

NEWS

Cute videos, but little evidence: Police say Amazon Ring isn't much of a crime fighter

Hundreds of police departments have signed agreements with Ring to gain access to footage filmed on home surveillance cameras



— Ring cameras turn neighborhoods into surveillance networks. But do they really slash crime?

Glenn Harvey / for NBC News

Feb. 15, 2020, 6:16 AM CST

By Cyrus Farivar

Last year, Ring, the doorbell and security camera company – which Amazon bought in 2018 – released a [promotional video](#), centered on the town of Winter Park, Florida.

The video opens with an aerial shot of the well-to-do Orlando suburb, where nearly 30,000 people live.

“We have Ring cameras in our community,” says Police Chief Michael Deal in the voiceover. “And we understand the value of those cameras in helping us solve crimes.”

But the Winter Park Police Department hasn’t made a single arrest facilitated by footage obtained from Ring cameras since it partnered with the company in April 2018, according to a department spokesman, Lt.

Edwin Santos.

Since 2018, [Ring](#) has signed up more than 800 law enforcement agencies as “partners,” offering them access to video footage recorded by its millions of customers’ internet-connected cameras across the U.S. through an app called Neighbors.

Ring promises to “[make neighborhoods safer](#)” by [deterring](#) and helping to [solve crimes](#), citing its own research that says an installation of its doorbell cameras reduces burglaries by more than 50 percent. But an NBC News Investigation has found – after interviews with 40 law enforcement agencies in eight states that have partnered with Ring for at least three months – that there is little concrete evidence to support the claim.

Three agencies said the ease with which the public can share Ring videos means officers spend time reviewing clips of non-criminal issues such as racoons and petty disagreements between neighbors. Others noted that the flood of footage generated by Ring cameras rarely led to positive identifications of suspects, let alone arrests.

Thirteen of the 40 jurisdictions reached, including Winter Park, said they had made zero arrests as a result of Ring footage. Thirteen were able to confirm arrests made after reviewing Ring footage, while two offered estimates. The rest, including large cities like Phoenix, Miami, and Kansas City, Missouri, said that they don’t know how many arrests had been made as a result of their relationship with Ring – and therefore could not evaluate its effectiveness – even though they had been working with the company for well over a year.

Ring’s rise also comes at a time when reports of property crimes, including package theft and burglaries, are already in steep decline across the United States.

“We don’t have any research data showing that Ring has a correlation to a reduction,” emailed Jodee Reyes, a spokeswoman for the Carlsbad Police Department, outside San Diego. “Our residential burglary rate began decreasing before Ring gave us access to their portal. There are more than likely many factors that have led to this decrease.”

While about a quarter of the law enforcement agencies NBC spoke to said they believed the cameras, discreetly fitted inside internet-connected doorbells, deterred crime, none had data to link the overall drop in property crimes to their deal with Ring.



— Ring's cameras are discreetly fitted in doorbells, making them difficult to recognize from afar. This has led some researchers to question their value as a crime deterrent Jessica Hill / AP file

None of the departments said they collect data to measure the impact of their Ring partnership in terms of reducing or deterring crimes, nor did they consistently record when Ring footage was helpful in identifying or arresting a suspect.

Amazon declined to share any data on how Ring has impacted Amazon package theft, if at all, but [tells customers](#) to use an Amazon locker, or have their packages delivered elsewhere as a possible way to mitigate theft.

Ring itself says it does not know how effective its own cameras are in catching theft itself, much less identifying suspects.

“We do not track package thefts caught on Ring and defer to local law enforcement for those numbers,” Morgan Culbertson, a Ring spokeswoman, emailed.

“There’s a deafening lack of evidence that any city has been made safer,” Liz O’Sullivan, the technology director of the [Surveillance Technology Oversight Project](#), a nonprofit that fights excessive local and state-level surveillance, told NBC News.

The lack of evidence that Ring reduces crime adds to a list of concerns that have plagued the company in recent months, ranging from [bad security practices](#) to privacy questions surrounding the company's plans to [incorporate facial recognition](#), among other biometric characteristics.

Privacy activists also note that wading through the surveillance footage that Ring cameras send to its associated app, Neighbors, makes people believe there is more crime in their neighbourhood than there actually is.

"They're stoking the suspicion that we have of one another," O'Sullivan said.

Ring's pitch to law enforcement

Ring began back in 2013, and its founder, Jamie Siminoff, appeared on the business TV show Shark Tank. At that time, the company was known as Doorbot, and was pitched as a "[caller ID](#) for one's front door".

The device had a camera that could detect and record when somebody approached the doorbell, alerting the homeowner via a connected app to see and talk to the person at their door, even when they weren't home.

