Major UK retailers urged to quit 'authoritarian' police facial recognition strategy

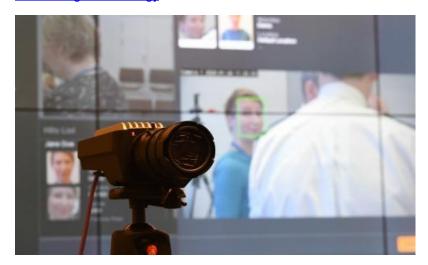Some of Britain's biggest retailers, including Tesco, John Lewis and Sainsbury's, have been urged to pull out of a new policing strategy amid warnings it risks wrongly criminalising people of colour, women and LGBTQ+ people. A coalition of 14 human rights groups has written to the main retailers – also including Marks & Spencer, the Co-op, Next, Boots and Primark – saying that their participation in a new government-backed scheme that relies heavily on facial recognition technology to combat shoplifting will "amplify existing inequalities in the criminal justice system". The letter, from Liberty, Amnesty International and Big Brother Watch, among others, questions the unchecked rollout of a technology that has provoked fierce criticism over its impact on privacy and human rights at a time when the European Union is seeking to ban the technology in public spaces through proposed legislation. "Facial recognition technology notoriously misidentifies people of colour, women and LGBTQ+ people, meaning that already marginalised groups are more likely to be subject to an invasive stop by police, or at increased risk of physical surveillance, monitoring and harassment by workers in your stores," the letter states.Its authors also express dismay that the move will "reverse steps" that big retailers introduced during the Black Lives Matter movement, including high-profile commitments to be champions of diversity, equality and inclusion. Meanwhile, concerns over the broadening use of facial recognition technology have further intensified after the emergence of details of a police watchlist used to justify the contentious decision to use biometric surveillance at July's Formula One British Grand Prix at Silverstone. The previous year, five climate protesters had climbed on to the track on the Wellington Straight, one of the fastest parts of the Northamptonshire circuit, and were removed by marshals and arrested. New documents, obtained through a freedom of information request, reveal that two-thirds of people on a secret watchlist drawn up by Northamptonshire police were not wanted for arrest or suspected of "criminal activity", prompting campaigners to believe that the majority are likely to have been protesters. Of 790 names on the watchlist, just 234 people were "wanted for arrest, either on a warrant and/or suspicion of criminal activity", with 556 others not wanted for arrest. Critics say using biometric surveillance could impinge on a person's "freedom of expression" and deter people from protesting. Madeleine Stone, senior advocacy officer at Big Brother Watch, said: "Live facial recognition is a dystopian mass surveillance tool that turns streets into police lineups. Deploying this biometric surveillance to track protesters is an authoritarian step that aligns the UK with the likes of Russia and China." Stone added: "The composition of this watchlist suggests that police forces are increasingly using this technology not only to make arrests but to monitor the location of innocent members of the public."

No arrests were made at the Silverstone race despite the crowd of more than 400,000 being scanned by the technology. The police's new strategy to crack down on shoplifting – called Project Pegasus and unveiled last Monday – involves retailers stumping up almost £800,000 over two years to fund a partnership with police. Under the Pegasus initiative, shoplifting will be targeted like organised crime with a specialist police team to gather intelligence on gangs responsible for widespread retail crime. However, the coalition of campaign groups, which also includes the Runnymede Trust and Privacy International, urged the government to halt Pegasus and focus instead on tackling the root causes of shoplifting, namely poverty and the cost of living crisis. "The reality is that we cannot police and surveil our way out of a cost ofliving crisis, low wages, an inadequate social security system, soaring housing costs and rocketing food prices," it stated. Emmanuelle Andrews, policy and campaigns manager at Liberty, said: "The expansion of facial recognition technology in supermarkets is a threat to our rights, targets people affected by poverty, and fails to address the root causes of shoplifting. "In particular, it has been used to discriminate against minority groups and people of colour. It has no place on our streets or in our shops." Despite the increasing adoption of the technology, campaigners point out there is no legal basis for police to use it, with a courtroom challenge finding that South Wales police's use of biometric surveillance was unlawful and breached privacy rights and equality laws. On Monday, the police minister, Chris Philp, chaired a meeting with senior police leaders and big UK retailers to outline his backing of facial recognition technology to tackle retail crime. Philp said: "I want a new zero-tolerance approach to tackling shoplifting. It is a blight on our high streets and communities and puts the livelihoods of traders at risk. I am determined to drive forward change." According to official figures, an average of more than 1,000 shoplifting offences a day were recorded by police in England and Wales in the year to June - a 25% increase compared with the previous 12 months.