



FUCK THE POLICE, TRUST THE PEOPLE

Surveillance Bureaucracy Expands the Stalker State

The **Stop LAPD Spying Coalition** is a volunteer-run grassroots organization rooted in the Skid Row community on the stolen Tongva territory known as Los Angeles. For almost a decade, we have been building power to dismantle LAPD surveillance, to fight for a world without policing, and to end mass criminalization. Throughout that struggle, we have organized not only against the police who cast deadly suspicion on our communities but also **against police reformers** who affirm that suspicion by entrusting the state to regulate surveillance, as though our people cannot be trusted to name and end their oppression themselves.

Surveillance bureaucracy is the latest reform that will help the state legitimate policing. Reformers always exploit moments of mass insurgency to make state violence more expansive and more durable. We saw this with the growth of body-worn camera surveillance that followed the Ferguson uprising. It's happening again. **We call upon communities across the country to reject surveillance bureaucratization and join us in building grassroots power to abolish the surveillance state.**

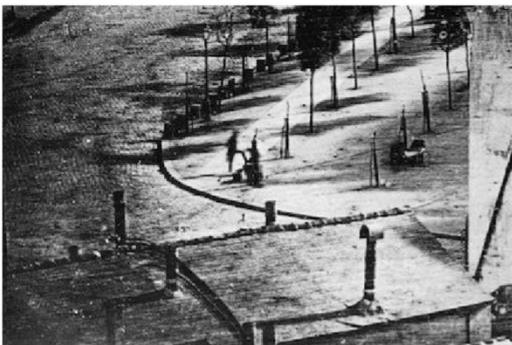
June 2020

“Surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness.”

Simone Browne, *Dark Matters* (2015)

“We will never have a complete definition of fascism, because it is in constant motion, showing a new face to fit any particular set of problems that arise to threaten the predominance of the traditionalist, capitalist ruling class. But if one were forced for the sake of clarity to define it in a word simple enough for all to understand, that word would be ‘reform.’”

George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (1971)



A MOMENT IN TIME



A CONTINUATION OF HISTORY



Who is pushing for surveillance bureaucracy?

Campaigns to push this reform are typically led by legal nonprofits. The campaigns Stop LAPD Spying has the most history resisting were led by the ACLU. In February 2015, we released a [detailed analysis](#) explaining our opposition to the ACLU of California's proposals for surveillance governance legislation. Later that year, [we used public record laws to expose](#) that the ACLU's local Director of Police Practices shared a draft of their model surveillance legislation with an LAPD deputy chief, asking "if you have any concerns with any of the provisions that are in here" and inviting ideas for "provisions you think should be in here but aren't." (These emails raise the question: how much police reform is written with police help? We encourage using open records requests to find out.)

Two years later, in 2017, the ACLU in partnership with other reformist groups worked with municipal prosecutors and a City Council member to advance legislation like this in Los Angeles. Stop LAPD Spying and other community organizations confronted the groups and forced them to withdraw the ordinance. The ACLU then took the fight statewide with SB 1186, a law that would have empowered local authorities across California to streamline the expansion of surveillance technologies. The ACLU [announced](#) that the bill would mean "a seat at the table" and "public debate" to create community assent for surveillance. We mobilized communities across California to defeat the bill. We hope this history puts legal reformers on notice that they will face fierce resistance from our communities if they try to enact laws legitimating surveillance of our people.

In the time since we fought back SB 1186, similar fights have unfolded across the country. Most recently, New York City this month enacted the POST Act, a law that we believe empowers police to write self-governance policies and claim their violence is legitimated by public input. With mass movements taking to the streets to oppose police violence, [politicians who were behind a billion-dollar increase to NYPD's budget](#) needed good press, and legal reformers helped hand them that win. We encourage people to [read the text of the POST Act](#) and analyze it for themselves.