As the company grew, changed its name to Ring and attracted more investment, it began selling even more doorbell cameras. Then, in 2018, Ring built a video sharing app called Neighbors, a social network of sorts, designed for customers to share videos of possible crimes recorded using Ring devices and discuss public safety.

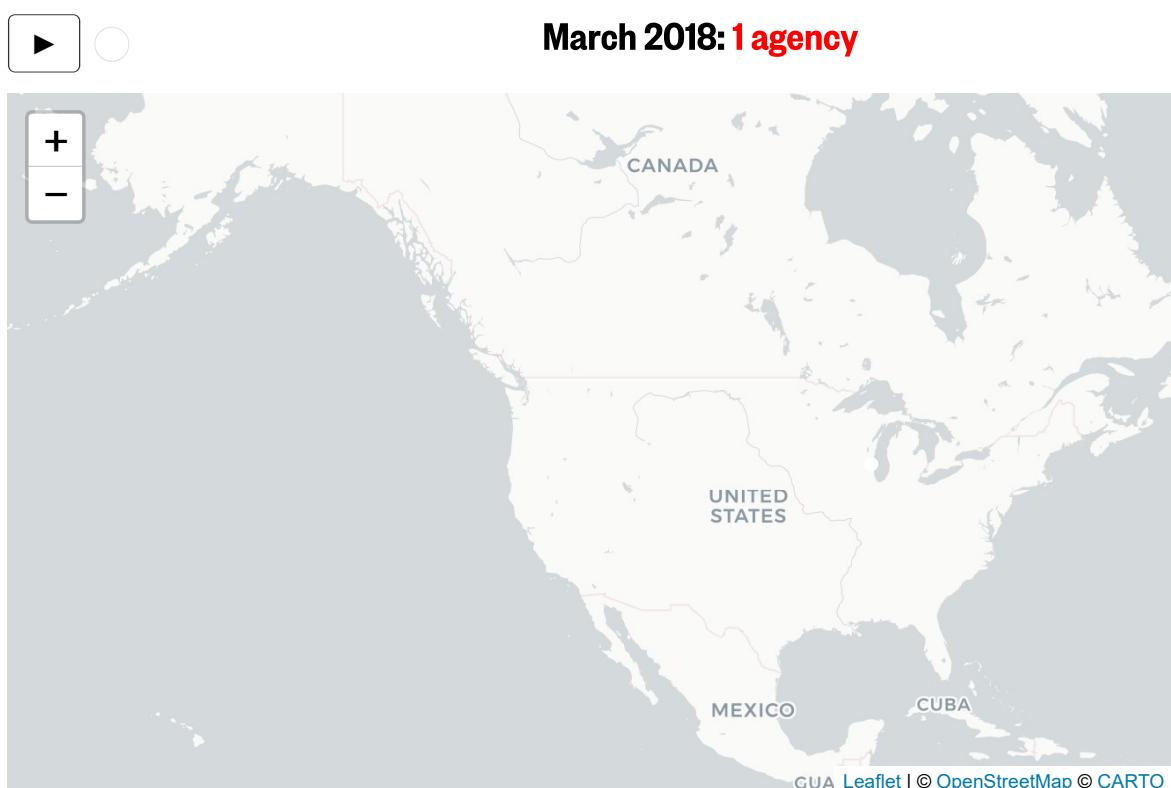
Ring does not disclose how many users it has, but has repeatedly stated – as [recently](#) as in a January 2020 letter to five senators – that there are “millions” of customers who have purchased a Ring device.

The company began approaching police departments, telling them in emails and official documents reviewed by NBC that the devices could help "[reduce crime and assist with investigations](#)" and encouraging them to sign a "[memorandum of understanding](#)" to gain access to the community of Ring owners and the footage shared through the app. In some cases, Ring gives police free camera doorbells to share with the community in return for encouraging the adoption of the app and the motion-activated surveillance devices. Ring makes a similar pitch to neighborhood watch groups, even [offering](#) a “50 percent off of any product,” if residents “solve a crime” with local police, according to promotional materials distributed by the company.

In 2019, the number of law enforcement agencies that have signed such agreements increased more than tenfold from 61 to 766. As of Feb. 1, 2020, there are 887.

The fast spread of Amazon Ring and law enforcement partnerships

By the beginning of February, Ring had deals with nearly 900 agencies.



Once an agency has signed up, it can request access to users' videos directly through the Neighbors app, essentially a digital shortcut around in-person, door-to-door requests for security video footage. In its agreements with police, five of which have been reviewed by NBC, Ring describes Neighbors as "an expansion of the traditional neighborhood watch."

