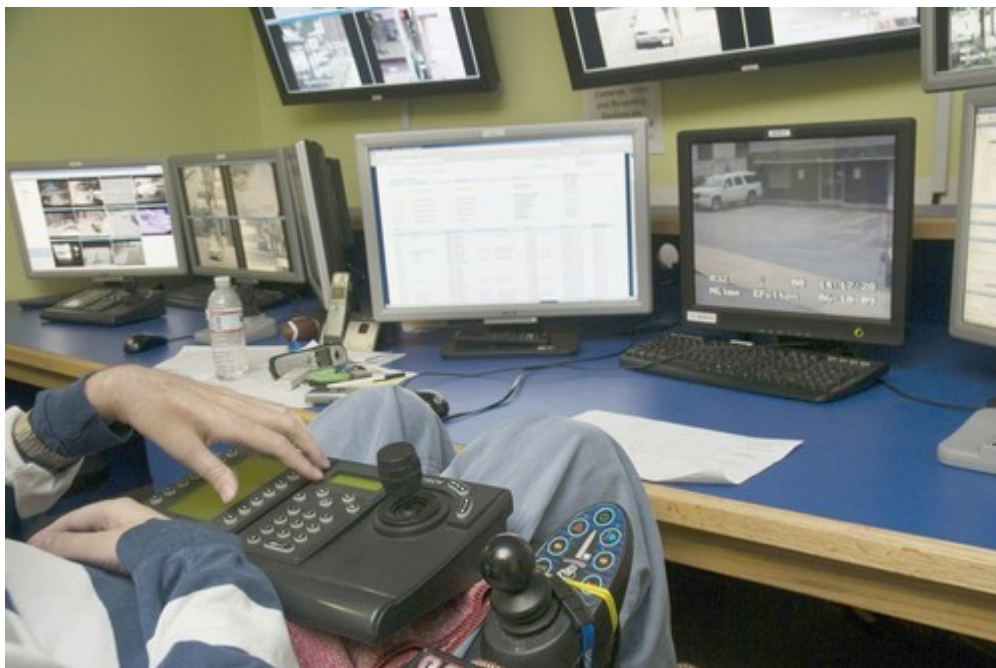


# Lancaster, Pa., keeps a close eye on itself



Linda Johnson / For The Times

The security cameras on the streets are monitored by civilians working for a nonprofit group. They pan, zoom and call police if they see a crime.

**A vast and growing web of security cameras monitors the city of 55,000, operated by a private group of self-appointed gatekeepers. There's been surprisingly little outcry.**

By Bob Drogin  
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Reporting from Lancaster, Pa. -- This historic town, where America's founding fathers plotted during the Revolution and Milton Hershey later crafted his first chocolates, now boasts another distinction.

It may become the nation's most closely watched small city.



'I don't want to live like this'



Crime solved

Some 165 closed-circuit TV cameras soon will provide live, round-the-clock scrutiny of nearly every street, park and other public space used by the 55,000 residents and the town's many tourists. That's more outdoor cameras than are used by many major cities, including San Francisco and Boston.

Unlike anywhere else, cash-strapped Lancaster outsourced its surveillance to a private nonprofit group that hires civilians to tilt, pan and zoom the cameras -- and to call police if they spot suspicious activity. No government agency is directly involved.

Perhaps most surprising, the near-saturation surveillance of a community that saw four murders last year has sparked little public debate about whether the benefits for law enforcement outweigh the loss of privacy.

"Years ago, there's no way we could do this," said Keith Sadler, Lancaster's police chief. "It brings to mind Big Brother, George Orwell and '1984.' It's just funny how Americans have softened on these issues."

"No one talks about it," agreed Scott Martin, a Lancaster County commissioner who wants to expand the program. "Because people feel safer. Those who are law-abiding citizens, they don't have anything to worry about."

A few dozen people attended four community meetings held last spring to discuss what sponsors called "this exciting public safety initiative." But opposition has grown since big red bulbs, which shield the video cameras, began appearing on corner after corner.

Mary Pat Donnellon, head of Mission Research, a local software company, vowed to move if she finds one on her block. "I don't want to live like that," she said. "I'm not afraid. And I don't need to be under surveillance."

"No one has the right to know who goes in and out my front door," agreed David Mowrer, a laborer for a company that supplies quarry pits. "That's my business. That's not what America is about."

Hundreds of municipalities -- including Los Angeles and at least 36 other California cities -- have built or expanded camera networks since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. In most cases, Department of Homeland Security grants helped cover the cost.

In the most ambitious project, New York City police announced plans several years ago to link 3,000 public and private security cameras across Lower Manhattan designed to help deter, track and detect terrorists. The network is not yet complete.

How they affect crime is open to debate. In the largest U.S. study, researchers at UC Berkeley evaluated 71 cameras that San Francisco put in high-crime areas starting in 2005. Their final report, released in December, found "no evidence" of a drop in violent crime but "substantial declines" in property crime near the cameras.

