

Attention: Mayors, Councillors & CAOs

To use video surveillance or not? Urban Institute sheds light on this modern dilemma

Can surveillance video cameras help to lower crime? The Urban Institute says yes, but only under certain conditions.

More big cities are turning to surveillance video cameras as a means to fight crime, especially as police departments face the grim prospect of budget cuts and reduced manpower.

But do surveillance cameras actually have the power to reduce crime, and furthermore, are they worth the money? The answer might be yes on both accounts — so long as the cameras are actively monitored and there are enough of them.

The Urban Institute, which studies public policy decisions in Washington, D.C., and across the U.S., examined the surveillance camera systems in use by law enforcement in Baltimore, Chicago and Washington, D.C., to address what the organization said is a dearth of research on the topic.

“Results varied, with crime falling in some areas and remaining unchanged in others,” the Urban Institute reported Monday, Sept. 19, in its findings. “Much of the success or failure depended on how the surveillance system was set up and monitored and how each city balanced privacy and security.”

The study highlights the differing results among Baltimore, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Baltimore has “virtually saturated” its downtown and high-crime neighbourhoods with hundreds of cameras, which are actively monitored by retired police officers from a control center. The cameras have contributed to as many as 30 fewer incidents of crime per month since they were installed. The city’s surveillance system cost \$8.1 million as of mid-2008 for start-up and ongoing maintenance, and that investment has resulted in \$12 million in avoided “victimization” and criminal justice costs according to the Urban Institute. In other words, for every \$1 spent on surveillance cameras, \$1.50 is saved.

More than 8,000 video surveillance cameras have been installed in Chicago. Many of them are located in high-risk neighbourhoods: “These cameras are highly visible, with signs and flashing blue lights, and connected by a wireless network that allows officers to watch real-time camera feeds from their desktop computers.” While crime hasn’t dropped in all neighbourhoods where the cameras are located, those places where there are now fewer incidences of crime may have a higher density of cameras and those cameras are more actively monitored.

Unlike the first two cities, Washington D.C.’s camera system hasn’t resulted in less crime. Beginning in 2006, some cameras were installed in locations prone to violent crime. The cameras were marked but didn’t have flashing blue lights like in Baltimore and Chicago. Furthermore, Washington, D.C., enacted a policy that restricted how the cameras were monitored in order to protect citizens’ privacy.

The Urban Institute’s study offered several lessons learned, including:

- “Cities and neighbourhoods that saw no change in crime may not be actively monitoring their cameras or may have had too few cameras or may have had too few cameras to render the system a useful crime prevention and investigation tool.” But this must be balanced with the public’s privacy concerns.
- Installation, maintenance and monitoring of the cameras was far more costly than purchasing the cameras themselves. “Jurisdictions investing in a public surveillance system should do their own research rather than rely on the advice of vendors, who may not detail the associated costs.”
- “Involve the community at the outset.” The surveillance systems should be explained to the community before they’re put in place and how the footage will be used to help achieve public buy-in.

Click [here](#) for a PDF download of the Urban Institute’s research brief, *Evaluating the Use of Public Surveillance Cameras for Crime Control and Prevention — a Summary*.

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Thank you.

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