

PROACTIVE MONITORING AND OPERATOR DISCRETION: A SYSTEMATIC SOCIAL OBSERVATION OF CCTV CONTROL ROOM OPERATIONS

Journal of Criminal Justice (2023)
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2023.102071>

*Data collection activities were funded by the National Institute of Justice (grant number 2010-IJ-CX-0026)



Authors:

Eric L. Piza

School of Criminology & Criminal Justice
Northeastern University

Lauren N. Moton

Marron Institute of Urban Management
New York University

Key Takeaways:

- Targeted surveillances of known suspects were nearly 8 times longer than surveillances of persons unknown to the CCTV operators
- Targeted surveillances of known suspects were 49% less likely to involve reasonable suspicion or probable cause
- Female CCTV operators were 40% more likely than male operators to observe incidents of reasonable suspicion/probable cause
- Female CCTV operators were over 4 times more likely than male operators to report incidents of reasonable suspicion/probable cause to patrol
- Visible obstructions to the camera feed were associated with over 9-minute increases in surveillance length and an over four-fold increase in reporting likelihood

Research Summary:

Technological advancements have allowed seamless integration of a range of surveillance technologies, making video surveillance a core component of daily police operations around the world. While the increase in evaluation research has provided insight into crime control outcomes associated with CCTV, many procedural and contextual considerations remain under-explored. Of particular importance is the lack of understanding of the human factors that drive surveillance interventions, and how decision-making processes influence the manner in which video surveillance translates to enforcement actions in the field. By and large, research has not analyzed how CCTV operators select which persons to observe or the factors that lead operators to report observed behavior to law enforcement.

The current study is a systematic social observation (SSO) of discretionary CCTV operator actions during the CCTV Directed Patrol Experiment in Newark, NJ. During all patrol shifts, the lead author and two research assistants observed the activity of the CCTV operators and actions of those being surveilled from within the CCTV control room. CCTV camera feeds were displayed on large monitors mounted on the control room walls, allowing the research team to easily view all activity. We coded field notes created by researchers during the SSO to build a database that allowed for a statistical analysis of each targeted surveillance—an observation of an individual or group of individuals lasting one minute or longer—conducted during the CCTV directed patrol experiment.

The analysis tests the effect a range of factors has on (1) the duration of targeted surveillances, (2) whether an incident providing reasonable suspicion and/or probable cause was observed by the CCTV operator, and (3) whether the CCTV operator reported any observed reasonable suspicion and/or probable cause to police. The average targeted surveillance lasted 16.52 minutes, with a standard deviation of 15.85 minutes. An instance of reasonable suspicion or probable cause was observed in 104 (46.22%) cases. Of these 104 cases, the CCTV operator reported the event to the patrol units in 72 instances (69.23%).

Fifty-five (24.44%) targeted surveillances observed a known suspect which may be credited to the focused nature of the intervention, as CCTV operators monitored the same cameras each tour of duty. Targeted surveillances of known suspects were nearly 8 times longer than surveillances of persons unknown to the CCTV operators, but 49% less likely to involve incidents of reasonable suspicion or probable cause. Female CCTV operators were 40% more likely than male operators to observe incidents of reasonable suspicion/probable cause and over 4 times more likely to report such incidents to the police. Operators with a supervisor rank were associated with over 3-minute decreases in targeted surveillance length, but a two-fold increase in observation of reasonable suspicion/probable cause. Visible obstructions to the camera feed were associated with an over 9-minute increase in surveillance length and an over four-fold increase in reporting likelihood.

These findings suggest that organizational culture, CCTV operator characteristics, and land usage of target areas may foster differential surveillance behavior across CCTV operators. As remote strategies for policing continue to expand internationally, the identification of factors that impact discretionary practices is critical.