do think it runs counter to the American ethos; the American tradition of our freewheeling national character is at risk of being chilled," said Stanley, stressing that the ACLU was not against technology being used in security but wanted checks on how it was introduced.

Police released four photographs which clearly showed the alleged perpetrators as they either prepared for or fled the scenes of the latest attempted terror strikes in the British capital on Thursday.

The closed-circuit television images showed casually dressed men -- one appearing to wear a dark-blue sweatshirt with the words "New York" emblazoned on the front -- in Underground stations and a bus.

Two of the men were wearing baseball caps. One was looking over his shoulder as he walked with a bulging rucksack on his back, while another seemed to be running through a tunnel.

~end~

Register for our Newsletter



*Email Address

Contact Us

American Policy Roundtable

11288 Alameda Drive
Strongsville, Ohio 44149
(800) 522-8683
info@aproundtable.org