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Study Questions Whether Cameras Cut Crime

By **Jennifer 8. Lee** March 3, 2009 10:16 am

Do surveillance cameras deter criminals?

A recently published statistical study out of New York University says they do not deter it much, if at all, based on five years of evidence from Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan.

By looking at crime rates within the two complexes and in Manhattan's 13th Precinct, which encircles them, two researchers said that their statistical calculations showed no persuasive evidence that the installation of cameras reduced the crime rate in Peter Cooper Village from 2002 to 2006. However, there was stronger evidence for a drop in minor crime at Stuyvesant Town. There was not meaningful enough information available on more serious crime in the complexes.

The study was conducted by David F. Greenberg, a professor of sociology, and Jeffrey B. Roush, an operations management consultant, using data from Jan. 1, 2002, through December 2006. An integrated security system, which included surveillance cameras, was introduced by the end of 2004, which allowed them to compare and contrast before-and-after figures.

There had previously been four studies of closed-circuit television as a crime prevention measure in American settings, according to the researchers. One study found that giving the police access to a combination of surveillance cameras, up-to-the-second police reports and electronic listening devices mounted around the the high-crime city of East Orange, N.J., helped reduce crime by 50 percent between

2003 and 2006 — with murders declining by nearly two-thirds, rapes by nearly a third, and robberies by half.

But the other three studies, which ranged from 1978 to 2002 and focused on lower-crime situations, found that the cameras' impact on reducing crime was statistically inconclusive. And the researchers raise the question whether the trade-offs in cost and loss of privacy are worth it. Civil liberties groups have also questioned whether surveillance cameras, which have proliferated in New York City, have deterred crime.

The Police Department, however, maintains that cameras were responsible for a 35 percent reduction in crime in public housing soon after their installation in public spaces there.

That being said, surveillance cameras have helped law enforcement *solve* crimes, by corroborating testimony from witnesses or tracing suspects.

For example, this week news broke of an East Village woman who claimed she was raped by a police officer while his partner stood by in December, after they escorted her back to her apartment when she was drunk. A surveillance camera from a nearby bar caught the officers entering and exiting three times, once with a key. "When they leave the second time, one notices the camera, and they do their best to avoid the camera," Heather Millstone, the bar owner, told *The New York Post*. "It's as plain as day. When they enter the building the third time, they're specifically out of camera range."

The camera, it seems, concerned the officers, but did not deter them.

Video evidence turns up in cases solved and unsolved. For example, the police put out video of a man believed to be the bomber who put an explosive in Times Square in 2008 and a tollbooth video of Keith Phoenix, a man who was sought in the beating of an Ecuadorean man.

The city obviously has faith in surveillance technology, given its plan for the expensive Ring of Steel, with mobile teams of heavily armed officers as well as technology including closed-circuit television cameras, license plate readers and

explosive trace detection systems. This major effort is directed less at reducing run-of-the-mill daily crime than at deterring potential terrorist activity, but it has privacy advocates alarmed.

Chicago has tried another strategy by installing a system that links cameras to 911. Even if surveillance cameras cannot prevent crimes from happening, the police hope that the system is almost as good — that it will enable them to get there as soon as possible when a crime occurs.

Are surveillance cameras worth the cost in resources and loss of privacy, given the role that they play in deterring or solving crimes?

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