

OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST
GULAM “OYSHI” MONAWARAH

Eyes at every stop

The New Haven Police Department is facing heated criticism from the state government for the increased installation of automated license plate reader, or ALPR, technologies and traffic cameras across the city. As of Sept. 3, Mayor Justin Elicker’s administration has installed seven ALPR cameras at various street locations, with a warning period set to begin on Sept. 15.

With this, the city has placed itself in the midst of a fierce national debate over the economics, legality and ethicality of AI-powered surveillance cameras. While these cameras may not be as infamous as their counterpart, Flock Safety, both technologies’ shared goal of removing human input and review from some of the most initial and critical stages of the justice system must be met with strict national scrutiny to prevent unfair detainment and the capture of private information before appropriate regulations are passed.

Some of the earliest proposals to pair specialized traffic cameras with license-plate reading technology and automated tickets can be traced back to March 2024. In late 2025, the Connecticut Department of Transportation reduced Mayor Justin Elicker’s initial plan to put up 19 red-light and speed cameras to 15 installations. These new cameras reach both Orange and Prospect Streets, close to Yale’s campus. If these first few cameras perform well enough per the NHPD’s standards, they will likely expand across Connecticut municipalities.

Mayor Elicker’s purpose is intuitive enough: the automated license-plate readers will pinpoint “injuries and fatalities from reckless drivers who blow through red lights and speed past our school buildings.” What is left rather unspoken, however, is the primary difference between regular traffic cameras – which would achieve the exact same premise – and these novel, AI-powered cameras. It is the same pro-efficiency logos that embodies the New Haven Police Department’s adoption of AI-powered body camera transcription.

By removing humans from the earliest step of the equation – and by extension our ability to discern intention and our ability to make mistakes – the NHPD hopes to catch more violations faster and easier. As such, anyone’s judgement on New Haven’s traffic ALPRs depends on how much they trust the NHPD to do their own job fairly and quickly. Regardless, New Haven residents should be concerned with the possibility that officers will become overly reliant on the ALPRs, thereby forgoing human review in favor of maximizing time on the street. The bottom line is that local security must avoid completely offloading human rationale onto

algorithm-driven cameras that cannot be held accountable.

Alongside the reduction of human judgement, Connecticut residents would not be wrong to worry about privacy concerns in our current moment, where wholesale AI privacy regulations are not in place. Governor Ned Lamont SOM ’80 has already called on the Connecticut Police Officers Standards and Training Council to review municipal ALPR technology, citing privacy issues. Among Lamont’s three primary concerns, it is particularly notable that he demanded information on “how long information may be stored, how it may be used, and how it may or may not be shared outside of local and state authorities,” and urged that “policies ... be created and adopted by a local or state agency before any such technology is rolled out by that entity.” In essence, there are fears that the lag time it takes to research, propose and pass ALPR policies can be weaponized to capture and store private information. The concern is not necessarily whether they are allowed to have that footage. Connecticut locals should be concerned that the wrong kind of information, even if inadvertently obtained, could be used against them in courts of law without adequate policy safeguards.

The local reaction resembles the national surveillance debate over Flock Safety. According to Flock’s website, their cameras “record vehicle sightings at a specific place and time;” “capture license plates and vehicle characteristics” and “help authorized users find relevant vehicle evidence.” Flock has disavowed any contracts with ICE or Palantir, organizations which critics like the American Civil Liberties Union worry could unfairly exploit such surveillance technologies. Yet with over 5,000 law enforcement agencies using Flock technologies, their cameras have been able to record billions of license plates.

Flock’s cameras and similar ALPRs have faced nationwide protests. A National Public Radio review finds that Flock cameras have been vandalized in at least 36 states with saws, paint, stickers and guns. The local materialization of these frustrations rings undeniably. Facing the systemic dismantling of privacy laws in digital and physical spaces, there is no doubt that the NHPD’s biggest opponents in this endeavor are the residents they’re seeking to protect. Given the opposition from major Connecticut officials, advocacy groups and local residents, ALPR users need to prioritize privacy concerns and wait for rigorous AI security policies before deploying such pervasive and concerning technologies.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
JUSTIN LEAHY

Get students outdoors

trails at East Rock, just two miles from campus.

Sometimes, we’re met with the new genre of videos built on standing somewhere stunning – like the Grand Canyon – and deadpanning that it’s basically Bridgeport. The joke works on the Internet, where the powers that be agree local communities aren’t worth the trip.

Yale students face this same pull, yet we resist it anyway. FOOT, Yale Outdoors, Outdoor Climbing Team, Yale Birding, Club Geo and various other student groups prove Yalies make time to explore nearby wilderness. But our effort isn’t backed by strong institutional support from Yale, at least compared to peer institutions.

In 2017, my predecessor, Yale Outdoors Co-President Emma Spence ’18, wrote that while Yale has the crucial ingredients for a strong outdoors culture, a need for an outdoors center, similar to that of Dartmouth, clearly exists. We live in the leafy “Elm City,” have a renowned forestry school managing a 10,000 acre forest, maintain a 1,500 acre outdoor educational center and send half of our freshmen on a four-day backpacking trip before classes start. Despite these treasures, our many outdoor student groups operate with no shared office or reliable way to get students outside during the academic year.

