

## Written evidence from Big Brother Watch

### About Big Brother Watch

Big Brother Watch is a civil liberties and privacy campaign group that was set up to challenge policies that threaten our privacy, our freedoms and our civil liberties, and to expose the true scale of the surveillance state.

We campaign to give individuals more control over their personal data, and to hold to account those who fail to respect our privacy, whether private companies, government departments or local authorities.

We deal with several areas of policy which can be considered crime reduction, however in this response we will concentrate on two specific issues: CCTV dispersal orders.

### CCTV

#### Summary

It is estimated that during the 1990s the Home Office spent 78% of its crime prevention budget on installing CCTV. This is a huge investment, yet has it delivered a reduction in crime that justifies continued expenditure?

It is our belief that CCTV is still being pursued as a crime prevention measure, when in reality this is not supported by the research in this area.

In 2007, the UK national CCTV Strategy stated:

*“The effectiveness of CCTV systems varies significantly across the country and there is a wide variance in terms of coverage, monitoring, quality of images, uses and therefore the impact that CCTV can have on local crime and disorder. Similarly, there is considerable variance in the way police forces utilize CCTV and whether the product of surveillance cameras is effectively integrated into the policing function.”*

It is impossible to say with any confidence the situation has improved.

CCTV has become a ubiquitous feature on Britain’s streets. Hanging from walls, positioned atop lampposts, and hidden behind blacked-out glass; cash-strapped local authorities have spent unprecedented amounts of taxpayers’ money making the United Kingdom the most watched nation of people anywhere in the world. In the past decade alone, the number of CCTV cameras surveying town centre shopping precincts, parks and other public places has increased tenfold<sup>1</sup>.

Some reports have estimated that Britain is home to as many of 20% of the world’s total

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<sup>1</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1789157.stm>

CCTV cameras, approximately 2 million cameras. However, the Metropolitan Police's own research found how less than one crime was solved by every 1,000 cameras in the capital.

In the current financial climate, sustaining the level of investment in CCTV is impossible to justify. The surveillance British citizens are now subjected to continues to increase, despite being at a level that makes many other democratic countries recoil in horror.

CCTV does not have a significant deterrent effect on crime, and is not a substitute for police. Yet it continues to be claimed – without evidence – that more CCTV improves public safety. CCTV certainly has a role to play in tackling crime, but the current state of affairs is based not upon evidence but hearsay and conjecture, with reasonable concerns about privacy and civic society brushed aside with little regard. Little investigation has been undertaken to ascertain displacement versus reduction.

We believe it is essential that a greater evidential basis is developed to justify the continued level of CCTV surveillance. Our report 'The Price of Privacy' highlighted how local authorities had spent £515m on installing, operating and maintaining CCTV systems between 2008 and 2012.

In that report, we called for a series of steps to be taken to increase transparency around CCTV. They were:

1. Give the CCTV regulator the powers to enforce the code of practice
2. Any publicly funded CCTV installation should have to refer to crime statistics or demonstrate a significant risk of harm before being commenced
3. Public bodies should publish the instances where their CCTV cameras have been used in securing a conviction, and for what offences.
4. Public bodies should be required (save for those used in direct protection of sites at risk of terrorism) to publish in a standardised format the locations of their cameras
5. The Government should begin a consultation on regulating private CCTV cameras, both those operated by commercial companies and by private individuals

It is not unreasonable to ask councils to use crime data to decide on where cameras are positioned, and use non-fixed cameras as part of an operation to tackle the root cause of the problem. However, this will only work if cameras are *part* of the police's action, rather than being used *instead* of police action.

The public's perception of CCTV is based on a widespread misconception that cameras are monitored, and in the event of an incident an operator would be able to send help. This is not true, with the overwhelming majority of cameras only used after an event has been reported – with many either not functioning or able to provide an image of sufficient quality. As a result, the public debate about CCTV has been skewed, something we hope to address.

There remains little evidence that suggests further investment in CCTV will directly reduce crime, in particular crimes against people. Equally, retaining the current level of surveillance

directs resources away from alternatives could have a greater impact on both preventing and solving crime.

The 2007 CCTV Strategy recognised how Britain's CCTV infrastructure had been "*developed in a piecemeal fashion with little strategic direction, control or regulation.*"

Furthermore, we believe that councils should undertake a review of how their own cameras have been used in recent years and identify those that are not being used either to protect infrastructure or solve crimes. Where the camera has not solved a single crime in the past three years, we believe the camera should be turned off.

Any publicly funded CCTV installation should have to refer to crime statistics or demonstrate a significant risk of harm before being commenced. Prior to installation, this would require councils to publish an evidential basis for camera installation, and also raise strategic questions before a decision has been taken. It would also highlight situations where temporary, non-fixed cameras would be a better solution than inflexible, fixed

The availability of crime maps enables this to be delivered without significant administrative burdens and would restore trust in the use of CCTV. Where residents suspect that surveillance is designed to, for example, the number of monetary penalties issued for parking offences, this process would improve transparency and better inform debate.

Public bodies should also be required to publish the instances where their CCTV cameras have been used in securing a conviction, and for what offences.

This simple statistic would enable the public to see the true impact of CCTV, and ensure that multi-function cameras continue to be used for the reasons stated when they were installed.

The debate around CCTV lacks any real measurement of effectiveness, and despite academic research highlighting the weak deterrent effect of CCTV, statements alluding to the effectiveness of CCTV continue to be made based on personal beliefs instead of evidence.

## **Dispersal orders:**

We have seen two cities in recent months pursue a dispersal order system based on age threshold upon a defined area in Barnsley and Bangor.

Our concern, which we also addressed in our evidence to the Home Affairs Committee's investigation into the draft Anti-Social Behaviour Bill, is that this is not a particularly effective prevention measure while also representing a significant infringement on liberties. Indeed, when we raised our concerns about the 'strict liability' pursued in Bangor, where the individual's conduct was not taken into account.

Our view is simple – if someone is breaking the law, whether they are 15 or 50 is irrelevant. The police can and should arrest them, and they should be held accountable. Bangor's dispersal order made no such distinction. It decreed that any person under the age of 16 in the designated area between 9pm and 6am is liable for upto three months incarceration or a fine of upto £2500. There is no requirement for the person to be engaged in wrongdoing. This in our view is wrong, and as a preventative strategy is slightly bizarre as it criminalises people who are not engaged in criminal activity.

Our concerns around dispersal orders are broadly:

- 1) They criminalise behaviour that is not in itself criminal or causing harm
- 2) The displacement effect has not been properly investigated
- 3) The underlying issues go unaddressed, while enforcement of the dispersal order takes resources away from real policing

Unfortunately, the evidence base for dispersal orders has not been fully put, while statistics on their operation have not been published. We would urge the committee to consider what steps can be taken to assess the crime prevention value of dispersal orders.

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