

Closed Circuit Television  
S u r v e i l l a n c e  
of Public Space  
in Vancouver

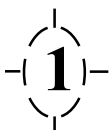
A Brief Overview of Evidence from the UK  
& Arguments About its Use in the Downtown  
Eastside

Carnegie Community Action Project  
July, 1999

The Vancouver Police Department is proposing a Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) system to combat criminal behaviour in the Downtown Eastside. While the goal is laudable, we believe the police have left too many unanswered questions about CCTV. Without more research and public debate, neither the City of Vancouver nor the Police Department should give this proposal any further consideration. CCTV has implications for the use and governance of public space that reach far beyond the Downtown Eastside. And while the police promise only good results for the neighbourhood itself, it is evident that, in the medium-term, CCTV will have deleterious consequences for the many residents of the neighbourhood with low incomes.

In light of this, the Carnegie Community Action Project has started looking at research and analysis of CCTV systems. This overview is a very preliminary report of what we have found. It is offered as the first step in a *community-initiated* critical discussion about CCTV and its potential effects on the Downtown Eastside and the entire city.

## OVERVIEW



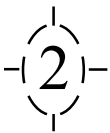
The Vancouver Police Department's (VPD) report, which proposes a CCTV system for use in the Downtown Eastside, suggests a straightforward, unilinear connection between CCTV and

crime reduction. Further, it suggests that displacement of crime is not a factor. However, the link between CCTV, crime reduction, and crime displacement is more complex than the report infers

Most evidence on the effectiveness of CCTV as a crime-fighting technology is from the UK. The vast bulk of this evidence has been gathered by the agencies which either fund these highly expensive systems (in the UK, this has been through the Home Office) or have purchased them (local authorities). There is thus a notable degree of self-interest in proving that they work. Most of the VPD testimony regarding crime reduction effects is from the security industry, as well as British political sources, two obvious sectors with vested interests in the proliferation of CCTV (see section 3, below).

Much evidence has been based on aggregate data derived from simple analyses of crime statistics in areas of CCTV coverage before and after camera installation. Data frequently covers only very short time-frames. Such dubious methodology has been described by British criminologists as ‘wholly unreliable’ and ‘post hoc shoestring efforts by the untrained and self-interested practitioner’.<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, however, even Home Office research has not been able to ignore the mixed bag of CCTV effects, not all of them desirable.<sup>2</sup>



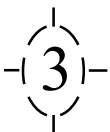
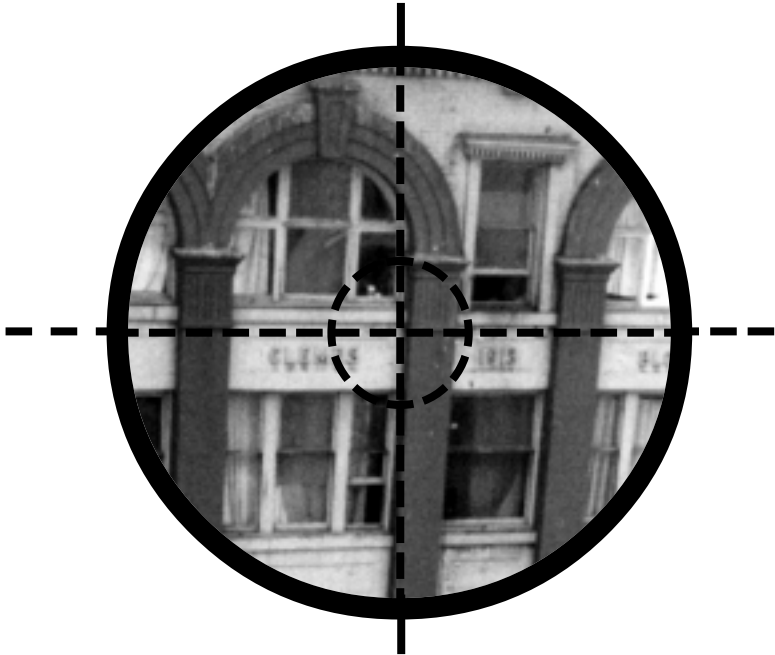
The direct link between CCTV and reductions in criminal activities starts to come apart when data are subjected to rigorous evaluation by independent observers.

