



Ideas Changing the World

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Crime

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SECURITY CAMERAS' SLIPPERY SLOPE

Times Square has 82 police surveillance cameras, but when jihadist Faisal Shahazad tried to set off a car bomb there May 1, they were no help in catching him. That failure hasn't cooled public officials' camera craze, however. New York Police Department Commissioner Raymond Kelly wants an electronic eye on every block from Central Park to 34th Street, and New York Sen. Charles Schumer demanded \$30 million from the feds to help complete the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, which includes a centralized camera network based on London's "Ring of Steel."

Actually, we have a lot to learn from the British, says Gene Healy, vice president at the Cato Institute. Over the last couple of decades, they've run a large-scale experiment with closed-circuit TV surveillance, and the results suggest that the security benefits aren't worth the cost in tax dollars and lost privacy:

- Driven by fears of Irish Republican Army terrorism, the British Home Office spent nearly 80 percent of its criminal justice budget in the 1990s on surveillance technology.
- Today, the United Kingdom has more than 4 million cameras, one for every 14 Britons.
- In London, with its million closed-circuit TV units, the average citizen can be recorded more than 300 times a day.

The Brits have little to show for a program that's cost more than a half-billion pounds over the last decade, says Healy:

- An internal study by London police showed that for every 1,000 cameras, fewer than "one crime is solved per year" using video evidence.
- A 2005 report by the British Home Office found the camera systems had "little overall effect on crime levels."

In 2004, Richard Thomas, Britain's information commissioner, the official who reports to Parliament about privacy issues, publicly worried that the United Kingdom risked "sleepwalking into a surveillance society." Indeed, the nonprofit group Privacy International ranks the United Kingdom as the worst of the Western democracies at protecting privacy, with a record only slightly better than Russia's.

We're a few years behind our trans-Atlantic cousins, but we're catching up. We could use more public debate on this issue, before we sleepwalk into a surveillance society of our own, says Healy.

Source: Gene Healy, "Security Cameras' Slippery Slope," Washington Examiner, May 12, 2010.

For text:

http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/columns/Security-cameras_-_slippery-slope-93317309.html#ixzz0njvAPWd8

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