License plate readers spark debate

By DeAnn Smith, Digital Content Manager - email
KANSAS CITY, MO (KCTV) -

Police use license plate readers to track drivers, and this is sparking controversy.

Some say it's an invasion of privacy that police can track information about law-abiding citizens who have committed no crimes or traffic violations.

But police say it's a valuable tool when it comes to fighting crime. The readers helped locate a homicide suspect in the Kansas City area.

The American Civil Liberties Union is asking the Kansas City and Wichita police departments for information on their tracking and recording the movements of residents through their automatic license plate reader programs. The cameras are mounted on patrol cars or stationary objects, such as telephone poles or bridges. The camera snaps a picture of each vehicle that comes into view.

Other groups are seeking similar information from federal agencies.

"Automatic license plate readers make it possible for police to track our location whenever we drive our cars and to store that information forever," said Doug Bonney, legal director for the area ACLU chapter. "The American people have a right to know whether our police departments are using these tools in a limited and responsible manner, or whether they are keeping records of our movements for months or years for no good reason."

Lenexa Police Department Officer Dan Friesen said Lenexa has been using the readers for several years.

"It gives us the ability to read several tags in a short amount of time," he said. "We can go back if we're looking for a tag number or a particular type of a car to be able to show us if that particular info was read by one of our readers."

That can be hundreds of license plates every minute being read and fed into the system.
"There's no doubt," Bonney said. "Big Brother is watching."

He said the fear is the information can be obtained for reasons that have nothing to do with breaking the law.

"The danger is if the data isn't purged from the system within a reasonable amount of time then anybody can go back and say, 'Police department, I'd like to know where my husband was on July 31, 2012, and see if he was at his girlfriend's house,'" Bonney said.

Friesen said that would not happen. He said the information can eliminate people as suspects.

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