We highlight that last example because we worry the current national uprising against police terror will be used to force similarly reforms across the country. The politicians and lawyers behind the POST Act put out a press release [celebrating their "tremendous" and "vital" victory](#). But the truth is that legislation like this is the easiest possible "win" in this moment, and it betrays the bolder visions of the mass movement forming on our streets. Our people are [facing down riot police and political prosecutions](#) to demand that police be defunded, dismantled, and abolished. No one is marching for police self-auditing and impact policies. Yet the state will be quick to accept surveillance bureaucratization as a hedge against those demands.

Abolitionists need to not only to fight for the changes we want but also resist the ones we don't. In order to do that, our people must be organized and educated, and we must plan to win.

What is surveillance bureaucratization?

There are many different approaches, but the central idea is transparency: police publicize some information about their surveillance systems, and then regulations create “public” approval of those systems. The requirements for this approval vary, though in our view, a police-controlled process can be just as harmful as one that promises “public” control.

New York City’s POST Act falls in that first category, tasking NYPD with writing “surveillance impact and use policies” saying what police think the impact of their surveillance will be and also what policies police plan to follow. NYPD then posts the policies on their website, where the public has 45 days to comment. The police are asked to “consider” comments, though no one has power to force changes or explanations. NYPD also never has to share how they got to their conclusions. The underlying information remains secret as ever, and the public only sees what the police concluded, carefully framed by the NYPD’s army of lawyers.

Other models feature a broader input process including public hearings and an approval vote. But this just deepens the same problem: it takes power away from the people and directs opposition into a process that marginalizes community voices, while elevating voices that support police or – at most – compromise with them. And at the end of the day, this legislation allows police to say that the community “controls” surveillance (“community control” is even in the title of some of these laws) when the truth is that police set the agenda and hold the power. After securing “public” approval, the police unleash their violence with a claim of legitimacy and public input.

Police reform is crucial to the evolution of racial domination.

Police reform is inherently anti-Black because it improves the operation of an institution that has been white supremacist at every moment of its history. Surveillance is the tip of policing’s knife, and it originates in slave patrols, indigenous extermination, lantern laws (forcing Black people to illuminate their bodies in public), infiltration of organized dissent, and enforcement of apartheid.

Surveillance bureaucratization can whitewash that history, allowing the state to treat surveillance as a mostly fine endeavor that occasionally tips into excess. This lets police claim community “approval” for their oppression. It also gives elite institutions yet more input in state violence (the [history of wealthy funders capturing civil rights advocacy is long](#)). And it puts lawyers – the profession most complicit in rebuilding and legitimating the carceral state – in greater control of police. In short, it makes policing more powerful, more lawful, and more difficult to dismantle.

As abolitionists, we believe that oppressive systems cannot be reformed. But surveillance bureaucracy is an especially dangerous strategy because it gambles liberation on the same regulatory framework that has made policing so oppressive, hoping for a different result this time around. Decades of transparency legislation, civilian oversight, and self-auditing have done nothing to reduce the power of the carceral state. Instead, they helped create a vast punishment bureaucracy that lends political legitimacy and social inertia to mass caging and police violence. It is absurd to hope that applying this same framework to the governance of surveillance technology will do anything other than expand the reach and harm of policing, much like how these reforms have long made the carceral state bigger, harsher, more durable, and racist as ever.

The basic premises of surveillance bureaucracy betray everything abolitionists must fight for as we build autonomy and safety beyond policing:

1. Surveillance bureaucracy trusts police to self-audit and self-govern, when we know that police can never be trusted and that laws facilitating the use of police technology will be used to build new oppression.
2. Surveillance bureaucracy pretends that police violence is not “transparent,” as though it is not in our faces, on our necks, and piercing our flesh, as though surveillance can be distinguished from the rest of policing.
3. Surveillance bureaucracy trusts that the concerns of those most harmed by surveillance will be well understood and represented by police and politicians, when all that these people consistently do is excuse or expand state violence.
4. Surveillance bureaucracy pretends policing can be reduced with new rules and criteria, when we know that this just leads police to invest more resources and personnel into monitoring and avoiding “compliance.”
5. Surveillance bureaucracy presumes that our communities want to be surveilled, so long as the state follows a heavily stacked process, pretends to consider input, and checks off a few baseline legal requirements.

