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They see you, but do you see them? Growth of surveillance cameras booming in N.J.

By Christopher Baxter and Steve Strunsky – May 5, 2013

A suspected bank robber in a blue hat strolls out of a branch office in Woodbridge.

A man wanted in a Newark killing paces outside a neighborhood convenience store.

A woman believed to have made off with a \$5,000 wedding gown marches through downtown Fanwood.

And a confused 16-year-old runaway waits for a train in Rahway.

These four scenes have a couple of things in common: All four played out last year and all four were caught in living color on video surveillance — just as the nation's booming network of cameras was key in identifying and building a case against the alleged Boston Marathon bombers.

Today, more than ever, it's practically impossible to move around the state and not be caught on camera. From stores and stadiums to city streets and transit hubs, New Jersey's 9 million residents create a complex digital video reel of faces and movements.

Though no one tracks just how many thousands of cameras keep watch over the state every day, security experts told The Star-Ledger that, due to the decreasing cost of surveillance technology and an influx of homeland security money, they are multiplying rapidly.

And after Boston, the experts said, residents should expect that trend to only accelerate.

"Unfortunately, because of crime and bad people, cameras will continue to increase," said Derk Boss, president of the trade group International Association of Certified Surveillance Professionals. "Police can't be everywhere so we must rely on the eye that never blinks or goes to sleep."

Privacy advocates warn against the inevitable calls for more surveillance to battle crime and terrorism in the wake of the Boston attacks, fearing a day when someone's every move could be cataloged by police. But new poll numbers show most Americans of all ages are just fine with being watched in public.

"We're always on camera," said Cristian Hoyos, 19, a freshman at Kean University who was waiting for a train at Newark Penn Station. "We're raised with it. So we don't think much of it."

After the bombings near the Boston Marathon finish line last month, investigators immediately turned to private surveillance cameras pointed at streets and sidewalks to identify suspects and trace their movements. The images, combined with cell phone photos, proved critical to solving the case.

"The more prevalent cameras are, the more easily they become a go-to item in an investigation," said Lt. Stephen Jones, a spokesman for the State Police, who added that troopers routinely seek out private surveillance footage as the first step toward solving a crime.

In response to the role cameras played in Boston, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg touted their cities' growing networks of digital eyes, both public and private, which can be tapped by their police departments to detect suspicious activity.

Cities in New Jersey — including Newark, Jersey City and East Orange — operate similar camera networks. In Jersey City, there are two separate systems — 131 cameras paid for with state money, and an additional 88 cameras paid for with Homeland Security grant money.

"It took about eight months of them being up and running, but now every neighborhood wants them," said Jerramiah Healy, a former prosecutor and the mayor of the city.

"They've been so effective here, and that was just a perfect illustration of their efficacy in Boston."

Smaller police departments also use cameras or are exploring how to take advantage of them, according to a recent survey by the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police.

The Pleasantville Police Department installed cameras in 2010 to monitor its business district. In Gloucester Township and Upper Saddle River, police use cameras in local parks, while Spring Lake is looking to use them in one of its schools to guard against a shooting.

The Leonia Police Department is soliciting quotes from vendors for cameras it hopes will deter burglaries. In Woodbury City, police had just begun researching cameras when two homicides occurred within a 10-day period. Private surveillance helped them solve the crimes.

As a result, the department surveyed all businesses to determine what cameras were already deployed and where they were pointed so they could fill in the blanks with their own technology.

In 2003, East Orange began installing one of the most advanced "smart" camera systems in the country, able to track suspicious movements, feed footage into patrol cars and alert officers before a problem occurs. The 3.9-square-mile city has about 75 cameras, Mayor Robert Bowser said.

Automated license plate readers also track every car that enters and leaves the city.

"We had to get our crime numbers down, and this is just a tool," Bowser said. "This is not some of that stuff you see on TV, we have some of it, but we don't have all that facial recognition and that kind of stuff. It's not used for invasion of privacy."

From 2003 to 2011, the crime rate in East Orange fell 71 percent, state statistics show.

QUESTIONS OF PRIVACY

Studies on the effectiveness of surveillance cameras suggest mixed results, said Julian Sanchez, a research fellow at the Cato Institute. Sanchez said cameras do little to deter crime but can be helpful after the fact during an investigation, such as in Boston.

A recent survey by Forrester Research found 68 percent of public employers and 59 percent of private employers use video surveillance, with another 9 percent planning to implement it. Sanchez said there is an important distinction between private cameras and network government cameras.

"It's sort of like asking someone, well, how do you feel about being seen in public and going about your day and being seen by a lot of people, versus how do you feel about someone following you all day?" Sanchez said.

The executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, Udi Ofer, said there needs to be rules to make sure people's actions are not recorded and stored forever.

"If people are educated and know their everyday movements, their trip to the hospital or a meeting of the Republican Party or a political protest can now be monitored by surveillance cameras, intensely and cheaply, then people will want rules."

Some cities that operate camera networks, such as Newark and Jersey City, have privacy protections, including restricting who can watch the cameras, where they can be pointed and how long their footage can be stored.

"The public needs to understand there is little to no evidence demonstrating surveillance cameras deter violent crime or terrorists," Ofer said. "What surveillance cameras have proven to be are an effective forensic tool, such as in Boston."

STRIKING A BALANCE

At Newark Penn Station, Sara Gomez, 45, of Harrison, said cameras were a welcome presence.

"When I'm on the train, or the PATH train, for example, I feel afraid, very afraid," said Gomez, who teaches Portuguese. "Whenever I see something, I always think it could be something (dangerous)."

A survey last month of 1,000 adults in the United States found 70 percent support surveillance and security cameras in public, though experts cautioned the number was probably influenced by their use to catch the Boston Marathon bombers.

The survey, conducted by Rasmussen Reports from April 22 to 23, also found 55 percent believe public areas are safer with cameras, and 87 percent found they are at least somewhat important to help law enforcement officials solve crimes. The poll had a margin of error of three percentage points.

Some New Jersey school districts are increasing the number of cameras they have in their buildings. But if they are motivated by any one incident, it is more likely to be the Newtown, Conn., school shootings in December rather than the Boston Marathon terror bombing.

Millburn School Superintendent James Crisfield said there are already cameras keeping watch over much of the middle and high schools. Plans are now to spend about \$200,000 beefing up cameras in those schools, and adding them in the district's five elementary schools, he said.

"If you're walking down the hall, you're getting recorded," Crisfield said. "But if you're walking down the hall in an elementary school and doing something you're not supposed to, you should be recorded."

Electronics.ca Publications, an electronics market research firm, said in a 2011 report that it expected the surveillance camera industry to more than triple in size from 2008 through 2012, with the largest growth in education, government, retail, banking and transportation.

Dave Dalleske, the vice president of marketing for Pelco by Schneider Electric, a manufacturer of surveillance cameras based in California, said spending on cameras has been rising, especially on infrastructure and municipal and school projects.

"Hidden cameras get very sensationalized on TV with reports of catching inappropriate behavior," Dalleske said. "However, you can never underscore the deterrent factor that an overt camera has when individuals know they are being watched."

Bill Bradbury, 73, of South Orange, said he never worried much about an attack before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. He often rode the New York City subway to Shea Stadium to catch a Mets game. His only worry then was who was playing and if it would rain.

"I've just learned to accept it," Bradbury said.