



## **Police Use License Plate Readers To 'Grid' Neighborhoods**

Chances are your city is already hoovering up license plate images on every street, but there are few regulations to prevent it. Any city council could stop this unConstitutional practice cold, if they would dare to make a protest. □ TN Editor

Every shift in Chandler, police officers in cars equipped with special cameras can be seen driving up and down every street in a neighborhood, gathering data on every vehicle in the area.

The cameras, known as automated license plate readers, or ALPRs, scan license plates of nearby cars, capturing images not only of the license plate number, but also recording where the vehicle is located and the time of day, among other things.

As part of the training for the ALPR systems, Chandler officers are taught to “grid” neighborhoods during their downtime – systematically driving up and down every street in an area, indiscriminately scooping up information on vehicles – not because of any suspected criminal activity, but because the information might be useful in future criminal investigations.

The practice is worrisome for civil liberties advocates, who view the sweeping data collection as too expansive.

“Historically, police officers could go out and look for license plate numbers, walk or drive up and down the streets in the whole neighborhood to do that, but until you had this technologies, there were physical limitations to that,” said Jared Keenan, Criminal Justice Staff Attorney at ACLU of Arizona. “You had to have officers go out and do it, and it naturally limited how much information they could gather.”

Automated readers, on the other hand, can gather [thousands of records a second](#), which Keenan says is scary.

Chandler Police Department’s Commander Ed Upshaw said that ALPRs do not capture individuals, and that collecting data on what cars are where at specific times can create investigative leads.

“If your vehicle is parked in a public place or visible from a publicly accessible place, it can be recorded by anyone. Is there a reason a YouTuber can record but police cannot?” he told the *Mirror* in a written statement. Chandler Police Department officials would not agree to an interview.

But critics say there is a difference.

“When the government is indiscriminately gathering massive amounts of data like this, it can provide very intimate insight into people’s lives,” Keenan said.

For instance, law enforcement can use ALPR data to determine the places people frequent, with whom they associate, what doctors they go to and what religious services they attend.

Additionally, Keenan said, when these types of technologies are deployed without reasonable suspicion, implicit and explicit bias can mean that police deploy this technology more heavily in poor neighborhoods and communities of color. For example, police could grid low-income or minority neighborhoods more often, which could lead to over-policing of those neighborhoods—even if there are just as many crimes in rich, white areas.

This has played out in Oakland, where police disproportionately captured ALPR data in low-income communities and communities of color, [according to a week's worth of 2014 data analyzed by the Electronic Frontier Foundation](#). And in 2016, a [BuzzFeed investigation](#) found that ALPRs in Port Arthur, Texas, were primarily used to track down unpaid traffic citation arrests, leading to the incarceration of mostly black residents.

ALPR devices [are marketed](#) as ways for police to “develop more leads and solve more cases” for a variety of crimes, ranging from murders to kidnappings, and organized crime to terrorism. But some Arizona contracts for automated license plate readers, including those in Mesa and Chandler, were provided through a grant from the Arizona Automobile Theft Authority, because one of the primary uses of ALPR is to identify and recover stolen vehicles. In Chandler, where the first two 3M PIPS LPR systems and Vigilant Solutions subscription came from these grants, police officers were instructed to send one-sentence emails with report numbers and how Vigilant Solutions helped their investigation, not just for arrests but also for locating stolen vehicles.

The expansion of the license plate reader program and maintenance of the systems in Chandler has come from Federal Justice Assistance Grants, according to Commander Upshaw.

The longer ALPR data is retained, the more likely it is to be misused or [exposed in a data breach](#). While some cities have policies to retain license plate data for only six or 12 months, some police departments don't appear to have retention policies at all. And though police departments with retention schedules all indicated that records are purged automatically, public records indicate that only a single

department has ever conducted an audit - and the last one was conducted in 2015.

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