In a study of CCTV in Airdrie, which had Scotland’s first such program, researchers discovered that a decline in crime rates attributed to surveillance included variations among different categories of crime. While so-called crimes of dishonesty, including theft and robbery declined, some of this decline was due to displacement. Public order crimes, on the other, skyrocketed.<sup>3</sup> Another independent study, reported in the *Electronic Telegraph* (a source for the VPD report), noted quite the reverse effect in the south London Borough of Sutton. In this instance *theft and muggings actually increased* in the area under CCTV

coverage, while the overall decrease in crime was greater outside the area of coverage than within!<sup>4</sup>

The displacement effect of CCTV should be of serious concern for there is evidence not only that it militates against crime reduction effects of cameras, but also that it fuels demand for the extension of video surveillance. In Doncaster, South Yorkshire, displacement of crime from the town centre toward peripheral areas meant that the overall reduction in the crime rate was rather minimal, offsetting the

decline in the area under CCTV coverage.<sup>5</sup> In Newcastle-on-Tyne, heralded as a major success-story for CCTV, displacement has apparently helped produce public pressure for more video cameras to cover increasingly wider areas.<sup>6</sup>



The rapid proliferation of CCTV schemes in the UK seems to have been politically-driven. Both the Conservative Party, which sought to recapture its image as the party law and order, and Labour, which has successfully lifted this mantle, have used

endorsements and funding of CCTV to prove their “get tough” approaches to crime. Under the Tories, 78% of the Home Office crime prevention budget was expended on CCTV funding.<sup>7</sup>

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Despite the purported effectiveness of CCTV at least two major British cities, Manchester and Leeds, have rejected it. In the USA, the Oakland, California, police also rejected CCTV. The Oakland Police Chief told that city’s politicians: “... there is no conclusive way to establish that the presence of video surveillance cameras resulted in the prevention or reduction of crime.”<sup>8</sup> In each of these cases, according to reports, police have opted for programs that require more intensive community involvement.

In Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, the VPD has also undertaken innovative policing responded to long-concerns. For together with health authorities, the pressure on bar totally eliminated incidents over the police are also with other authorities the owners of some room occupancy effort has produced some tangible improvements in conditions at a number of these locations.

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Police Chief,  
Oakland California

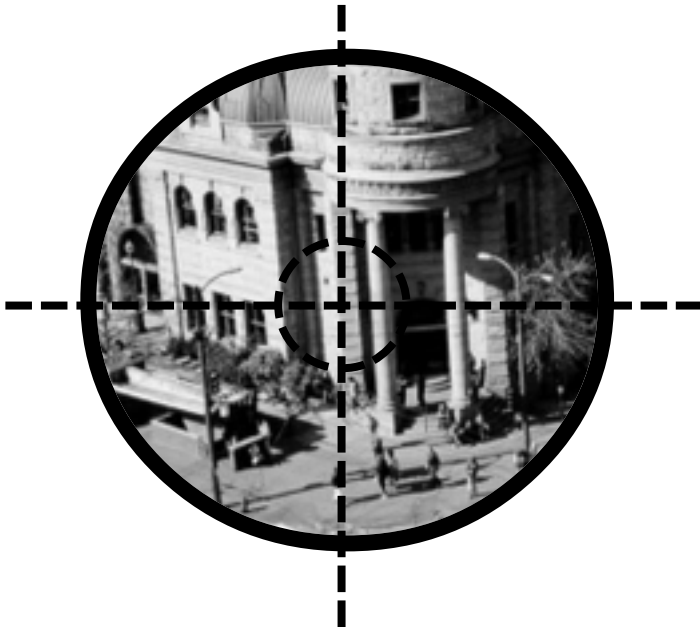
measures that have time community example, by working and licensing police have exerted operators and have bar-related knife past 18 months. The working in conjunction to impose pressure on of the worst single (SRO) hotels. This

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Both empirical evidence and theoretical considerations raise questions about the deployment of CCTV as an exclusionary device. This has potentially serious ramifications with regard to the Downtown Eastside.

Any discussion of CCTV that uses evidence from the UK must take note of the three primary types of sites of British surveillance schemes. First, there are the town centres, where CCTV was viewed as a means

of business regeneration. Here, surveillance provides the basis for a ‘feel-good factor’ that is supposed to promote the revival of city centre shopping by making consumers feel more secure. In practice, it appears that this has involved CCTV-facilitated crack-downs on so-called public order and nuisance offences as well as targeting of specific age or ethnic groups by surveillance monitors.<sup>9</sup> Second, middle and upper



class residential areas in the UK are also adopting video surveillancesystems. In each case, CCTV would seem to operate as a force of exclusion on moral, as well as legal grounds, leading to the promotion of conformity in behaviour and appearance.

Third, working class housing estates have become key sites for surveillance, including the deployment of pinhole or keyhole cameras, which are designed to be secret or hidden to the casual observer. There is debate about whether the effect (intended or otherwise) of CCTV in such cases is to disperse crime or contain it.<sup>10</sup>

# DISCUSSION

The question of whether CCTV does, indeed, create a field of exclusion within the range of its cameras, either by intent or as an unintended consequence, should in itself provide sufficient reason to more closely examine its use in the Downtown Eastside.

