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By TRISTAN HALLMAN ~ Staff Writer ~ 11 December 2013 10:49 PM

Dallas Police Add More Digital Eyes to Nab Bad Guys in Crime Hot Spots

The city's nine highest-crime areas now have some additional crime-fighting help: surveillance cameras and automatic license plate readers.

This year, the Dallas Police Department installed 76 new surveillance cameras and 28 plate readers in high-crime areas. Officials see the technology, which was already being used in other areas of the city, as a key to reducing and preventing crime while also toeing the line between privacy and security concerns.

Police officials say they have already had some positive early results from the technology, but say it's too early to know what effect, if any, the cameras will have on reducing crime rates. Deputy Chief Catrina Shead said the new gadgets are still in a "testing phase."

Some who live and work in those areas are still getting used to the idea of surveillance. Michael DiCarlo, the owner of Jimmy's Food Store, isn't sure how he views the cameras. Although his store sits in the middle of the second-highest crime target area, which is around Ross and Bennett avenues in Old East Dallas, DiCarlo said he wasn't aware the devices were installed this year. "I don't want anyone filming me," DiCarlo said. "But I also don't want to get killed."

Real-time Information

In the Ross-Bennett area, police have deployed nine new cameras and three license plate readers — two posted in a fixed place and one in a patrol car. The most troublesome spot is the area around Five Points intersection in northeast Dallas, where Park Lane, Fair Oaks Avenue and Ridgcrest Road meet. That area also received three license plate readers, as well as five surveillance cameras. Seven other areas had cameras and license plate readers divvied up between them.

From Aug. 1 through Oct. 31, the cameras in those two locations helped officers make eight arrests in the Five Points area and five in the Ross-Bennett area. The plate scanners, which record cars' locations as patrol vehicles drive by them, led to 16 arrests in Five Points and 23 in Ross-Bennett. The plate readers also alert officers in certain cases, such as if the driver has outstanding warrants or is a registered sex offender.

In August, a plate reader alert led to the arrest of murder suspect Floyd Murray. The plate readers have also helped

police recover 105 stolen cars since August, said Maj. Scott Bratcher, who oversees the Homeland Security and Tactical Intelligence Division. The cameras feed to City Hall and police headquarters and are monitored to give real-time information to officers.

Shed said she hopes the cameras eventually will link directly to patrol substations. Chief David Brown has pushed the technology bundles as part of a multimillion-dollar initiative partially bankrolled by private funding raised by Safer Dallas Better Dallas, a booster group of sorts for the department.



Charles Terrell, who co-founded Safer Dallas Better Dallas, said his group has given \$650,000 to the police for its latest initiative. And he said he expects to raise much more money for Brown's efforts if the technology leads to crime reductions.

Terrell said the early returns have been better than what he expected.

Privacy Concerns

Yet some privacy advocates worry the cameras and license plate readers are too intrusive. "There is a real interplay between privacy rights and just casting too wide of a net to be effective police work," said Matt Simpson, a pol-

icy strategist for the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas. Simpson believes the technology should be used only to target criminals and not just as a blanket surveillance of regular citizens.

But he believes Dallas has good policies in place to prevent abuse. For instance, the department deletes data gleaned from license plate readers after three months and keeps video for only two weeks. "That is ample enough time for a detective doing an investigation to go back and get video of a situation," said Shead, the deputy chief. With the addition of the newest phase of cameras, the city now has more than 200 police surveillance cameras, she said.

The department is working to buy more over the next few years. The Vickery Meadow Improvement District had already installed five cameras near the Five Points area in 2011, said Angelina Avalos, the group's director. Avalos said the cameras have contributed to a 20 percent crime decline near Five Points so far this year.

But, Avalos added, the cameras can't do everything. "It's not going to be a solve-all," she said. "It's a piece of the puzzle."

But Rahim Noorani, who manages Andy's Food Mart, said he hasn't seen much benefit from the cameras posted near his store at the intersection of Fitzhugh Street and Capitol Avenue in the Ross-Bennett area. Criminals and vagrants aren't going to go away just because of a few cameras, he said.

"They're not scared of anything," he said.

Top Dallas crime hot spots (in descending order):

Five Points Ross-Bennett
St. Augustine Road-Bruton Road
Camp Wisdom Road-Chaucer Place
Webb Chapel Road-Timberline Drive
Spring Valley Road-Preston Road
Forest Lane-Audelia Road
Greenville Avenue-LBJ Freeway
John West Road and Buckner Boulevard

