



Surveillance Is Not Safety

FACTSHEET: The Dangers of Live Facial Recognition Technology & Cell-Site Simulators in New Orleans

For the past few months, City Council members Oliver Thomas and Eugene Green have been working on an ordinance to officially grant New Orleans police and other law enforcement agencies the full authority to use around-the-clock facial recognition technology and cell-site simulators to surveil people in public.^{1 2 3} This dangerous expansion of surveillance technology would violate our fundamental constitutional rights against warrantless search and seizure, and threaten the safety, privacy, and civil liberties of residents and visitors to New Orleans.

The work on this ordinance comes on the heels of an alarming May 2025 article that exposed an undisclosed partnership between the New Orleans Police Department and Project NOLA, a privately owned and operated network of more than 200 facial recognition cameras that scanned the faces of countless individuals without their knowledge or consent, compared them against a list of suspects, and sent potential matches to New Orleans police officers via an app.⁴ This backdoor partnership persisted for two years despite violating a 2022 city policy that forbids the use of automated facial recognition technology for ongoing surveillance.⁵ This is just one example of NOPD's extensive track record of overreach and discriminatory abuse. And instead of holding law enforcement accountable, this ordinance will bolster the NOPD's surveillance powers and further erode data protections established in 2020, which banned facial recognition, cell-site simulators, predictive policing, and characteristic tracking software.^{6 7}

City Council members Thomas and Green have stated that they are making edits to the ordinance to ensure that access to facial recognition technology and cell-site simulators includes protections for civil liberties.⁸ We know that no amount of guardrails can make facial recognition and cell-site simulators safe for our communities. Surveillance technologies pose a significant threat to our safety, privacy, and civil liberties – and should be banned outright.

¹ French, Piper. "New Orleans May Hand Its Police Live Facial Recognition Tech. Critics Warn It'll Help ICE." *Bolts Mag*, 15 August 2025, <https://boltsmag.org/new-orleans-live-facial-recognition-and-immigration/>.

² "Face Recognition." *Street Level Surveillance*, <https://sls.eff.org/technologies/face-recognition>.

³ "Cell-Site Simulators/ IMSI Catchers." *Street Level Surveillance*, <https://sls.eff.org/technologies/cell-site-simulators-imsi-catchers>.

⁴ MacMillan, Douglas, and Aaron Schaffer. "Police secretly monitored New Orleans with facial recognition cameras." *The Washington Post*, 19 May 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2025/05/19/live-facial-recognition-police-new-orleans/>.

⁵ French, Piper. "New Orleans May Hand Its Police Live Facial Recognition Tech. Critics Warn It'll Help ICE." *Bolts Mag*, 15 August 2025, <https://boltsmag.org/new-orleans-live-facial-recognition-and-immigration/>.

⁶ O'Connor, Meg. "Report: Nearly 200 New Orleans Cops Were Accused Of Sexual Misconduct, Domestic Violence, or Harassment." *The Appeal*, 7 March 2023, <https://theappeal.org/nopd-sexual-misconduct-rodney-vicknair/>.

⁷ "Ord. 33021, passed in December 2020, banned four technologies that infringe upon our civil liberties and have built-in racial bias, & secured common sense data protections for the 21st century." <https://eyeonsurveillance.org/program/ordinance>.

⁸ Thomas, Oliver, and Eugene Green. *Ordinance 35137*. 12 June 2025,

https://cityofno.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=42&clip_id=5134&meta_id=744702



Why should New Orleans reject any implementation or expansion of live facial recognition programs, cell-site simulators, and other surveillance technologies?

Guardrails are not sufficiently strong to withstand state and federal laws.

