FROM THE FRONT

"You set fire to my world, couldn't handle the heat. Now I'm sleeping alone and I'm starting to freeze"
RUIN MY LIFE ZARA LARSSON

Cameras keep watch. Will the city scrutinize them back?

CAMERAS FROM PAGE 1

power," Ward 29 Alder Brian Wingate, who chairs the aldermanic Public Safety Committee, said. Alders held public hearings before purchasing cameras, but Wingate said that most residents still are not aware of how extensive New Haven's surveillance system is.

And it is continuing to expand. Last month, the city received a $750,000 grant from the state to expand StarChase and purchase more automated license plate readers and tire deflation devices. Kenealy said last month that the police department was looking to hire another crime analyst.

"The biggest question I have is, where do you cross the line with privacy?" AnneMarie Rivera-Berrios, chair of the city's Civilian Review Board, which handles civilian complaints against the police, said. "Is it okay to put these cameras in place if we don't have these answers yet?"

A surveillance hub

When a shot is fired in New Haven, all of the city's police officers are instantly alerted on their department-issued smartphones. Each time Kenealy gets a ShotSpotter notification, she immediately pulls up camera feeds in the area of the gunshot as dispatchers send officers to the scene.

Kenealy's task is to give officers what experts call a "tactical advantage" when they arrive at the scene. That could mean describing a suspect's car, clothing and direction of travel over the radio, or sending photos or videos to cruiser computers, so officers know exactly who they are looking for and where they are going. Stationary and police-car cameras can also automatically identify license plate data, which officers can access and send to Kenealy.

"Ten, fifteen years ago, when we didn't have all these cameras, these people could have been like a ghost," Kenealy said.

According to Kenealy, the police department doesn't have cameras "in every single intersection, but for the most part, our areas are pretty well covered" — particularly high-traffic areas or crime "hotspots." There are cameras in each of the city's 10 policing districts, but the city does not disclose their locations.

When she's not actively responding to a crime, Kenealy keeps cameras around District 1 — which covers downtown — on the main screens, she said, "since there's a lot of traffic" there.

Kenealy said she most frequently responds to car thefts and other larcenies. She mentioned a recent case in which Real Time Crime Center technology helped the department apprehend a woman who had stolen $100 from a CVS pharmacy. "A crime is a crime, and if you can get a record of it, it definitely just helps for closing a case out," she said. "No crime is too small."

The department stores camera footage for 15 to 30 days, and the footage can be searched as needed by anyone in the department, according to Kenealy.

Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, an expert on privacy and policing and a law professor at George Washington University, said a Real Time Crime Center gives officers an "impressive level of observational power."

New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker said in a phone interview that "reasonable people" can disagree about whether cameras make cities safer, or just give that illusion. Even without the guarantee that they will deter crime, or proof that they allow the department to solve crimes faster, Elicker said that giving up a measure of anonymity is "a sacrifice that most people are willing to make."

'We needed every tool possible'

In 2001, the New York Police Department became the first department in the United States to set up a Real Time Crime Center, according to Kimberly Przeszlowski, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Quinnipiac University.

New Haven started to develop its own in 2020, which Przeszlowski called a year of "peak growth" in Real Time Crime Centers nationwide. There was "peer pressure" on New Haven to level up, she added.

Wingate also attributed New Haven's increased spending on surveillance technology to the police department's retention issues in the early 2020s.

"We needed every tool possible to keep New Haven safe," he said, emphasizing that the department "didn't have a lot of manpower."

Bridgeport and Hartford both have Real Time Crime Centers. According to a press release from Milestone — a company from which both Hartford and New Haven buy cameras — Hartford had a "staggering 442% increase in case solvability for firearm assault incidents with video evidence" during a two-year study starting in January 2022. The company appears not to have conducted such a study in New Haven.

Since 2021, the city has committed about $13 million to contracts with Axon, a police and military technology company, and Fusus, a surveillance company Axon acquired in 2024. That money has come from the city budget and funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, a 2021 pandemic relief bill, according to public records of the agreements.

In 2021, the NHPD signed its first five-year contract with Axon for tasers, improvements to interview room equipment, dashboard cameras for police cruisers and body-worn cameras, which the department began using in 2017. The city bought 500 surveillance cameras that year, 300 of which have been installed so far, according to Elicker.

Axon provides storage for camera footage on a website called evidence.com, according to Ferguson, the privacy expert. Elicker said the companies "have made written commitments to us that we own the data."

Ferguson said Axon has been "more transparent" than other surveillance companies, conducting bias checks on their technology. Still, he said, "the technology is moving faster than law and regulation."

"I think the cameras and the money that we spent on the surveillance has been beneficial," Wingate said. Wingate said surveillance is one aspect of a "holistic" approach to policing, and that a recent downturn in crime has come as a result of "communication with the community."