In press releases, Ring claims that "one Los Angeles neighborhood saw a 55 percent decrease in home break-ins after Ring doorbells were installed on just ten percent of homes." This pilot, which took place over a seven-month period in 2015 has become a keystone of Ring's origin story.

Ring declined and Amazon did not respond to requests for data surrounding the methodology or analysis of how this conclusion was reached.

In October 2018, MIT Technology Review magazine concluded that "even if the doorbells had a positive effect, it seemed not to last. In 2017, Wilshire Park suffered more burglaries than in any of the previous seven years."

In an email to NBC News, Drake Madison, an LAPD spokesperson, did not dispute MIT Technology Review's conclusions, and declined to characterize Ring's effectiveness.

He did, however, confirm that after the pilot LAPD did not enter into a contract with Ring.

Ring conducted a similar program in Newark, New Jersey, in 2018, and has [made similar claims](#) of a dramatic drop in burglaries, without citing any concrete evidence.

In a statement provided to NBC News, the Newark Police Department repeated the assertions made on the Ring website, without any further explanation of the methodology or analysis. A Newark police spokeswoman, Catherine Adams, clarified that the agency "didn't capture any information regarding a control group or how many doorbell cameras were installed."

Newark also does not have a contract with Ring.

More evidence than investigators

In general, Ring's partnerships with local departments have not been in place long enough to draw firm conclusions about its effects on crime prevention. But anecdotally, even the departments who have used it the longest don't have much tangible evidence of deterrence of thefts or apprehension of suspects.

Greenfield, Wisconsin, the very first city nationwide to sign an agreement with Ring – nearly two years ago – couldn't cite a specific arrest that had been facilitated through Ring footage.

"My guess is that we have [made an arrest via Ring], I just can't recall specifically," Scott J. Zienkiewicz, a Greenfield police spokesman, said.

Winter Park became one of the first 10 police departments in America to sign up with Ring in spring 2018. Two years on and Ring videos have identified just one would-be thief, according to spokesman Santos: a 13-year-old boy who, according to the police report, opened two delivered packages containing a \$325 Away suitcase and a \$70 Christmas tree topper. After opening the packages, he "determined he did not like the items" and left the scene on his bike. Eventually the boy was sent to a state diversion program for first-time offenders in lieu of being formally charged in court.

The experience of Greenfield and Winter Park is mirrored in many parts of the country.

Of the arrests that police connected to Ring, most were for low-level non-violent property crimes, according to interviews and police records reviewed by NBC. These arrests detailed the [theft of a \\$13 book](#), the [theft of a Nintendo Switch video game console](#) (and [several items, including two coffee mugs](#), purchased from the Home Shopping Network valued at \$175. In Parker County, Texas, two people were arrested for allegedly [stealing a dachshund named Rufus Junior](#), valued at \$200.

For instance, Green Bay, the third-largest city in Wisconsin, hasn't made any arrests via Ring since signing its agreement in August 2018, said Commander Paul Ebel, of the city's investigations division. Similarly, Mesquite, Texas, has also made just one arrest since signing in September 2018 – for stealing an Amazon-delivered package containing an Echo Show smart speaker, and also the mounted Ring camera itself, spokesman Lt. Stephen Biggs, emailed NBC.

Fort Lauderdale, a Florida city that [experienced](#) 728 residential burglaries from January through November 2019, has only had six arrests and four prosecutions stemming from Ring footage since April 2018, Casey Leining, a police spokesperson, said.

Of those, one man, Jerry Hickman, was [arrested](#) twice within less than 30 days during the summer of 2018, on [four counts of burglary and two counts of petit theft](#). Hickman was accused of stealing a \$40 "golf trainer," dog treats worth \$18, [among other low-value items](#). In June 2019, [one man and two male juveniles](#), were also [arrested](#) in the city on charges of vehicle burglary – that stolen car was captured via a Ring camera.

In Houston, Texas, America's fourth-largest city, police do not keep detailed statistics of Ring-related arrests but estimate that there have been more than 100 since signing an agreement over a year ago. The city experiences [approximately 16,000 burglaries per year](#).

"The way I would describe it, is that it's an incremental change," [Lt. Jack Harvey](#), a lead property crime investigator at the Houston Police Department, the nation's fifth-largest city police agency, said. "It's not a paradigm shift."

He noted that the flood of evidence generated by Ring cameras doesn't often result in positive identification, much less an arrest.

"You have a video of one unknown person in a city of two-and-a-half million people!" he said while chuckling, pointing out that his department is in dire need of more officers.

"Our limiting factor is not evidence," he continued. "We have more solvable evidence than we have investigators."

Ring makes it so frictionless to share footage with police that some residents submit videos of anything they find displeasing, even when there is no indication that a crime has been committed, Lt. Santos, of Winter Park, said.

