Miami-Dade County

'Big brother' in Coral Gables? Police capture data that says a lot about people's lives

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The Coral Gables Crime Intelligence Center has an air of futuristic sophistication, its technology so fantastic that it might remind you of a scene from the movie "The Dark Knight": Batman builds a machine that sweeps up data on everyone in Gotham and it works so well at helping him find the Joker — or potentially anyone else — that another good guy tells Batman it's "too much power for one person."

The biggest difference is the Coral Gables system is legal. Authorized users at the Crime Intelligence Center monitor the city's public spaces through 13 high-resolution screens, using advanced technology to help identify persons of interest and solve crimes faster than ever.

On one screen, software identifies patterns in video feeds — all vehicles that made a left turn at a particular intersection for example, or women who wore black blouses and blue jeans. Another program allows techs to generate rudimentary maps of where people have been over time.

Like Batman's machine, the crime intelligence system is so good at finding people that the center was specially designed to keep its users honest, said assistant city manager Frank Fernandez, who stressed the importance of balancing constitutional privacy rights with security. The center's glass walls give no privacy to those who might otherwise consider a clandestine search. And a video camera mounted to the ceiling monitors the technicians at all times. All users sign in with personalized credentials, and tracking anyone requires inputting a case number to ensure the system is being used for authorized investigations only.

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Among the impressive technology at the techs' fingertips is a cache of 48.2 million data points representing individual vehicle movements around the city.

That may sound boring compared to video monitoring, but license plate recognition data provide enough information to map basic movements of every car-owning resident in the city, according to Benjamin Stevenson of the American Civil Liberties Union. While that technology alone cannot say exactly where you are going or what you are doing, he says Coral Gables residents still have a reason to worry about their privacy.

"It's more pointing in the direction than exact mapping," said Stevenson, who says license plate data collected over the span of months or years tell a lot about someone's life. "He goes to work at certain times. Maybe he has a girlfriend in the north part of the town because he goes there at strange hours of the night. Things like that."

The more data collected on an individual, the more you can say about that person's life, said Stevenson. And Coral Gables says it has collected more license plate data than any of the 27 South Florida law enforcement agencies that use the technology, including MIami-Dade County and the city of Miami Beach. That's partly because more people travel through Coral Gables than other places, city officials say. But Coral Gables also has more cameras than most.

Thirty cameras located at strategic points around Coral Gables take photos of the back of each passing vehicle. The system uses optical character recognition technology to read the license plate, then records the tag, the location of the vehicle, and the time and date the vehicle moved through that point. The data are saved for three years on a private server in Virginia.

According to the Coral Gables Police Department, cameras along the city's major arteries create a "geofence," seen as a deterrent against would-be-criminals. Since the City Commission unanimously approved the purchase of the $1.35 million system in 2015, Fernandez says crime in the city has dropped more than 30 percent.

The license plate reader system allows police to know when a vehicle enters the city, when it leaves and if it goes through any major town centers. It also helps police locate vehicles associated with crimes by alerting nearby officers when it detects a "hot plate." The commission has since approved more than $1 million in additional funding for the program.

Cameras make a lot of Coral Gables residents feel safer. But some worry the license plate recognition system has brought an era of "Big Brother" to the City Beautiful.

"They pretty much know your daily routine every single day," said Raul Mas Canosa, a Coral Gables resident who called the system Orwellian. "I think they have a legitimate law enforcement purpose but what is troubling is what are the parameters for this?"

The ACLU argues one of the biggest constitutional issues with location data collection is how long it is stored.

"My estimation is that the usefulness of LPR [License Plate Reader] data deteriorates really quickly," said Stevenson. Knowing where a stolen vehicle is in real time makes sense, he said, but the information is

less useful the next day, much less three years later. Data stored over time serve the purpose of mapping lives, he said, even if the person hasn't committed a crime.

Historical data can help solve cold cases, said Fernandez. And, according to the company that built the system, the ability to recognize patterns even provided a lead in a recent South Florida insurance fraud case.

The data collected by the license plate readers are "nothing compared to the private sector," Fernandez said. He pointed out most phone apps collect some sort of location data on users who don't specifically opt out or turn off location services. That data can be sold to private vendors who use it to learn where people live, work, shop, or go to school.

Though less specific than location data from phone apps, license plate recognition systems have still faced legislative push-back on constitutional privacy grounds.

"Information about where you are, 'location information,' is personally identifiable information" and should be subject to laws about data retention and surveillance, wrote Claire Guthrie Gastañaga, executive director of the Virginia ACLU. In 2012, even the FBI temporarily stopped purchasing license plate readers, as internal emails obtained by the ACLU suggest it wrestled with privacy issues.

License plate data alone are not associated with a person's name, and doesn't require a warrant to collect. But critics point out that the data can be matched up to other personal data that would make an individual identifiable. To Stevenson, it becomes an effort to strike a balance between security and privacy.

"Is this going to make us safer? And what checks are in place that the government isn't going to get anything wrong?" Stevenson asks.

According to Coral Gables police, internal audits show a 97 percent accuracy rate in reading tags. And any time the information is used in an investigation, the tag is verified by a person to ensure someone is not being incorrectly associated with a crime because of a technical failure. The city did not publish data on how many crimes were solved with this technology.

License Plate Readers in Coral Gables capture this information on every car that passes by. The data is stored in a server operated by Vigilant Solutions.

The system used in Coral Gables was developed by Vigilant Solutions, a private company that claims to provide the largest network of license plate data in the world. Vigilant holds contracts with thousands of law enforcement agencies, providing data on at least 80 million vehicle locations each month across the United States. The company also provides services to law enforcement agencies in other countries including Egypt, Turkey, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates.

Vigilant also holds a contract with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which uses license plate data from its national repository to track undocumented migrants. The company also provides a commercial data service where users can link license plate data provided by private entities like insurance companies.

Contractually, only Coral Gables can decide who gets to access the data the city collects, according to Mary Alice Johnson, spokeswoman for Vigilant Solutions. Whether it participates in the larger national law enforcement network or commercial data program is up to the city.

Maria Rosa Higgins Fallon, spokeswoman for the city government, said license plate data collected in Coral Gables are shared with the other 26 South Florida agencies that use Vigilant systems and no one else. She said Coral Gables data are not sold, nor provided to ICE or any other state or federal law enforcement agency at this time. The city plans to expand its program by putting cameras on top of a few police cars in coming years.

Vigilant also provides an app that allows officers to take pictures of license plates on their phones and find other associated vehicles. The company even developed facial recognition software that can match feeds from any high-resolution security camera to photographs uploaded into the system. But Coral Gables is not currently considering any of those other services Vigilant provides, said Higgins.