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## **State Guardrails on Mass Surveillance: A Policy Case Against Government License Plate Reader Systems**

### **Author's Note**

This paper reflects my perspective as a Colorado resident, veteran, and criminal justice professional. It is not intended as a legal brief or academic research paper. Its purpose is to outline a policy direction grounded in civil liberties, public safety experience, and democratic accountability.

### **Introduction**

Civil liberties depend on maintaining clear boundaries between citizens and government surveillance power. Automated license plate reader (ALPR) systems represent a significant expansion of the ability to monitor movement patterns at scale. Combined with large data networks and artificial intelligence analytics, these systems enable a level of population-level tracking that raises serious constitutional and policy concerns.<sup>1</sup>

This policy proposal argues that Colorado should establish firm guardrails by refusing both to host surveillance infrastructure on public property and to allow government reliance on ALPR data. This approach protects civil liberties while preserving effective public safety strategies.

### **Historical Context: Expansion of Surveillance Authority**

Federal surveillance authority has expanded significantly since the early 2000s, particularly following the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and passage of the Patriot Act. Emergency authorities historically tend to persist and expand. Technological advances now allow analysis of movement data at scales previously impossible, increasing the importance of structural safeguards at the state level.<sup>2</sup>

### **Federalism as a Constitutional Safeguard**

Federalism is designed to prevent excessive concentration of power. States have historically served as buffers when federal authority expands too far or too quickly. Refusing to host or participate in surveillance infrastructure is consistent with this constitutional tradition.<sup>3</sup>

### **Civil Liberties Considerations**

Once surveillance infrastructure is installed, it rarely shrinks. Mass tracking capabilities alter the relationship between citizens and government and can normalize monitoring practices that would previously have been considered unacceptable.<sup>4</sup>

### **Artificial Intelligence and Oversight Challenges**

Modern surveillance increasingly relies on artificial intelligence to analyze large datasets. AI dramatically expands scale while reducing practical oversight. Systems can also be designed

in ways that obscure accountability. Limiting infrastructure and government reliance on these systems helps prevent normalization of mass automated surveillance.<sup>5</sup>

### **Effectiveness of ALPR Systems**

Evidence suggests ALPR systems are most effective in specific cases such as stolen vehicle recovery and post-incident investigation, but evidence of broad crime-prevention impact remains limited. Public safety policy should prioritize proven prevention strategies alongside effective investigative tools.<sup>6</sup>

### **Fiscal Priorities and Prevention**

Surveillance infrastructure requires ongoing spending for equipment, maintenance, storage, and analytics. Research consistently shows that long-term crime reduction is more strongly associated with investments in education, housing stability, healthcare access, and economic opportunity.<sup>7</sup>

### **Policy Position**

Colorado should prohibit installation of automated license plate reader cameras on government-owned or government-controlled property, regardless of whether those systems are installed by public agencies or private entities.

In addition, government agencies should be prohibited from operating, accessing, purchasing, or relying on automated license plate reader surveillance data, regardless of whether that data is collected by government agencies or private organizations.

This policy establishes a clear constitutional boundary: the state will neither host nor depend upon mass vehicle-tracking infrastructure while continuing to support effective law enforcement and prevention-focused public safety strategies.

### **References**

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