Automatic License Plate Recognition
Sensible Limitations Are Needed to Prevent Government Tracking of Massachusetts Drivers

What is ALPR?

Automatic License Plate Recognition (ALPR) is an increasingly popular new law enforcement technology. Used appropriately, it can be a tool to help police do their jobs more efficiently, improving enforcement of motor vehicle infractions and other routine matters. The ACLU of Massachusetts does not oppose the use of ALPR for legitimate policing purposes, including traffic and outstanding warrant enforcement.

However, ALPR technology is very powerful and has the potential to be powerfully abused. A single unit mounted on a police cruiser can capture thousands of license plates per minute. It stores information in a database recording not only the license plate number, but also the GPS location of where it was "pinged". If the information is collectively stored, over time it becomes a treasure trove of personal data showing where people traveled, when, and for how long.

Why is ALPR dangerous?

Absent good policies restricting how location information can be retained and shared, ALPR ceases to serve as a legitimate law enforcement tool and becomes a fundamentally different technology. It becomes a tracking tool aimed at all of us, even those of us who haven't committed any crimes, tracking drivers' movements and whereabouts as we go about our ordinary lives.

At present, there are no policies in place to prevent ALPR from being used in ways that violate people's civil rights and liberties. Why is this a problem? Just imagine how easy it would be for police to compile lists of people who attend AA meetings, political gatherings or union meetings, or who frequent porn shops. They could simply park one of these machines at the entrance to any parking lot or on the street and without any human effort compile a fairly accurate guest list for any event or occasion.

Instead of providing privacy protections, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has said that it will require municipalities that receive grant money for ALPR technology to send all of their captured plate data to the state's criminal justice data center, CJIS, which is in turn accessible to all other state law enforcement agencies and the federal government. Without limits on the collection, retention, and sharing of ALPR data, government at all levels can quickly amass huge amounts of information about where we travel by car.

Is this technology being used in my community?

Yes. More than 30 Massachusetts municipalities, in which a majority of state residents live and work, have acquired ALPR technology in the past few years, as have the state police. It's in the cities (Boston, Worcester, Springfield, Lawrence, Lowell, Brockton, Fall River), the suburbs (Newton, Hingham, Ashland, Burlington, Randolph), and small towns in between. For a complete list, see privacysos.org/alpr.

Powerful technology demands sensible policy

Every community should think carefully about whether it wants to give this kind of power to local police. And any community that decides to invest in ALPR should also establish policies to prohibit abuses. The state legislature should also act to protect residents from ALPR tracking.

At a minimum, a good ALPR policy must:
- Specify legitimate, narrow uses for the technology, such as checking warrants or registration violations.
    - ALPR should not be used to track our movement and whereabouts, whether in the present or for future data-mining. Such unrestrained monitoring is inconsistent with a free society.
- Require that all "non-hit" or non-criminal data be deleted within 10 days.
- Permit sharing of individually-identifiable ALPR data only for specifically-authorized enforcement.
- Establish auditing mechanisms to ensure appropriate use of ALPR technology and data.
- Provide sanctions for misuse of ALPR technology by individual officers.