

# DRAFT

## SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS – MYTHS AND REALITIES

### Backgrounder

June 2009

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“Public opinion is dependent on the extent of individual understanding or experience of the issues involved. Support for surveillance may be based on lack of knowledge about its methods, extent, or unintended consequences.” – House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Surveillance: Citizens and the State*, February 2009.

“How can the encroachment on personal freedoms which is the supposed price for greater safety and feelings of security be justified, when it seems that surveillance does not deliver?” – The Royal Academy of Engineering, *Dilemmas of Privacy and Surveillance: Challenges of Technological Change*, March 2007.

“When crime goes down, cameras get the credit; when crime goes up, it’s because there aren’t enough of them. Either way, the end result is more cameras.” – Erin Anderson, *Globe and Mail*, March 30, 2002, quoted in Matt Hern, *Watch Yourself: Why Safer Isn’t Always Better* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2007).

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### Synopsis

The City of Vancouver is planning to deploy surveillance cameras in public space during the Winter Olympic Games in February 2010, and to test the cameras at public events in the summer of 2009. While the City has described the deployment as “temporary,” it is an open question as to whether and where the cameras will be used following the period of the Games. Examples from previous Olympic host cities and elsewhere show that government bodies often continue to make use of surveillance cameras introduced for a “temporary” purpose.

In light of the City’s current plans and the question of whether government surveillance of Vancouver public space will be ongoing, it is worth examining some of the commonly held opinions about the purposes, capabilities and effectiveness of surveillance cameras. This backgrounder draws on several reports and articles, primarily from the United Kingdom, where video surveillance (also known as closed circuit television or CCTV) is used to a considerable degree by local and national government as well as by police. We can learn much from the example of the UK, particularly in terms of how public misconceptions about CCTV can shape public policy. In order for there to be a meaningful debate on surveillance cameras in Vancouver, the public needs to be well-informed on an issue that is far from straightforward.

## **Does CCTV reduce crime?**

In an article on CCTV policy in the UK, William Webster identifies what he calls several “myths” about CCTV. The first myth that Webster addresses is the effectiveness of CCTV in achieving the stated objective of reducing crime. Webster refers to several studies for his conclusion that there is no correlation between CCTV schemes and crime reduction, and that crime reduction tends to be the result of other factors. Such factors, as noted by the House of Lords in its recent report on surveillance, may include better street design / lighting and the presence of police and other officers. This conclusion is echoed in a report on surveillance and technological change by the Royal Academy of Engineering, which cites a report to the effect that “success stories ... tended to include cases where CCTV was introduced alongside other measures.” CCTV also tends to be more effective in enabling prosecutions than in preventing crime, given that many CCTV systems do not allow for an immediate response to an incident.

In Webster’s view, while CCTV is a multi-purpose policy (e.g., a tool for directing police resources and gathering intelligence), the indicators used to measure its performance often assume one primary purpose, namely the reduction of crime. As a result, Webster concludes, “the evidence-base is unreliable ... [and] has been misunderstood, misused, or even ignored by policy-makers in the policy process,” and “it becomes increasingly difficult to explain CCTV as a rational ... policy.”

## **Is public safety a matter of gathering more information?**

In his book on surveillance and safety, Matt Hern points out the circular logic used to justify CCTV: where CCTV coincides with crime reduction, a correlation is assumed, but when crime rates increase, additional CCTV is proposed as the solution. The use of CCTV is often framed as a tradeoff between privacy rights and safety, but this supposed tradeoff rests on the questionable assumption that the authorities simply require more information in order to ensure security and justice. Where the range of problems to be solved is diffuse and unclear in its scope, as Professor Clive Norris notes in the House of Lords’ report, “the temptation is to collect all information about all people.”

## **Does CCTV make people feel safe?**

The House of Lords refers in its report to the idea that CCTV makes people feel safer. Aside from the question of whether this perception of safety is borne out by the facts (as discussed below), it is even questionable whether CCTV is effective in reassuring people. The Royal Academy cites research indicating that people prefer “natural” to “electronic” surveillance, and that police patrols are more effective than CCTV in making people feel safe.

## **When people say they support CCTV, do they understand what they’re supporting?**

Webster highlights the considerable variation between different types of CCTV systems, which is at odds with the general perception that systems are constantly monitored and

that following an incident an appropriate response will be forthcoming. While some systems are proactive, with live monitoring and immediate response, many are reactive, with recordings that may be accessed after an event has occurred, and some are even non-active, using fake cameras as a visual deterrent. The Royal Academy notes that the term “CCTV” itself is increasingly a misnomer, given the increasing number of systems using networked digital cameras, which have much greater flexibility in terms of storing, transmitting and searching for images. As the Royal Academy notes, “The continued use of the term is an indicator of a general lack of awareness of the nature of contemporary surveillance, and disguises the kinds of purposes, dangers and possibilities of current technologies.”

In the words of Professor Angela Sasse, quoted in the House of Lords’ report, “Very often, where people say they do not actually care about [privacy], it is because people are not very good at assessing risks in the future, because they have not experienced the impact or nobody they know well whom they would understand and empathise with has experienced these bad effects.” The Royal Academy cites a study arguing that CCTV operators in the UK engage in racial and socio-economic profiling, with ethnic minorities being disproportionately targeted for surveillance. This is a reminder that CCTV, like many other forms of technology, is not neutral or impartial but rather is affected by the assumptions and prejudices of individual policy makers and officials.

## **Conclusion**

In calling for “an open debate on the acceptability and usefulness of surveillance,” the Royal Academy stresses that the “worst way to deal with” the questions of whether CCTV brings significant benefits and whether those benefits outweigh the limitations imposed on individual rights “is to ignore them on the basis that it seems obvious that increased surveillance will mean decreased crime or on the basis that increased surveillance is inevitable or unstoppable.” While video surveillance by public authorities in the UK is already extensive, there is more of a chance in Vancouver to conduct the debate at a relatively early stage of the policy process. This backgrounder is intended to help ensure that the debate includes a thoughtful look at some of the assumptions or myths associated with CCTV.