It is important to understand that, despite the poverty of the majority of residents and the poor housing conditions which continue to prevail here, the Downtown Eastside is not the classic abandoned inner city slum. Rather, it is a hotly contested site that offers the potential for some people — developers, property-owners, tourist-operators — to make a lot of money at the expense of the current resident population. One person's 'revitalization' or 'improvement' means the eviction and displacement of another.

The community is being squeezed by property development and tourist business on all sides. The main reason for empty buildings and vacant store fronts real estate *speculation* rather than abandonment. The key form of housing stock in the neighbourhood, SRO hotels, has been eroded with increasing rapidity via conversion to tourist accommodation. This SRO stock is Vancouver's last remaining defense against the scale of homelessness that we see in Toronto.

Meanwhile, the Downtown Eastside is regularly demonized in local and national media as 'skid road' and 'the worst place ... in the entire country'.

The use of CCTV in this situation potentially brings the worst of all possible worlds to the Downtown Eastside. It provides no new housing or employment opportunities to the people who live in the neighbourhood. It offers no means of improving living conditions inside SRO hotels. Indeed, some people have suggested that it might push illegal activities off the streets and into people's living spaces.

Rather than targeting business-operators or landlords who take advantage of poverty and addictions, it focuses on the behaviour of those individuals who do not fit the expectations or mores of the camera monitors. In so doing, it bolsters those elements in the city who promote gentrification and tourist development as the solutions to social problems in the Downtown

Eastside by increasing pressure to expel individuals whose behaviour does not fit the model of the residential property-owner, the shopper or tourist. The use of private security in Gastown and Chinatown is indicative of this trend.

Given the large-scale evictions of residents from Granville Street SRO hotels, to make way for tourists, it is hard to take seriously the assertions that CCTV offers only benign consequences. The current round of Granville Street evictions are the outcome of a process that started some 14 years ago, when police and planning officials inaugurated a 'clean-up' campaign which initially resulted in the shift of Granville's long-time heroin trade to Hastings St. The migration of the soft-drug trade from the Granville mall to Pigeon Park followed shortly thereafter. The rest is history.

CCTV promises to accelerate this process in the Downtown Eastside. Like any new technology, it will be utilized most successfully by those with the most social power. An image of crime-fighting technology is designed to appeal to a broad audience yet the forms of conduct that it targets will inevitably be defined by, groups with money and property. Taken in context with the pervasive conflict over space in the Downtown Eastside, video surveillance offers a weapon promoting displacement (intentionally or not) of poor people.

The VPD has shown that, with a little imagination, it can respond effectively to problems, which the community has identified, and that it can do so by working *with* the community (see section 4, above). However, this is a labour-intensive process at a time when the police are threatened with cutbacks. CCTV offers the police a long-term means of monitoring behaviour with minimal presence. Unfortunately, this is not what the Downtown Eastside or Vancouver presently need.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cited in Nick Fyfe and Jon Bannister, 1996, *City Watching: closed circuit television surveillance in public spaces*. *Area* 28, 1, 37-46.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. David Millward, 1996, 'TV cameras have limited effect on town centre crime'. *Electronic Telegraph, Home News*, 2 January ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)).
- <sup>3</sup> Jason Ditton and Emma Short, 1998, *Evaluating Scotland's first town centre CCTV scheme*. In Clive Norris, Jade Moran and Gary Armstrong, *Surveillance, Closed Circuit Television and Social Control*. Ashgate: Aldershot.
- <sup>4</sup> Millward, 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> David Skinnis, 1998, *Crime reduction, diffusion and displacement: evaluating the effectiveness of CCTV*. In Norris, Moran and Armstrong.
- <sup>6</sup> *Electronic Telegraph*, 1996, 'Newcastle: Public want more cameras'. *Home News*, 2 January ([www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)).
- <sup>7</sup> Stephen J. Fay, 1998, *Tough on Crime, Tough on Civil Liberties: Some Negative Aspects of Britain's Wholesale Adoption of CCTV Surveillance During the 1990s*. *International Review of Law, Computers and Technology*, 12, 2, pp. 315-347.
- <sup>8</sup> On Manchester and Leeds, see Stephen Graham, John Brooks and Dan Heery, 1996, *Towns on Television: Closed Circuit Television in British Towns and Cities*. *Local Government Studies*, 22, 3, pp. 1-27; on Oakland, see American Civil Liberties Union, 1997, 'Oakland City Kills Video Surveillance Project; ACLU Cites Important Lessons for Other Cities'. *Freedom Network News* ([www.aclu.org/news/n902297a.html](http://www.aclu.org/news/n902297a.html)).
- <sup>9</sup> John Bannister, Nicholas Fyfe and Ade Kearns, 1998, *Closed circuit television and the city*. In Norris, Moran and Armstrong; Graham, Brooks and Heery, 1996; Fay, 1998.
- <sup>10</sup> Fay, 1998; Graham, Brooks and Heery, 1996.