

Automated License Plate Readers

12 reasons why Austin should not authorize a new ALPR contract

July 2022

Summary: The city of Austin must reject Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs) contracts because they threaten residents' rights and safety and promote profiling in Black and Brown neighborhoods. As more evidence emerges about the lack of efficacy of ALPRs, it is against our interests to invest our funds in technologies that have no value for its residents.

1. *ALPR's generate millions of data points on the movement of people not suspected of violating any law.* Data shows that an extremely small percentage of vehicles are connected to criminal activity. An examination of ALPR data shows that it **does not generate investigative leads as promised nor validate the cost.**

Illinois: In 2021, Transparency Chicago released [ALPR data](#) collected from 20 Illinois local police departments, all of which had spent tens of thousands of dollars into ALPR. The hit ratio (fraction of detections of interest to law enforcement) NEVER exceeded .5 percent.

“Together, these agencies recorded over 414 million license plate detections in 2020. However, only a small fraction of these detections, 0.22%, were vehicles of interest to law enforcement (reported stolen, wanted in connection with crimes, AMBER alerts, etc).”

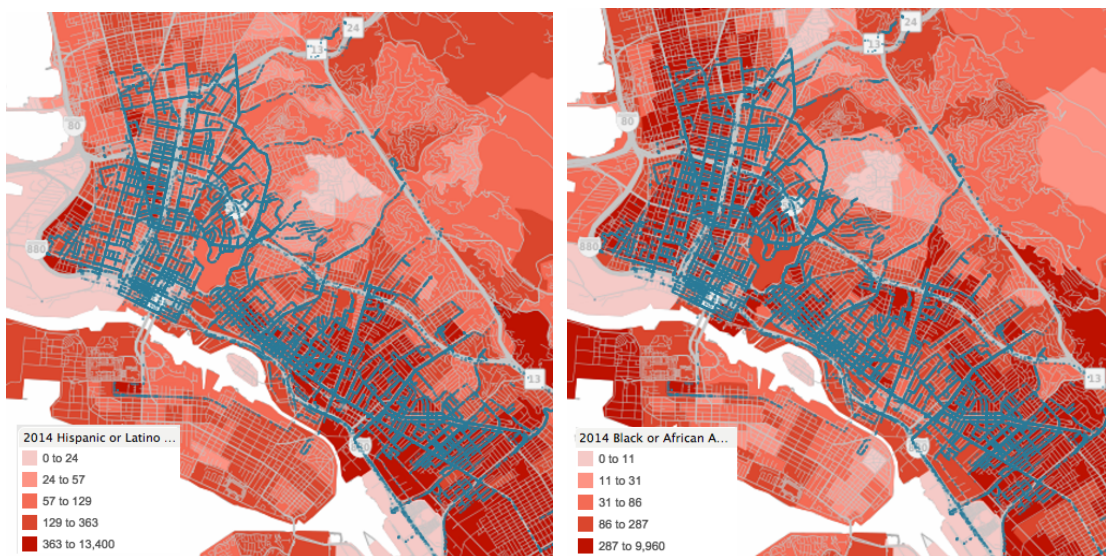
Piedmont, CA: A November 2021 [study](#) reviewed the investigative leads generated by the ALPRs and the recovery of stolen cars in the City of Piedmont between the years 2013–2019, while comparing occurrences of motor vehicle theft before and after the ALPRs, between 2004–2020. Among other troubling findings, the ratio of Piedmont's ALPR systems license plate hits-to-investigative leads for law enforcement was subjectively low, **less than 0.3%** of hits equate to leads and the positive correlation between license plate hits and investigative leads is weak.

“The market value of recovered stolen vehicles during the years observed exceeds the city’s costs to purchase the cameras, but given the absence of evidence of a casual relationship between ALPRs and recovered vehicles, it is not suggested that the costs to the city have been recuperated.”

This is the latest in a series of studies showing that an [extremely small percentage](#) of cars scanned are connected to any crime or wrongdoing.

