



SACRAMENTO COUNTY GRAND JURY NEWS RELEASE

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Sacramento County motorists' privacy in jeopardy from intricate network of law enforcement license-plate cameras

Sacramento County drivers are likely unaware that, as they travel on county streets and highways, their vehicles are being tracked by an intricate network of stationary and mobile cameras.

Operated by the Sacramento Sheriff's Office and the city police departments within the county, this vast network of cameras scans license plates and can capture a digital file of each vehicle's image with the location, date, and time.

After learning these networked cameras, called Automated License Plate Readers (ALPR), are becoming more prevalent, the Sacramento County Grand Jury launched a seven-month investigation to know what safeguards are in place to protect an individual's right to privacy.

"We found the ALPR system couldn't distinguish between cars used in criminal activities and those operated legally," said Steve Caruso, foreperson of the 2023-24 Grand Jury. "And we subsequently learned that both the Sheriff's Office and Sacramento Police Department have been lax in following state law regarding how ALPR data is shared with other law enforcement entities."

In 2015, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 34 (SB 34), which established stringent requirements for California law enforcement agencies (LEAs) who utilize the ALPR system. SB 34 mandated detailed usage and privacy policies to describe the system's purpose, who may use it, how the agency will share, store, and protect the data, and how the system will be monitored.

Most importantly, SB 34 strictly prohibited sharing data with any out-of-state LEA, as well as any federal law enforcement agencies.

“The Grand Jury was surprised to learn that both the Sheriff’s Office and Sacramento Police Department were violating SB 34,” Caruso said. “However, after meeting with the Sheriff’s Office in the course of our investigation, they decided to stop sharing ALPR data with out-of-state LEAs.”

On the other hand, Caruso pointed out, the Sacramento Police Department continues to share ALPR data with Washington, Oregon, Nevada, and Arizona LEAs.

In another threat to data privacy protection, the Grand Jury learned that a Sheriff’s Office internal audit revealed a major flaw in its ALPR procedures. Users of the system at the Sheriff’s Office are able to extract data from ALPR by entering random characters that are not related to a specific case number.

“The Grand Jury believes that the residents of Sacramento County have a right to understand who is collecting the data; how it is shared and stored, and whether local LEAs are following state privacy laws,” Caruso said.

The Grand Jury report has five recommendations for how local LEAs can better ensure the public’s privacy while using this valuable investigative tool. One recommendation calls for all Sacramento LEAs to ensure their ALPR policies are readily available to the public and posted conspicuously on the agencies’ websites no later than January 1, 2025.

“Maintaining the effective use of technology while ensuring public safety and statutory compliance is increasingly complex,” Caruso said. “Law enforcement agencies must take this responsibility seriously. And the public must be equally vigilant in our oversight of these agencies to ensure our rights are not eroded.”

The Sacramento County Grand Jury is the independent watchdog over public entities within the county. Concerned residents can contact the Grand Jury on a confidential basis through written complaints that alert the Grand Jury to issues within public entities. We would like to hear from you at www.sacgrandjury.org.

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