The Yale Outdoors Education Center, or OEC, sits in East Lyme, Conn., 42 miles from campus, inaccessible without a car. It closes after Labor Day for the entire school year. Take the Yale Shuttle to East Rock, the lone route to any park, and it’ll drop you off blocks from the summit trail, on an irregular schedule. Students, to spend time outdoors, end up Ubering, taking MetroNorths, renting ZipCars or even flying to parks – paying everything out-of-pocket, trip-after-trip. Before a recent Yale Outdoors backpacking trip, five of my peers dropped out last minute, unable to afford transportation.

Through Dartmouth Outdoors, students have trips completely

subsidized, reside fee-free in a nearby mountain lodge, work student jobs and borrow backpacking gear. When I visited Dartmouth as a prospective student, I kayaked the Connecticut River for free on campus.

Through Stanford’s Outdoors Center, students can sign up for \$150 trips to Yosemite and Big Sur. Students can rent any backpacking gear for \$25 per year and tackle a 3,200-square-foot climbing space.

Through Cornell’s Outdoor Education Center, students take Backpacking, Caving, and Paddling classes for credit. The Center hosts a climbing gym with 8,000 square feet of space and also takes students tree climbing, from the Redwoods to tropical forests.

Yale and its peer institutions share pre-freshman outdoor orientation programs. After FOOT, the resemblance stops. At Yale, groups must pay Uber to reach hiking trails, scalp companies to kayak the Mill River and climbing gyms out-of-pocket for membership fees.

There are simple ways Yale can start righting this now. Keep the OEC open on weekends throughout the year, past Labor Day. Have the shuttle offer riders stops at nearby parks and trails – like Lighthouse Point, West Rock and Hammonasset Beach – instead of just the corner of Orange and Tanner. Centralize outdoors group funding under one office, instead of making each club bankroll all activities from the already-limited Yale College Council funding.

Yale students have much desire to be outdoors, and for years, we’ve proved we don’t need viral landscapes. And, like Thoreau proved, local New Haven can suffice. Now, only time will tell how many resources and how much support we’ll get from our University.

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GUEST COLUMNIST
SEAN BRADY

Keep Yale’s mental health protections

Shortly before her death by suicide in March 2021, Yale first-year Rachael Shaw-Rosenbaum wrote about her fear that seeking mental health care could result in being forced to withdraw from the University. In the wake of her death, students, alumni and family members formed Elis for Rachael, demanding that Yale treat students with psychiatric disabilities with dignity rather than punishment.

That advocacy helped produce a landmark settlement in August 2023. Yale agreed to reform its medical-leave and accommodations policies by replacing medical withdrawal with a less punitive medical leave of absence, simplifying the requirements for returning, allowing part-time study as a disability accommodation and creating a centralized process for appealing accommodation decisions. For three years, those commitments were backed by the continuing jurisdiction of a federal court. As of this August, that enforcement period has ended.

The end of this oversight does not necessarily mean Yale will abandon these reforms. What it does mean is that the future for students with psychiatric disabilities is now dependent on Yale’s voluntary commitment – and the commitment of the community to hold Yale accountable. Yale needs to publicly guarantee that these protections will stay in place and that they are working to establish meaningful oversight for the years ahead.

Most current Yale College students have never lived without these protections. Students have grown accustomed to having their mental health respected, at least to a certain degree, and that is a good thing!

But we are living in an era of institutional retrenchment. As

Yale moves away from a period of abundance, it has an incentive to slowly chip away at these protections without most students noticing. The Yale administration is increasingly worried that their efforts to support marginalized students will come under federal attack. In uncertain times, it’s too easy to treat relatively new gains as unearned entitlements. We must resist that trap and recognize these protections for what they are: necessary steps toward equitable treatment for students with psychiatric disabilities.

In 2021, more than 60 percent of college students were reported to have some sort of mental health concern. The notion that vulnerability is weakness is a prejudice older than the mental health system itself. Speaking from personal experience, these conditions are some of the greatest challenges in my life, but the journeys they require have deepened my empathy for others who are suffering.

Many thrive at Yale because of the perspectives those conditions have helped them develop, not merely in spite of them. Students with psychiatric disabilities often transform their lived experiences into a commitment to serving others, including through helping professions, peer support and advocacy. Yale has a vested interest in helping these students develop, and a responsibility to protect them from practices known to intensify mental distress.

I have seen the successes first hand. I have been in the Eli Whitney Students Program for non-traditional students for 4 years now. Students who return from a medical leave aren’t eligible for this program, but many tend to hang out with us and fit in very easily. They aren’t failed students bearing scarlet letters; they are extraordinary Yalies who

just happen to be a little bit older than their peers. But so are we. The reason they gel so well is that they have come back to Yale with their hardships, but with wisdom to match. That is why, as Co-President, I will always make sure they are included with us.

This system is of course far from perfect. As a Disability Peer Mentor, I have seen too many accommodations rejected and too many professors deny support they are not legally required to provide. Moreover, this agreement fails to protect graduate and professional students. But we have to secure our progress before we seek to expand our gains.

We cannot allow Yale to begin to slowly chip away at these protections until nothing remains but the conditions for another tragedy. Rachael’s death was avoidable. These reforms, the result of years of testimony from students who had been harmed by Yale’s policies, were established to prevent more needless suffering.

Everyone deserves to have their mental health respected. This doesn’t change when one matriculates to Yale. These protections are a guarantee for us and for future classes of Elis.

I call on President McInnis to affirm in writing that these reforms will remain intact and to commit to expanding them to all students at Yale University. That is what is just, what is humane and what will save lives.

If you or someone you know is in crisis or experiencing thoughts of suicide, call or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988. Help is available 24/7.

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