Only a few communities have said no. In February, the city council in Cambridge, Mass., voted not to use eight cameras already purchased with federal funds for fear police would improperly spy on residents. Officials in nearby Brookline are considering switching off a dozen cameras for the same reason.

Lancaster is different, and not just because it sits amid the rolling hills and rich farms of Pennsylvania Dutch country.

Laid out in 1730, the whole town is 4 square miles around a central square. Amish families still sell quilts in the nation's oldest public market, and the Wal-Mart provides a hitching post to park a horse and buggy. Tourists flock to art galleries and Colonial-era churches near a glitzy new convention center.

But poverty is double the state's average, and public school records list more than 900 children as homeless. Police blame most of last year's 3,638 felony crimes, chiefly thefts, on gangs that use Lancaster as a way station to move cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs along the Eastern Seaboard.

"It's not like we're making headlines as the worst crime-ridden city in the country," said Craig Stedman, the county's district attorney. "We have an average amount of crime for our size."

In 2001, a local crime commission concluded that cameras might make the city safer. Business owners, civic boosters and city officials formed the Lancaster Community Safety Coalition, and the nonprofit organization installed its first camera downtown in 2004.

Raising money from private donors and foundations, the coalition had set up 70 cameras by last year. And the crime rate rose.

Officials explained the increase by saying cameras caught lesser offenses, such as prostitution and drunkenness, that otherwise often escape prosecution. The cameras also helped police capture and convict a murderer, and solve several other violent crimes.

Another local crime meeting last year urged an expansion of the video network, and the city and county governments agreed to share the \$3-million cost with the coalition. Work crews are trying to connect 95 additional high-resolution cameras by mid-July.



• 'I don't want to live like this'



• Crime solved

"Per capita, we're the most watched city in the state, if not the entire United States," said Joseph Morales, a city councilman who is executive director of the coalition. "There are very few public streets that are not visible to our cameras."

The digital video is transmitted to a bank of flat-screen TVs at coalition headquarters, several dingy offices beside a gas company depot. A small sign hangs outside.

On a recent afternoon, camera operator Doug Winglewich sat at a console and watched several dozen incoming video feeds plus a computer linked to the county 911 dispatcher. The cameras have no audio, so he works in silence.

Each time police logged a new 911 call, he punched up the camera closest to the address, and pushed a joystick to maneuver in for a closer look.

A license plate could be read a block away, and a face even farther could be identified. After four years in the job, Winglewich said, he "can pretty much tell right away if someone's up to no good."

He called up another feed and focused on a woman sitting on the curb. "You get to know people's faces," he said. "She's been arrested for prostitution."

Moments later, he called police when he spotted a man drinking beer in trouble-prone Farnum Park. Two police officers soon appeared on the screen, and as the camera watched, issued the man a ticket for violating a local ordinance.

"Lots of times, the police find outstanding warrants and the guy winds up in jail," said Winglewich, 49, who works from a wheelchair on account of a spinal injury.

If a camera records a crime in progress, the video is given to police and prosecutors, and may be subpoenaed by defense lawyers in a criminal case. More than 300 tapes were handed over last year, records show.

Morales says he refuses all other requests. "The divorce lawyer who wants video of a husband coming out of a bar with his mistress, we won't do it," he said.

No state or federal law governs use of public cameras, so Morales is drafting ethical guidelines for the coalition's 10 staffers and dozen volunteers. Training has been "informal" until now, he said, but will be stiffened.

Morales said he tries to weed out voyeurs and anyone who might use the tapes for blackmail or other illegal activity.

"We are not directly responsible to law enforcement or government at this point," he said. "So we have to be above suspicion ourselves."

Morales, 45, has a master's degree in public administration. Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., he grew up mostly on Army bases. He was accepted to the U.S. Naval Academy, he said, but turned it down. "I made a lot of bad choices," he said. "Substance abuse was part of that."

Mary Catherine Roper, staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, says the coalition's role as a self-appointed, self-policed gatekeeper for blanket surveillance of an entire city is unique.

"This is the first time, the only time, I've heard of it anywhere," she said. "It is such a phenomenally bad idea that it is stunning to me."

She said the coalition structure provides no public oversight or accountability, and may be exempt from state laws governing release of public records.

"When I hear people off the street can come in and apply to watch the camera on my street, now I'm terrified," she added. "That could be my nosy neighbor, or my stalker ex-boyfriend, or a burglar stalking my home."

J. Richard Gray, Lancaster's mayor since 2005, backs the program but worries about such abuses. He is a former defense attorney, a self-described civil libertarian, and a free-spirited figure who owns 12 motorcycles.

"I keep telling [the coalition] you're on a short leash with me," Gray said. "It's one strike and you're out as far as I'm concerned."

His campaign treasurer, Larry Hinnenkamp, a tax attorney and certified public accountant, took a stronger view. He "responded with righteous indignation" when a camera was installed without prior notice by his home.

"I used to give it the finger when I walked by," Hinnenkamp said.

But Jack Bauer, owner of the city's largest beer and soft drink distributor, calls the network "a great thing." His store hasn't been robbed, he said, since four cameras went up nearby.

"There's nothing wrong with instilling fear," he said.