



Police Drones Are Starting to Think for Themselves

In one Southern California city, flying drones with artificial intelligence are aiding investigations while presenting new civil rights questions.



By Cade Metz

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CHULA VISTA, Calif. — When the Chula Vista police receive a 911 call, they can dispatch a flying drone with the press of a button.

On a recent afternoon, from a launchpad on the roof of the Chula Vista Police Department, they sent a drone across the city to a crowded parking lot where a young man was asleep in the front seat of a stolen car with drug paraphernalia on his lap.

When the man left the car, carrying a gun and a bag of heroin, a nearby police car had trouble following as he sprinted across the street and ducked behind a wall. But as he threw the gun into a dumpster and hid the bag of heroin, the drone, hovering above him, caught everything on camera. When he slipped through the back door of a strip mall, exited through the front door and ran down the sidewalk, it caught that, too.

Watching the live video feed, an officer back at headquarters relayed the details to the police on the scene, who soon caught the man and took him into custody. Later, they retrieved the gun and the heroin. And after another press of the button, the drone returned, on its own, to the roof.

Each day, the Chula Vista police respond to as many as 15 emergency calls with a drone, launching more than 4,100 flights since the program began two years ago. Chula Vista, a Southern California city with a population of 270,000, is the first in the country to adopt such a program, called Drone as First Responder.



Capt. Don Redmond, left, and Officer Evan Linney monitoring a police drone operation from the Chula Vista Police Department's command center. John Francis Peters for The New York Times



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