

“It’s a crystal-clear example of why mass surveillance makes our society less safe, not more safe,” says Evan Greer, deputy director of the digital rights group Fight for the Future, of the data leak. “Both corporations and governments are terrible at safeguarding the sensitive data that they collect.”

Police drones have gotten a lot of attention lately, because they represent a new generation of aerial vehicles capable of particularly stealthy surveillance and new types of behavior, including flying indoors. In contrast, law enforcement agencies have used helicopters in aerial surveys and monitoring for decades. But the footage released by DDoSecrets illustrates how effective helicopter-mounted cameras can be at capturing extremely sharp and detailed video close to the ground. Helicopters can also carry heavier surveillance equipment than what can be affixed to basic quadcopters or other types of low-cost drones.

“People think of police helicopters as traffic copters, but they’re so much more than that,” DDoSecrets’ Best wrote. “They carry technology that lets police watch people who have no idea they’re being watched. It’s important for people to understand what police technology is already capable of and what it could be capable of soon. There can’t be informed discussions or decisions otherwise.”

Such broad use of helicopter surveillance augments privacy advocates’ concerns about drones. UAVs are much cheaper and easier to purchase and operate than helicopters and can still be outfitted with an extensive array of sensors.

“Camera and zoom tech is getting cheaper and lighter all the time,” says Matthew Feeney, director of the Cato Institute’s Project on Emerging Technologies. “We need to always think of aerial vehicles like drones as a platform for other surveillance tools including cameras, stingrays, thermal imaging, and facial recognition software.”

In the case of the leaked helicopter video, Best notes that much of the footage is time-stamped from 2019 and that retention limits should be a crucial priority for police departments. Similar [discussions](#) have come up about the need for deletion policies when dealing with police body cam footage. It’s possible that some of the leaked helicopter footage was retained because it is still relevant to an active investigation, but many of the files capture hours in real time and focus on disparate, seemingly unconnected activity, places, and people.

Privacy advocates particularly emphasize the stakes of securing aerial police surveillance data, given that such footage could be valuable in a number of ways for stalkers, attackers seeking materials for blackmail, domestic or foreign terrorist groups, or those conducting espionage operations.

Some of the leaked Dallas and Atlanta footage reflects the types of uses you might expect from police helicopters: crowd surveillance over stadium parking lots on game day, for example, or officers pulling a car over. But other scenes in the footage have a more aimless, roving quality.

“I haven’t heard specifically about helicopters being used in this way,” Fight for the Future’s Greer says. “It’s totally unsurprising, but it is alarming. At least in an urban setting, you think of police helicopters

showing up when there's something specific going on, but anecdotally you also hear about them being used for intimidation purposes, like flying really low over neighborhoods where residents are predominantly people of color.”

In Minneapolis, for example, residents have [consistently reported](#) intense police helicopter traffic overhead ever since the protests and riots in summer 2020 that followed George Floyd's death. And though helicopters are a familiar technology, their use in law enforcement surveillance comes with long-standing privacy concerns. In 2004, a New York Police Department helicopter scoping out an unpermitted mass evening bicycle ride in Manhattan captured almost [four minutes of night-vision-enabled footage](#) of a couple having sex on a secluded penthouse terrace.

More Great WIRED Stories

- ? The latest on tech, science, and more: [Get our newsletters!](#)
- Blood, lies, and a [drug trials lab gone bad](#)
- [Age of Empires IV](#) wants to teach you a lesson
- [New sex toy standards](#) let some sensitive details slide
- What the [new MacBook Pro](#) finally got right
- The mathematics of [cancel culture](#)
- ?? Explore AI like never before with [our new database](#)
- ? Optimize your home life with our Gear team's best picks, from [robot vacuums](#) to [affordable mattresses](#) to [smart speakers](#)

Source: [1.8 TB of Police Helicopter Surveillance Footage Leaks Online](#)