Acting Police Chief David Zannelli, who has been with the police department for 18 years and whom Elicker nominated last month to become the permanent chief, emphasized that the new technology, particularly the citywide cameras, has increased the department's efficiency.

"The expansion of the cameras has really helped us in the last couple of years to recover vehicles and people involved in gun violence rather quickly," Zannelli said in a phone interview. "Now that we have equipment that is set up there, we're able to respond quickly, and not just respond quickly, find the right person and the right car."

Data as to whether the Real Time Crime Center is helping the department solves crime faster is "pending," Zannelli said.

Concerns about expansion

Axon and Milestone, two surveillance companies that the department has partnered with, both sell artificial intelligence technology.

Other Real Time Crime Centers employ two types of surveillance cameras: closed-circuit television, or CCTV, and cameras with the capacity for video analytics, which can turn a city into "a trackable object tracing system," according to Ferguson. Officers can use video analytics to search footage for specific objects.

Bruckhart said the department does not use video analytics. He declined to specify the make or model of its cameras.

"We don't provide specifics for the cameras as we don't want the exact capabilities of them made public," Bruckhart wrote in an email. He added that the department uses "a variety of vendors depending on who is cheaper."

"One can have video without video analytics. It is just super time consuming to find or use anything for court," Ferguson wrote in an email to the News.

According to Bruckhart, right now, the New Haven police's crime analysts and detectives manually search footage themselves, although it's inconvenient.

When the city reupped its first contract with Axon in 2024, it signed on to the possibility of implementing more advanced Axon technology, including Axon Investigate Pro and Axon Redaction Assistant, which Bruckhart said the department is not currently using.

"We have a contract with Axon in which various products are negotiated," like tasers, body cameras and data storage, according to Bruckhart, but the department does not "provide details on those negotiations because it could affect future contracts."

> *"Every once in a while, you know, perhaps we need to take a peek in to see what's going on with that kind of level of power,"*

Under the 2024 contract, the department also purchased Draft One — an AI-assisted police report drafting tool — and Axon video drones with the ability to play pre-recorded messages.

The chief state's attorney and the state's attorneys for Connecticut's 13 judicial districts this month issued a moratorium "on the use of AI tools for drafting or narrating police reports," according to Alaine Griffin, a spokesperson for the chief state's attorney.

The department had been "experimenting" with Draft One, according to Bruckhart.

'I wouldn't want Big Brother'

The New Haven Independent reported in 2024 that the city operates 190 "regular cameras" and 183 automated license plate readers. Przeszlowski, the Quinnipiac University professor, said the New Haven Police Department has access to footage from over a thousand cameras, some of which are businesses' or private Ring cameras.

Chelsea Infinity-Gonzalez, the director of public policy and advocacy of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, said that when a city expands its surveillance system like New Haven has, "the question isn't just about the number of cameras, but what rules are actually in place to govern that data."

The ACLU of Connecticut has advocated for seven-day limits on the police's retention of license plate reader data, meaning that data would be deleted after seven days if not saved.

With automated license plate readers, "you can query your plate and see where it's been across multiple locations," Infinity-Gonzalez said, "so from a privacy perspective there's a strong argument and we support having stricter retention limits."

Zannelli proposed that the department should be able to keep license plate data for six months. There is no current Connecticut law limiting license plate data retention.

"How do we know that they're not just going to hide their vehicle used in the drive-by shooting in a garage somewhere for a week and then just start driving around?" Zannelli said. "I wouldn't want Big Brother, but that's not the intent of it."

In 2017, before New Haven had a Real Time Crime Center, Sean O'Brien, the founder of the Privacy Lab at Yale Law School's Information Society Project, decided he would try to map the city's surveillance cameras.

When O'Brien posted pictures of cameras on State Street that year to a website called Open Street Map, he said he "would come back the next day and there would be a traffic cone over one of them." Others, he said, "would look like they'd been hit with baseball bats, or would be spray painted black."

He hasn't mapped the new cameras — the Open Street Map of New Haven's surveillance cameras was last updated by the Privacy Lab in 2017.

For O'Brien, the police department's surveillance has gone too far.

"If your neighbor had a camera pointing into your window and you knew that they were watching it on their monitor or on their smart TV in their living room, watching a feed of your living room," he said, it would be "very visceral and very creepy."

But, he said, "when we have cameras everywhere outside all the time, even if they're effectively doing this at a massive scale, we don't have the same feelings because we can externalize it and not have to think about it as strongly."

O'Brien believes New Haveners should be paying attention to surveillance. "People deeply care about privacy," O'Brien said, "yet feel powerless to do anything about it." O'Brien has seen what he calls "privacy nihilism" take over.

"Every once in a while, you know, perhaps we need to take a peek in to see what's going on with that kind of level of power," Wingate said of police surveillance.

New Haven's Real Time Crime Center is in the police department's headquarters at 1 Union Ave.

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Martin Peralta / Staff Photographer



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