

Talking Points for Local Conversations

LICENSE PLATE READER SURVEILLANCE

Use these when speaking with neighbors, attending town meetings, or talking to municipal officials. These concerns are not partisan — they resonate across the political spectrum.

General Overview:

License plate readers (LPRs) are cameras placed on roadways that automatically photograph every passing vehicle — recording the plate, location, and time. This data is then uploaded to a searchable database, where it is often pooled with LPR data from other jurisdictions.

At least 80 Massachusetts police departments have contracts with Flock Safety, a private company that operates nearly 90,000 cameras across the country. Other departments, as well as the Massachusetts State Police, contract with Vigilant Solutions, another major LPR vendor. When a department joins Flock or Vigilant's network, its cameras often feed drivers' location information into national databases that can be searched by thousands of other law enforcement agencies — including departments in states hundreds of miles away, and in some cases, federal agencies like ICE. This is not targeted surveillance of suspects. It is mass, warrantless tracking of every driver — the vast majority of whom have done nothing wrong.

"But this technology helps solve serious crimes!"

Occasionally, LPRs can be useful in serious criminal investigations. But they also raise serious safety risks for people like immigrants, dissidents, and even ex-girlfriends or romantic interests of police officers. Local communities need to decide whether the hypothetical use of LPR data to solve a serious crime outweighs the significant privacy and safety risks inherent in mass surveillance data collection. Subject to strict regulation, policy, auditing, and local oversight by elected officials, police could use LPRs to investigate crimes and retain data tied to specific investigations, while ensuring data is never shared outside the department absent a judicial warrant or in life threatening emergencies. Effective reforms ensure data is never accessed or shared inappropriately, and block the indefinite storage of millions of innocent people's location data.

"Our police department has policies against misuse."

Local policies only govern local officers, and while they are important, they are not law. When your department automatically shares its data with external departments in Flock's national network, up to thousands of officers in other jurisdictions — who do not answer to your local officials or chain of command — can access it. It is impossible for your police chief to ensure that officers in other departments follow your town's policies or Massachusetts law.



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"This would hamper legitimate investigations!"

The same argument was made about requiring warrants for GPS tracking and cell phone location data. Courts recognized those practices as unconstitutional, and law enforcement adapted. Good investigations work within constitutional limits. And our communities are not safer when ICE agents, stalkers with badges, or out-of-state prosecutors can use LPR data to track their targets. Unregulated surveillance isn't safety; to the contrary, it endangers our most vulnerable neighbors and exposes us all to violations of our privacy.

Other points worth making in local conversations:

- At least 16 states regulate law enforcement use of LPRs — including our neighbors Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont.

- Cambridge cancelled its contract with Flock after residents organized. Dozens of other municipalities have followed suit, cancelling their Flock contracts. Other communities can do the same, or demand stronger protections—like an outright ban on the use of LPRs at the local level.

- Ask your local elected officials: Does our department share data nationally or with other police departments? Have you reviewed the contract terms? And do those contract terms allow Flock to share LPR data without the knowledge or consent of local leaders?