We know from our daily organizing work that our people do not want to be surveilled, either illegally or legally. At a time when mass uprisings are helping make that view widespread, we should use this power to abolish components of the surveillance state. We should enact bans on police surveillance of faces, of association, of movement, of expression, of youth. That list could go on. Introducing and enacting bans like this would actually help dismantle policing. Surveillance bureaucratization goes in the opposite direction, giving the state a footing to defend itself and stake out more durable positions.

A useful comparison here is our experience with community “advisory” boards, in which the state empowers people and organizations who they trust to work with them. As we know from our experience with the Los Angeles Police Commission (a civilian board that oversees the LAPD), these institutions do not represent the community as a whole as much as they represent a narrow segment that benefits either directly or adjacently from the police state. Even when the representatives are elected, they still tend to be least accountable to the people who are most harmed by surveillance. These institutions just redistribute power among our oppressors.

There is a better way to resist surveillance: building grassroots power to resist and systematically dismantle state oppression.

Unlike reforms that entrust police to govern themselves, grassroots resistance puts power in the hands of the people. The heritage of our resistance includes the struggles to liberate people from colonialism, enslavement, and capitalism. This is a journey of decolonization, divesting from police and investing in the autonomy that the state has denied our communities.

Here in Los Angeles, our success against LAPD surveillance has been growing: just in the past year, we forced police to dismantle their [LASER](#) and [Chronic Offender](#) (both ended in 2019) as well as [PredPol](#) (ended this April) surveillance programs, all using grassroots organizing and direct action. We also worked to ground LAPD's drone program for years and have challenged LAPD's reliance on UCLA scholars and infrastructure. And we are currently developing campaigns to take on more forms of policing.

Through much of that side, legal nonprofits have fought on the opposite side of our struggle. For example, as we fought to dismantle LASER, police pointed to a [paper that DOJ and the Vera Institute](#) had put out promoting the surveillance program. Last year, with Vera expanding its influence in Los Angeles, [we urged abolitionists](#) to "reject allegiances with entities like Vera that use the rhetoric of liberation but have a long history of serving the carceral state."

The example of the ACLU may be worse. As noted above, the ACLU sought [input on their surveillance ordinance from LAPD](#), promising "to work toward enacting a set of rules, like these, that will ensure that the use of surveillance technology is consistent with the principles we've discussed that I think we agree on." In contrast to this collaboration and sharing of "principles" with LAPD, the ACLU never sought input from the communities harmed by surveillance. Instead, grassroots groups [were only asked after-the-fact to "sign on"](#) to the ACLU's proposal and to mobilize their constituents in favor of it. This is how legal nonprofits use the "community" time and again: as cover for collusion with police. Giving into this model is playing to lose.

Legal reformers might say that our work is not politically expedient. We believe these people are on the opposite side of our struggle to end surveillance. It is easy to claim political success by passing legislation that doesn't actually challenge police power. In fact, nothing could be easier at moments like now when the masses are exploring their power to make bold demands. Reform endangers us by both by diverting energy from more promising fights and by creating structures that police use to empower themselves.

Abolition is politically inexpedient only if legal reformers succeed in making it so and only if we refuse to struggle for it. Liberation requires imagination, it requires strategy, and it requires courage. Our efforts to embody abolition and end policing are rooted as much in historical analysis as in the truths we see around us every day. Police are hunting our people, tear gassing our children, and killing our kin. Our fight is against anyone who works to empower and legitimate domination of our people. While we do not aim to divide those fighting alongside us, we will not shy from naming the police state's consorts. This is a journey of collective liberation. We are eager to learn together, to teach each other, to know our power, and to know our fight.