

## Police Go Live Monitoring D.C. Crime Cameras

Chief's Initiative Aimed At Faster Response Time

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D.C. police are now watching live images from dozens of surveillance cameras posted in high-crime parts of the city, hoping to respond faster to shootings, robberies and other offenses and catch suspects before they get away.

Since August 2006, the city has installed 73 cameras across the city, mostly on utility poles, at a cost of about \$4 million. But until recently, officers were using them mainly as an investigative tool -- checking the recordings after crimes were committed in hopes of turning up leads and evidence.

[Police Chief Cathy L. Lanier](#) said she thought the department wasn't making the most of the technology and was missing opportunities to more quickly solve crimes -- or even stop them in progress. "I thought, 'Why the heck aren't we watching them?'" Lanier said.

And so, for about 40 hours a week, a small team of officers in the department's Joint Operations Command Center watches the live feeds from 10 to 15 of the cameras. They choose locations based on the latest crime trends -- focusing, for example, on areas in Southeast Washington beset by gun violence.

The District is following cities such as [Baltimore](#), [Chicago](#), [New York](#) and [Philadelphia](#), where police have actively monitored live camera scenes for years. [London](#) is often credited with having the most extensive network -- 500,000 cameras that make up the "Ring of Steel," dating to the early 1990s. "I'd love to have the whole city wired like London," said Lanier, adding that she didn't anticipate that becoming a reality.

The District's cameras have quite a range, officials said. Officers can rotate angles for different views. They can zoom in on faces of potential suspects and pick up license plate numbers from cars several blocks away. Officers monitor 911 calls while watching the cameras, and they can switch feeds if they learn of a crime being reported at one of the sites under surveillance.

Police have directed one arrest from the command center, a drug deal they spotted at a Northwest Washington gas station a few weeks ago. Officers called in vice units that surprised the suspect.

Lanier said the initiative is a pilot project that began without any fanfare in mid-November. The [D.C. Council](#) is expected to learn details of the new use of the cameras in a report due Friday. Members will probably assess the effectiveness of the live monitoring and weigh concerns about balancing public safety and privacy.

The city first turned to cameras nearly a decade ago, creating a downtown network to aid police in monitoring large demonstrations, inaugurations and other big events. At the time, civil liberties groups and some council members raised concerns about privacy rights.

Over the years, residents in many parts of the city pushed to get cameras for crime-fighting purposes, and that led to the program's expansion into neighborhoods in 2006. Police hope to add about 50 cameras in the next two years and make other upgrades, at an estimated cost of \$4.5 million. Of the 73 cameras in neighborhoods, police can get live feeds from 54, officials said. Eventually, they plan to have the capability to get live images from all of the cameras.

The cameras are in public places, clearly marked with the D.C. police logo. But Arthur B. Spitzer, legal director of the Washington office of the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), said he remains concerned about privacy. Spitzer said police will be observing more average, law-abiding people who are unaware they are being watched.

Spitzer said there is also a danger of officers "zooming in on attractive women or engaging in idle curiosity."

Mel Blizzard, the police official in charge of the camera program, said standards guard against misuse. "This is not intended to be Big Brother watching but to be more responsive to our residents' needs. As long as you put protocols in place, which we have, we can be answerable to the community and the government," he said.

The live monitoring has also raised questions about the best use of limited police resources. Typically, two or three officers are assigned to monitoring.

"To just park someone in front of a bank of monitors is not a good use of resources," said council member [Phil Mendelson](#) (D-At Large), head of the Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary. "The issue of the cameras is whether we get the best bang for our buck. The more officers you have on the street, the more visibility you have."

Former D.C. police chief [Charles H. Ramsey](#), who left office in December 2006, echoed that view. He said that under his tenure, he did not want to dedicate personnel to live monitoring, preferring to have officers on the street.

"You can always go back after the fact and look at the tape," said Ramsey, who is commissioner of the police department in Philadelphia, which implemented live monitoring before he arrived.

Lanier said that she took action last fall after officials mapped locations of shootings in the city and realized that the gunfire often was taking place within range of the cameras. The department is also using a technology called ShotSpotter, which detects the sound of gunfire in some parts of the District.

In one case, police looked at recordings of a homicide in August in Southeast. Lanier said she was appalled by the tape, which showed several people passing the victim without stopping to help, including a man smoking a cigarette while staring at the body. Ten minutes went by before anyone called 911. That incident cemented Lanier's decision to be more proactive.

"It literally makes you sick to your stomach to watch somebody executed that way," Lanier said of the images, which captured the slaying of Antwan McKinney, 38, in the middle of the 900 block of Valley Avenue SE. "The guy laid there for so long. No human being should lie there for so long."

There have been no arrests in the case.

Since the cameras were installed, investigators have pulled 130 recordings for possible use as evidence in criminal cases, officials said, although none has been used in trials. Lanier said she hopes that by watching live images, officers will pick up clues for police and prosecutors.

Neighborhood activists said they want police to be watching.

"All of [the cameras] should be monitored," said community activist [Sandra Seegars](#), who lives in Ward 8, which has the city's highest rate of incidents of gun violence. "In my neighborhood, we're not concerned about privacy -- just keeping crime down and catching people who are committing the crimes."

On a recent afternoon in [Columbia Heights](#), several residents said they supported live monitoring. At 14th and Girard streets, where there were multiple shootings and several homicides last year, Kafi Gregory, 27, said she hopes police start watching around the clock.

"As much crime as is going on here, they need it," Gregory said.

But despite the hopes, cameras have limitations.

A block away and slightly around the corner, a pregnant woman was walking at 14th and [Fairmont](#) streets when a man approached her, grabbed her purse and pushed her around. The robbery occurred out of camera range -- and the case has not been solved.