



OFFICE OF THE
INFORMATION &
PRIVACY COMMISSIONER
for British Columbia

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Use of video surveillance by local governments

In recent weeks many local governments have reported plans to implement video surveillance in public spaces, on a scale that would be unprecedented in BC. Richmond plans to spend over \$2 million to deploy video surveillance throughout the city and Terrace plans to install surveillance in its public parks. The City of Kelowna – which already has CCTV in place – plans to hire employees to monitor their surveillance cameras continuously, in real time.

These proposals all assume that video surveillance prevents crime and justifies the persistent invasion of the privacy of law-abiding people who are just going about their day-to-day business. My office is working with those municipalities to determine whether any of these proposals are lawful, which remains to be seen. A key question we will ask is whether a less privacy-invasive option was attempted.

Video surveillance is tempting to local governments. At first blush it's an easy way to appear to address public safety issues, rather than take on the more difficult challenge of the social ills from which crime arises. But what Richmond, Terrace, and Kelowna are ignoring is that for all its monetary and privacy costs, there is little evidence that surveillance works. In 2001, then privacy commissioner David Loukidelis reported that pervasive use of video surveillance had little or no effect on reducing crime. Nothing has changed since then. We must learn from the experience in other jurisdictions, such as the UK, where over 6 million cameras (one for every ten people!) have not significantly reduced crime in urban centres. Cameras are particularly poor at deterring violent crime, as those acts occur spontaneously and the perpetrators are not concerned with getting caught, on video or otherwise. Every blurry image we see on the news of a crime being committed was a crime that was not prevented by video surveillance.

While the benefits of video surveillance are hypothetical, the harm it presents to the privacy of British Columbians is real, and will only be amplified by increasingly sophisticated facial recognition technology and big data analyses identifying and following us from camera to camera. These days, most of our activities are surveilled, whether we know it or not. With so many of our relationships, thoughts, and emotions being lived and tracked online, physical spaces are among the scarce untraceable places left for us to be and to express ourselves. It is



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ironic that public spaces are among the few remaining places where we still have privacy. If we surrender our public spaces to surveillance— where we all have the right to be – we may never get them back.

Contact the OIPC if you're concerned about the use of video surveillance in your community.

Drew McArthur

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