- In a moment when we are witnessing federal agents detaining and deporting thousands of migrants, even those here legally, without due process, city ordinance protections will not withstand state and federal laws.⁹ The mass collection of people's biometrics and location information would create a database that could be accessed by State Police, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and other federal agencies seeking to harass and target migrants or anyone who is deemed a threat.
- Earlier this year, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) began work on an inter-agency database that combines data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), as well as voting records.¹⁰ It is impossible to imagine that the data collected in New Orleans won't be shared and accessed across agencies, regardless of any legal guardrails.
- ICE has moved aggressively to obtain sensitive data from police and other city departments, including in places where local officials have been reluctant to hand it over.^{11 12}
- A new state law, Act 399 (SB 15), which took effect on August 1, 2025, establishes criminal penalties for law enforcement officials who decline ICE requests for cooperation.¹³

Facial recognition technology is highly flawed, amplifies bias, leads to wrongful criminalization, and perpetuates systemic patterns of racial discrimination.

- Time and again, facial recognition has misidentified people of color, facilitated gender bias, and led to wrongful criminalization and incarceration.^{14 15 16}

⁹ Bryant, Erica. "What Does "Due Process" Mean for Immigrants and Why Is It Important?" Vera Institute, 4 June 2025, <https://www.vera.org/news/what-does-due-process-mean-for-immigrants-and-why-is-it-important>.

¹⁰ Kelly, Makena, and Vittoria Elliot. "DOGE Is Building a Master Database to Surveil and Track Immigrants." *WIRED*, 18 April 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/doge-collecting-immigrant-data-surveil-track/>.

¹¹ "Deportation Data Centers: How Fusion Centers Circumvent Sanctuary City Laws — S.T.O.P." *The Surveillance Technology Oversight Project*, <https://www.stopspying.org/deportation-data-centers>.

¹² Yin, Alice. "City mum on what documents it provided ICE in Streets and Sanitation subpoena." *Chicago Tribune*, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/06/24/city-documents-ice-streets-and-sanitation-subpoena/>.

¹³ Act No. 399. Senate Bill No. 15. <https://www.Legis.La.Gov/Legis/Viewdocument.aspx?D=1425927>.

¹⁴ Cranmore, Crystal. "Man's wrongful arrest puts NYPD's use of facial recognition tech under scrutiny." *abc7NY*, 27 August 2025, <https://abc7ny.com/post/man-falsely-jailed-nypds-facial-recognition-surveillance-tech-failed/17664671/>.

¹⁵ Damiani, Jesse, et al. "New Research Reveals Facial Recognition Software Misclassifies Transgender, Non-Binary People." *Forbes*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jessedamiani/2019/10/29/new-research-reveals-facial-recognition-software-misclassifies-transgender-non-binary-people/?sh=49093cc4606b>.

¹⁶ "Arrested by AI." *The Washington Post*, 14 January 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcasts/post-reports/arrested-by-ai/>.

- In 2022, law enforcement in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, used facial recognition technology to wrongfully jail Randal Reid for two local crimes, despite him never having set foot in the state.¹⁷
- Even the Detroit Police Department confirms that 96% of results are misidentifications.¹⁸
- In addition to the flaws in the technology, surveillance cameras are disproportionately installed in Black and Brown neighborhoods, further increasing the chances that Black and Brown residents will be targeted and wrongfully criminalized.¹⁹

Surveillance technology is weaponized to target marginalized communities, workers, activists, and others deemed a threat by those who employ the technologies.

- ICE is currently using the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's facial recognition system, which takes photos of people when they enter or exit the U.S., to target migrants.²⁰ Congress has never approved this dangerous practice, which demonstrates the ease with which a single massive biometric database system can be built for one reason and instantly repurposed for another.
- Cell-site simulators, also known as Stingrays or IMSI catchers, masquerade as legitimate cell phone towers, tricking phones within a certain radius into connecting to the device rather than a legitimate tower. A 2023 report by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of the Inspector General (DHS OIG) revealed that the United States Secret Service and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (ICE HSI) had illegally used cell-site simulators without a court order to obtain real-time cell phone device locations.²¹
- Facial recognition and other surveillance technologies are also weaponized against trans community members,²² abortion seekers,²³ labor movement leaders,²⁴ and have been used to target activists exercising their right to free speech.²⁵

¹⁷ "A bad facial recognition match costs Jefferson Parish Sheriff Joe Lopinto's office. See how much." NOLA.com, 18 June 2025, https://www.nola.com/news/jefferson_parish/facial-recognition-sheriff/article_3ed262bc-e360-4383-82fb-728b3783cb93.html.