"We've gotten videos of raccoons in the yard, with people saying, 'Hey, can you deal with these raccoons?'" he said. "That's the type of people we're dealing with. They're constantly sending us video clips."

Ring declined to respond directly to NBC News' specific questions surrounding its effectiveness.

"Ring works with local police agencies to help make neighborhoods safer," the company said in a

statement.

"Through these efforts, we are opening up the lines of communication between community members and local police and providing app users with important crime and safety information directly from the official source."

Ten of the thirteen law enforcement agencies that reported zero Ring-facilitated arrests echoed Ring's assertion of intangible benefits, saying that the cameras do build relationships with the community, something that would not be reflected in crime statistics.

Others told NBC News that they believe that Ring leads to lower crime rates even in the absence of definitive proof.

In Cape Coral, Florida, burglaries fell by 50 percent and larcenies by 40 percent from 2008 through 2018. In May 2018, the police department signed an agreement with Ring and burglaries and larcenies have continued to fall. From January through June 2018 the city [recorded](#) 202 burglaries and 1,084 larcenies. By contrast, during the first six months of 2019, the latest period for which data is available, the city [experienced](#) 147 burglaries and 865 larcenies.

"We do attribute a drop in crime to Ring cameras and other surveillance systems," Master Sergeant Patrick O'Grady of the Cape Coral Police Department, emailed NBC News. "People we arrest for burglary have told us they look to see if there is a Ring camera."

Police reports of porch piracy and burglary in decline

Another difficulty in measuring Ring's effectiveness stems from a major structural shift in the economy.

The volume of parcels sent in the U.S. has been rising over the last decade at a rate of about 7-9 percent each year, corresponding with the rise in online shopping, according to the [Pitney Bowes Parcel Shipping Index](#).

However, reported property crimes have been on a steep decline for years, with burglaries falling by nearly half from 2008 to 2018, and larcenies by almost a third, according to FBI statistics. Larcenies include the theft of packages from outside of homes, the crime known colloquially as "porch piracy".

How is it possible that porch piracy could be falling when the opportunity for the crime is soaring?

One reason the FBI's crime stats may not accurately reflect the level of porch piracy is that victims of theft [are less likely to report](#) the crime to the police than to the sender. For example, customers of Amazon, which sends about a third of the 18 billion packages sent domestically each year according to estimates from transportation consultancy iDrive Logistics, can request that Amazon redeliver the package or send it to another address.

Amazon now owns Ring. If Amazon were willing to make public a number showing the amount of times it has to reship packages that “never arrived,” it might give some insight into the true level of porch piracy, and, going forward, whether an increase in the number of doorbell cameras seems to accompany a lower rate of disappearing packages.

Amazon, however, declined to share such figures, and Ring said that its figure of a 55 percent decline in crimes was based on data provided by LAPD.

Steven Gaut, a spokesman for UPS, said that the company had not observed an increase in the rate of package theft, but had seen a rise in awareness of the issue thanks to people reporting their experiences on social media and using videos from porch cameras like Ring. However, he noted that UPS doesn’t consistently record package theft data.

In the absence of data, what should a consumer do to protect package deliveries?

In several cases, police said that the most effective deterrent to property crime was locking doors, windows, cars, and not leaving anything of value, including packages, visible from the street.

What about cameras?

[Read Hayes](#), a criminologist from the University of Florida who researches package theft for the Loss Prevention Research Council, an industry group of retailers, agreed. He said the best deterrent was placing packages where they can’t be seen from the road, but second best was “increasing the perceived risk of getting caught,” which includes conspicuous surveillance cameras and other security systems. Ring’s deterrent effect is less powerful, he said, because its design is so discreet.

“You have to know it’s there and recognize what it is,” he said. “Ring has promise but it’s not readily noticeable right now.”

In late December 2019, [Ben Stickle](#), a professor of criminal justice at Middle Tennessee State University, [published](#) one of the first academic studies of porch camera video footage, analyzing 67 videos he and his research team found on YouTube. He found that most of the so-called “porch pirates” were unfazed by the presence of cameras.

“If you expect the camera to deter people, you’re assuming that they see it and that they care,” Stickle, who served as a police officer in Bowling Green, Kentucky, told NBC News. “Those are two big assumptions.”



Cyrus Farivar



Cyrus Farivar is a reporter on the tech investigations unit of NBC News in San Francisco.



ABOUT

DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION

CONTACT

TERMS OF SERVICE

CAREERS

NBCNEWS.COM SITE MAP

COUPONS

ADVERTISE

PRIVACY POLICY

AD CHOICES

© 2020 NBC UNIVERSAL

NEWS

MSNBC

TODAY