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Atlanta leads the way in “Southern Surveillance”

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Atlanta is fast becoming as infatuated with surveilling its citizenry with federally-subsidized cameras, as many of its sister cities in the north, like New York and Chicago. “Southern hospitality” is becoming Southern Surveillance.

Just last week, for example, it was reported here in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that the Atlanta Police Department plans soon to open a largely federally-funded, “video integration center.” This high-tech center will allow officers to monitor hundreds of surveillance cameras placed around the city, including images provided by cameras run by private entities and non-police governmental agencies.

Other cities around the nation – including New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and the District of Columbia – have blanketed their cities with surveillance cameras in similar fashion. However, actual results of surveillance networks in those cities have been mixed, at best.

In 2009, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley proudly declared that by 2016 there would be “a camera on every corner” of the city. His efforts to win the “Big Brother” award have been noted by former Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who told the *Associated Press*, “I don’t think there is another city in the U.S. that has as an extensive and integrated camera network as Chicago has.” But the more than \$60 million price tag that has come with the title of “most closely watched U.S. city,” has not benefitted Chicago as much as Daley and company would have us believe.

The Illinois American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) conducted an extensive study of the Windy City’s massive, surveillance-camera network. The recently-published report found little evidence that the 10,000-plus camera network is truly deterring crime or simply shifting it to other areas.

Certainly, the raw numbers are not that impressive, as Steve Chapman pointed out last May in his column at the *Chicago Tribune*. Chapman noted, “Chicago police say the cameras have produced 4,000 arrests since 2006. That sounds like a lot, but it works out to only about 1 in 200 arrests. And for 10,000 cameras, 4,000 arrests [over more than four years] is not really a spectacular haul.”

Studies of surveillance systems in other cities have yielded similar, mediocre results. According to a 2009 report from the *Washington City Paper*, a Freedom of Information Act request by the ACLU forced police in the District of Columbia to admit that surveillance, “had not contributed to a single arrest.”

A 2008 study into the effectiveness of cameras in San Francisco by the University of California-Berkeley, found that “footage has assisted the SFPD in charging a suspect with a crime in six cases” over a three-year period. The study also found “limited success” in cases where the cameras acted as a “silent witness.”

Our friends across the Pond in the United Kingdom also have become infatuated with video surveillance. It is estimated there are over a million cameras in place in London. Despite such an overwhelming police-state presence, the Cato Institute’s David Rittgers points out that, “[r]oughly 80% of the crime in London goes unsolved.” In fact, an internal police audit covered by BBC News showed that only one crime was solved per 1,000 cameras in the city.

It is true that cameras occasionally may assist in identifying criminals after the fact; but there is little evidence to support claims that these vast surveillance systems, monitoring everyone who comes within their view, are having

more than a negligible impact in actually reducing crime.

Before Atlanta spends more money trying to emulate Chicago, city leaders should carefully weigh the costs to taxpayers associated with expanding these vast surveillance systems that are simply not producing a measurable benefit. It may make citizens feel safer, and offer the appearance that city leaders are “doing something” about crime, but that false sense of security comes at a very high price in dollars and loss of privacy.

-by Bob Barr, The Barr Code

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