

Boston PD Tested Facial Recognition Software on Every Face at Local Music Festivals

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Concertgoers at last year's annual Boston Calling music festivals weren't just there to watch the show — they were watched themselves as test subjects for Boston police's new facial recognition technology, which reportedly analyzed every attendee at the May and September two-day events.

Employees at IBM — the outside contractor involved in deploying the tech alongside Boston Police — planned the test of its Smart Surveillance System and Intelligent Video Analytics to execute “face capture” on “every person” at the concerts in 2013. Targets were reportedly described “as anyone who walks through the door,” according to company memos obtained by Dig Boston.

Using 10 cameras capable of intelligent video analysis, police and IBM captured thousands of faces and scanned individuals for details including skin color, height and clothing to screen for possible forensic identification. The tech also watched traffic and crowd congestion, searched for suspicious objects and monitored social media in real-time.

Attendees and promoters were wholly unaware of the test, which was conducted amid a slew of media and photographers regularly in attendance and during a public event where the expectation of privacy is at a minimum. Sensitive documents detailing the program were found unsecured online, where they've reportedly been accessible for more than a year.

The images, video and information obtained by the program will be kept for months and years — even after the sorting process deems it irrelevant — and more than 50 hours of video footage from the events are still intact, according to the report.

Other data stored online by Boston police in unsecured servers include drivers' licenses, addresses, parking permit information and more.

Boston PD initially denied any involvement in the programs' deployment on May 25-26 and Sept. 7-8 at City Hall Plaza, stating in an email from a representative that “BPD was not part of this initiative.”

“We do not and have not used or possess this type of technology,” the department wrote to Dig.

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