¹⁸ Koebler, Jason. "Detroit Police Chief: Facial Recognition Software Misidentifies 96% of the Time." Vice, 29 June 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/detroit-police-chief-facial-recognition-software-misidentifies-96-of-the-time/>.

¹⁹ Crockford, Kade. "How is Face Recognition Surveillance Technology Racist? | American Civil Liberties Union." ACLU, 16 June 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/how-is-face-recognition-surveillance-technology-racist>.

²⁰ Cox, Joseph. "ICE Is Using a New Facial Recognition App to Identify People, Leaked Emails Show." 404 Media, 26 June 2025, <https://www.404media.co/ice-is-using-a-new-facial-recognition-app-to-identify-people-leaked-emails-show/>.

²¹ *Secret Service and ICE Did Not Always Adhere to Statute and Policies Governing Use of Cell-Site Simulators (REDACTED)*. 23 February 2023, <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2023-03/OIG-23-17-Feb23-Redacted.pdf>.

²² Kladzyk, René. "Policing Gender: How Surveillance Tech Aids Enforcement of Anti-Trans Laws." POGO Project on Government Oversight, 28 June 2023, <https://www.pogo.org/investigations/policing-gender-how-surveillance-tech-aids-enforcement-of-anti-trans-laws>.

²³ "Cellphone location data used to target abortion misinformation to visitors at 600 reproductive health clinics in 48 states." ACLU Massachusetts, 13 February 2024, <https://www.aclum.org/en/press-releases/cellphone-location-data-used-target-abortion-misinformation-visitors>.

²⁴ Green, Ken. "The Role of AI in Union Busting: How Employers Use Artificial Intelligence to Keep Workers From Unionizing." Union Track, 5 December 2023, <https://uniontrack.com/blog/union-busting#:~:text=The%20approach%20is%20an%20obvious,workers%20in%20a%20break%20room.%E2%80%9D>.

²⁵ Mahajan, Ilica, et al. "The high-tech tools behind cops' protest surveillance." The Marshall Project, 12 November 2024, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/11/12/protest-surveillance-technologies>.



The costs of this dangerous technology deplete city funding that could be better spent on education, job creation, and other essential community services.

- This past June, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, was ordered to pay \$200,000 in a civil rights lawsuit for wrongfully incarcerating Randal Reid due to the use of facial recognition technology.²⁶ In 2021, the City of Tacoma, Washington, paid \$311,607 for improperly withholding information related to its use of a cell site simulator, which included hundreds of uses without the court or the public's knowledge, and on behalf of other cities and counties.²⁷
- Although there is no definitive national database of litigation and the settled lawsuit amounts, these cases, along with several high-profile lawsuits, reveal a growing pattern of civil lawsuits stemming from wrongful arrests due to facial recognition technology and unwarranted surveillance through cell-site simulators.²⁸
- In 2024, more than 250 pages of public comments were collected to express community opposition to a proposed drone surveillance program by the New Orleans Police Department. As one community resident stated, *"I would much prefer the money be spent on public transportation, health care, or even fixing the pothole the size of Texas on my block."*²⁹ Like drones, facial recognition and cell-site simulators are surveillance technologies that do not offer cost benefits to the community and, in fact, bring significant harm.

Who Benefits?

- Surveillance technology is a multibillion-dollar industry fueled by the collection, analysis, and sale of data from a wide range of sources.³⁰
- Large technology companies, data brokers, government contractors, and private companies are profiting from surveillance technologies – often deployed without thorough testing, utilized despite inaccuracies, and dangerously unregulated, with little to no oversight.
- Numerous reports have uncovered the far-right agenda of these technologies, including the intention to target immigrants and the political left.³¹

²⁶ "A bad facial recognition match costs Jefferson Parish Sheriff Joe Lopinto's office. See how much." NOLA.com, 18 June 2025, https://www.nola.com/news/jefferson_parrish/facial-recognition-sheriff/article_3ed262bc-e360-4383-82fb-728b3783cb93.html.

