

A dystopian surveillance fear has become reality in Texas

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Texas's Flocked-up abortion laws

Hello and welcome to the latest edition of “lo and behold, the dystopian thing that women and activists warned would happen ends up happening”. This time the issue is **automated license plate readers (ALPRs)**, which capture (no prizes for guessing!) license plate data and allow law enforcement to build a picture of where a particular vehicle has been. There's no opting out of being tracked: if you drive, you should simply assume that these cameras, which are sometimes hidden in objects such as traffic cones, are logging your movements. And you should assume that this license plate data can be combined with other surveillance data to paint a very detailed picture of your life. Privacy only exists for our **billionaire overlords** these days. The rest of us are just data points.

There are obviously plenty of legitimate uses to ALPRs. Their proponents will wax lyrical about how they can help solve carjackings and kidnappings. But, like all technology, they are ripe for abuse. They are particularly ripe for abuse in an increasingly authoritarian US, full of lawmakers who want to control women's bodies.

Back in 2022, a few months after Roe v Wade was overturned, the Guardian published a piece on ALPRs warning that “an expanding web of license plate readers could be ‘weaponized’ against abortion”. It focused on a company called Flock, one of the big players in this space, which promises a “**holistic solution to crime**”.

Flock's technology could be used to “criminalize people seeking reproductive health and further erode people's ability to move about their daily lives free from being tracked and traced”, one expert told the Guardian at the time. Another civil rights expert warned that

Flock, which has stated that it is happy to provide technology to help enact whatever laws have been passed, “illustrates how surveillance isn’t actually about benefiting society or protecting people – it’s about enforcing the political goals of those in power”. Unfortunately, all these experts have been proved right. This week 404 Media reported that a Texas police officer used Flock to **perform a nationwide search** of more than 83,000 ALPR cameras while looking for a woman who had had an abortion. Abortion is almost entirely illegal in Texas but law enforcement reportedly looked at cameras in states such as Washington and Illinois, where abortion is legal.

Anti-abortion voices love to argue that they’re not trying to control women, they’re trying to *protect* women. Funnily enough this same talking point came up in this case. Sheriff Adam King of Johnson county, **Texas**, told 404 Media that the woman had self-administered the abortion “and her family was worried that she was going to bleed to death, and we were trying to find her to get her to a hospital.” He added: “We weren’t trying to block her from leaving the state or whatever to get an abortion. It was about her safety.”

Perhaps this was true in this case. Many of the details are still unclear so it’s hard to tell. But even if this was purely benevolent surveillance, you can certainly see where all this is headed. “This incident is undeniably a harbinger of more AI-enabled reproductive surveillance and investigations to come,” Ashley Emery, a senior policy analyst in reproductive health and rights at the National Partnership for **Women** & Families, told 404 Media. “Especially for women of color who are already over-surveilled and over-policed, the stakes couldn’t be higher.”

“Texas is the land of freedom,” **Governor Greg Abbott** recently proclaimed. If you’re a woman in Texas, however, “freedom” seems to have quite a strange definition. Not only are you not allowed freedom over your reproductive decisions, a number of Texas city councils (some of which are composed **entirely of male lawmakers**) have been trying to **pass travel bans** that would stop Texans from driving to abortion appointments in other states. Abortion bans, attempted **travel bans**, and a network of surveillance

technology that can be used to enforce these bans: this is what “freedom” for women in Texas looks like.