



External Video Surveillance: Minimizing Harm

While interior video surveillance is not an appropriate practice for community-based programs ([link](#)), there may be limited benefits to the exterior video surveillance of shelter facilities or other types of support services. Appropriately positioned video surveillance may enhance a perception of safety for survivors and staff, and could potentially deter an abusive person from approaching a facility. However, video surveillance has not been proven to be effective for reducing violent crime, and can also come with substantial privacy and confidentiality risks.

This resource is meant to help programs decide whether to use external video surveillance, and how to do so in a way that minimizes harm to survivors if it is used.

NOTE: The use of video surveillance inside of shelters is not an appropriate practice. Read more about Internal Video Surveillance ([LINK](#)).

The First Decision: Should We Use External Video Surveillance?

Whether your program already uses external video surveillance or not, this first decision is important. If your program is considering using external video surveillance, this assessment will help you determine if the benefits outweigh the risks for the people you serve. If you already use external video surveillance, use this guide to reflect on the needs and wellbeing of the survivors you serve.

This assessment is adapted from the [ACLU's Six Questions to Ask Before Accepting a Surveillance Technology](#).

1. How effective is the technology?

What are the goals of using external video surveillance? Will surveillance help to achieve those goals? What problems are you hoping the surveillance will solve?

Most research does not show a connection between video surveillance and an actual decrease in violent crime. While it is not an effective tool for preventing crime, the presence of external video surveillance may help some people feel safer. Video recordings could also provide documentation if an incident occurs. However, if video recordings include survivors who don't want to be identified, using those recordings may violate the confidentiality obligations of both the organization and individual staff members.

2. What are the negative side-effects?

While surveillance may help some people feel more secure, other survivors or staff may feel that surveillance is a violation of privacy or an abusive tool of control. Re-traumatization may be a real consequence. The existence of video surveillance can also lead to requests (or demands) for recordings from law enforcement and others, which creates privacy and confidentiality concerns. If not setup and maintained properly, video surveillance could lead to data breaches and confidentiality violations.

3. What are the costs of this technology?

For programs to implement external video surveillance effectively and appropriately, the system needs to operate securely and be regularly maintained. Due to the strict confidentiality obligations of programs, following best practices will be important to ensure the program remains in control of recordings and retains minimal content. This requires both upfront and ongoing costs. Less expensive options are

likely to be less secure. There will also be costs in terms of staff training and implementation. Having and operating a video surveillance system will take time and money.

4. Does your community want it?

As stated earlier, some people feel safer under video surveillance while others do not. If survivors don't feel safer, but instead feel violated or controlled, this undermines the purpose of your program and may deter survivors from seeking services.

Whether or not the wider community supports video surveillance is also an important question. Different programs located in the same city may come to different answers. For example, a program in a commercial area may be more comfortable with surveillance, where a program in a residential area may be less comfortable because of privacy risks or experiences of surveillance and over-policing.

Staff may already have a sense of what most survivors think about video surveillance. Do incoming survivors ask if there is video surveillance and are relieved there is? Or, do they ask why the video surveillance is there and express concern or frustration about being watched?

The Second Decision: What Products Meet Our Goals and Minimize Harm?

If your program has gone through the discussion above and determined that video surveillance is helpful and wanted by survivors, this second decision can help you choose the best type of product.

There is a large market for video surveillance devices and systems, and a wide variety of consumer choices. Some systems can provide a live feed while others only offer the option of watching saved recordings. Some

systems don't make recordings, while others store recordings online, or on a physical device in your program, or both. Some devices and systems are more secure than others. Many systems are designed with commercial or personal risk-management needs in mind, which is different from the needs of a shelter program with strict confidentiality obligations.

Programs should limit their considerations to video surveillance systems that:

- Are meant to be mounted on the outside of a building.
- Use strong encryption for data transfer and storage so that recordings cannot be intercepted (encryption at rest and in transit).
- Are designed so only your organization can access stored recordings, and not the video system company. This may be referred to as no-knowledge, zero-knowledge, or client-side encryption.

NOTE: The Mozilla Foundation's [*Privacy Not Included](#) project can help you to evaluate some surveillance systems.

The Third (and final) Decision: What Policies Minimize Harm?

Programs need to have clear policies that guide how surveillance systems are setup and used. These practices help minimize harm to survivors and program staff when external video surveillance is used.

External video surveillance systems and policies should enforce:

- Using the strongest data security at all times.
- Deleting recordings on a frequent, regular, and continual basis. It's recommended that recordings be purged every 24-48 hours.
- Having strictly limited access to the system, including recordings and live views.
- Minimal collection and retention of recordings that include survivors.

External video surveillance systems should **not**:

- Be accessible to staff on personal devices, or through a website they can access offsite.

Policies should also include details on:

- Procedures for responding to legal demands or other requests for video recordings.
 - o **NOTE:** Confidentiality obligations prohibit programs from sharing identifying information about survivors, including video recordings, with anyone outside of the program without a valid court order or a requirement due to state law.
- Procedures for responding to survivor requests to review or use recordings if they suspect or identify that an abusive person was near the premises.

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