²⁷ *City of Tacoma to pay more than \$311,000 in Stingray public records case.* 5 October 2021, [https://www.aclu-wa.org/press-releases/city-tacoma-pay-more-311000-stingray-public-records-case/#:~:text=Press%20Releases-,City%20of%20Tacoma%20to%20pay%20more%20than%20\\$311%2C000%20in%20Stingray,cell%20site%20simulator%20since%202008.](https://www.aclu-wa.org/press-releases/city-tacoma-pay-more-311000-stingray-public-records-case/#:~:text=Press%20Releases-,City%20of%20Tacoma%20to%20pay%20more%20than%20$311%2C000%20in%20Stingray,cell%20site%20simulator%20since%202008.)

²⁸ ACLU, <https://www.aclu.org/court-cases?issue=face-recognition-technology>.

²⁹ *Emails Against NOPD's Use of Drones.*

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24254713-emails-against-nopds-use-of-drones/?responsive=1&title=1>.

³⁰ "How companies make money tracking you." 5 August 2025,

<https://techequity.us/2025/08/05/surveillance-economy/#:~:text=Employers%20try%20to%20cut%20down,you%20probably%20are%20the%20p>roduct.

³¹ Mother Jones. "The Shocking Far-Right Agenda Behind the Facial Recognition Tech Used by ICE and the FBI." May June 2025,

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/04/clearview-ai-immigration-ice-fbi-surveillance-facial-recognition-hoan-ton-that-hal-lambert-trump/>

- Historians and academics, including the author of Dark Matters, Simone Browne, have documented how modern surveillance is rooted in the violent practices used to track and monitor the movement of enslaved Africans during chattel slavery.³² Over time, surveillance has evolved from Lantern Laws, Branding, Runaway Slave Ads, and other violent practices to today's pervasive tech weapons deployed by police systems in partnership with private corporations.

Recommendations

It is the job of our elected officials to protect our freedoms, defend our dignity, and keep us safe. The only way to protect New Orleans and its visitors is to prevent the implementation of tech surveillance weapons in the first place. New Orleans was once at the forefront of protecting its residents and visitors from tech surveillance when it adopted Ordinance 33201 in December 2020, banning facial recognition, cell-site simulators, predictive policing, and characteristic tracking software.³³ Although this ordinance was revised in 2022 to allow law enforcement access to facial-recognition technology when investigating violent crimes after they have occurred, New Orleans has ***never authorized*** the use of around-the-clock facial recognition technology or cell-site simulators for ongoing surveillance. Moving to expand this dangerous technology further would be steps backwards in keeping NOLA safe, and would put our entire community in serious and unwarranted risk.³⁴

It is incumbent on local elected officials to do everything in their power to prevent more sources of harmful data collection and instead move to expand protections against surveillance and infringement of people's freedom.

Community members are clear on their position on surveillance tech and recommend:³⁵

- No introduction of any ordinance considering the implementation or expansion of live facial recognition technology, cell-site simulators, or any other surveillance technology.
- An assessment and expansion of current protections against surveillance in New Orleans.
- The reallocation of funds away from surveillance tech and towards community needs like education, housing, and supporting workers in the tourism industry.

³² Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters - On the Surveillance of Blackness*. 2015.

³³ Eye on Surveillance, <https://eyeonsurveillance.org/program/ordinance>

³⁴ *Ordinance 33809*. https://cityofno.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=42&clip_id=4142&meta_id=591807.

³⁵ Granger, Chris and Edith Romero. "Guest column: Expanding facial recognition is a bad move for New Orleans. Here's why." *NOLA.com*, 15 August 2025, https://www.nola.com/opinions/guest_columns/politics-new-orleans-technology/article_6ce49381-3323-4b67-9e1e-575f9f361595.html#tncms-source=opinion-featured.



About Us

This factsheet was compiled by Eye on Surveillance, Fight for the Future, and MediaJustice, based on years of documentation, research, and analysis of surveillance expansion across the United States.