TOWN/CITY	COLLECTION PERIOD	PLATE READS STORED	HIT RATE
Burbank, IL ⁱ	August 2011– July 2012	██████████	0.3%
Rhinebeck, NY ⁱⁱ	January– March 2012	██████████	0.01%
High Point, NC ⁱⁱⁱ	August 2011– June 2012	██████████	0.08%

2. More studies show that ALPRs have an inconsistent or unclear impact of clearance on crimes. A recent [study](#) found “little clear evidence for the crime prevention efficacy of using LPRs in general patrol, which is a common practice in the USA. Police and researchers should give more attention to testing the relative benefits of different LPR uses and modes of deployment.” They can also [reduce trust in police](#).
3. ALPR’s [disproportionately surveil](#) neighborhoods that are low income and communities of color, as shown by these maps of Oakland. This exacerbates criminalization of already over-policed communities.



4. *Location data could be shared with ICE for civil immigration enforcement, leading to separating families through detention and deportation.* Because of Texas law SB4, many types of police-ICE cooperation cannot be banned. APD [has shared information with ICE](#) through the ARIC Fusion Center with only an A#, which is not associated with any criminal case.
5. *ALPRs may be used by police and anti-abortion groups who seek to surveil, arrest, or prosecute women seeking abortion services [across state lines](#).* This possibility is increasing as [states like Texas](#) attempt to pass laws that will criminalize this conduct. Even if abortion cases are not prosecuted in Austin, this data would have already been collected and shared with dozens of other police departments in surrounding areas through the ARIC Fusion Center.
6. *ALPR's have been used to surveil people engaging in protected First Amendment speech.* In Virginia, police [scanned license plates](#) of people attending political rallies for Barack Obama and Sarah Palin, and of [environmental activists](#) conducting a nonviolence training in Denver. APD has a recent history of this; leaked information [revealed](#) surveillance of BLM protests and a Juneteenth event.
7. *The ALPRs are vulnerable to misuse.* Just last month, an [officer](#) improperly accessed a license plate database to provide his friend, who owned a delivery-car service, with the name and address of someone who was allegedly involved in a car accident with one of the service's employees. Also, errors within ALPR systems have caused [harm](#).
8. *Texas doesn't have an ALPR statute to ensure **privacy and security**.* At least 16 states have [statutes](#) regulating how ALPRs capture, use and retain license plate readers. Texas does not have one. Moreover, Texas privacy and cybersecurity laws are inadequate. One is facing legal [challenges](#) and other laws are not protective enough.
9. *Even where state statutes exist, **two state auditors recently found problems** with the use and data retention policies of ALPRs.* A [California State Audit](#) (2020) examined four jurisdictions' use of this tech and found the following: (1) the data collected is primarily not related to individuals suspected of crimes. (2) Many agencies did not implement privacy-protective oversight measures, despite laws requiring it; (3) Several agencies did not have documented usage or retention policies; (4) Many agencies lack guarantees that the stored data is appropriately secure. (5) Data sharing problems: Several agencies did not adequately confirm that entities they shared data with had a

right to receive that information. And many did not have appropriate safeguards for users accessing the data. A [Vermont State Audit report](#) (2018) found that 11% of ALPR searches violated state restrictions on when cops can and can't look at the data.

10. *There is a body of evidence showing that ALPRs may not work well in bad weather or can be confused.* A 2021 [study](#) by the **Texas A&M Transportation Institute** found that weather can affect a camera's ability to read a license plate and that cameras connected to out-of-date local and state databases generated false-positive hits. Although this study was ambivalent about the use of ALPRs, they also flagged the local jurisdiction's ability to maintain this technology to be a significant factor that impacted reliability. As for errors, [a dress](#) made of license plates created errors in ALPRs.
11. *Kickbacks for corporations:* In 2016, the Electronic Frontier Foundation [wrote](#) about three police departments in Texas who developed agreements with a tech company, Vigilant Solutions, which is now Motorola Solutions, that supplied free license plate readers and credit card machines for departments to keep in police vehicles. In exchange, the company received a 25% surcharge on the court fines for outstanding warrants or violations processed upon being pulled over - essentially giving motorists a choice to pay or go to jail. A year later, the city of Kyle, Texas, bailed on its agreement with what the company called its Warrant Redemption program.
12. *We need this money for urgent community needs, not more police surveillance.* Many needs in the Community Investment Budget such as support for people being evicted, EMS, and immigrant legal defense remain underfunded in the City Manager's budget draft. Any of these things would do more to advance public safety.