California city bans predictive policing in U.S. first

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NEW YORK (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - As officials mull steps to tackle police brutality and racism, California's Santa Cruz has become the first U.S. city to ban predictive policing, which digital rights experts said could spark similar moves across the country.

"Understanding how predictive policing and facial recognition can be disportionately biased against people of color, we officially banned the use of these technologies in the city of Santa Cruz," Mayor Justin Cummings said on Wednesday.

His administration will work with the police to "help eliminate racism in policing", the seaside city's first male African-American mayor said on his Facebook page, following a vote on Tuesday evening.

Used by police across the United States for almost a decade, predictive policing relies on algorithms to interpret police records, analyzing arrest or parole data to send officers to target chronic offenders, or identifying places where crime may occur.

But critics says it reinforces racist patterns of policing - low-income,

ethnic minority neighbourhoods have historically been overpoliced so the data shows them as crime hotspots, leading to the deployment of more police to those areas.

"As Santa Cruz rightly recognized, predictive policing and facial recognition are dangerous, racially biased technologies that should never be used by our government," said Matt Cagle, a lawyer with the ACLU.

PredPol Inc, the Santa Cruz-headquartered firm that pioneered the technology, said that it supported the city resolution's requirement that predictive policing "will not perpetuate bias", among other criteria.

"Given the institutionalized state of racial inequality in America, this is a legitimate filter to be applied to any new technology acquired by a public entity, whether used for public safety or not," it said on Twitter on Tuesday.

Boston's city council on Wednesday voted to ban face surveillance technology, a move also welcomed by digital rights activists.

"Lawmakers across the country have a responsibility to step up and dismantle surveillance systems that have long been used to repress activism, target communities of color, and invade people's private lives," Cagle said in emailed comments.

Roya Pakzad, a Santa Cruz-based researcher who founded human rights group Taraaz, said campaigners would continue to push for more limits on police use of technology, including requiring them to seek community approval of any new surveillance tool.

"What is still missed in this ordinance is a requirement for public

transparency and oversight," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.