

Starmer's live facial recognition plan would usher in national ID, campaigners say

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PM accused of ignoring civil rights and aping autocracies as he proposes new powers after far-right unrest

Civil liberties campaigners have said that a proposal made by Keir Starmer on Thursday to expand the use of live facial recognition technology would amount to the effective introduction of a national ID card system based on people's faces.

5 Silkie Carlo, the director of the civil liberties NGO Big Brother Watch, said it was ironic the new prime minister was suggesting a greater use of facial matching on the same day that an EU-wide law largely banning real-time surveillance technology came into force.

10 "Expanding live facial recognition means millions of innocent Britons being subjected to automated ID checks," said Carlo. "These are the surveillance tactics of China and Russia and Starmer seems ignorant of the civil liberties implications."

Live facial recognition has, until now, largely been used in the UK by the Metropolitan police and South Wales police, as a real-time aid to help officers to detect and prevent crime, including at public events such as last year's coronation. It is capable of scanning more than 100 faces a minute for identification.

15 But on Thursday, Starmer suggested that it should be deployed more widely, in response to the violent disorder around the country after the stabbing and murder of three girls in Southport, Lancashire.

Promising to create a national police capability to tackle the rioting, the new prime minister said forces needed to work better together, sharing intelligence and engaging in a "wider deployment of facial recognition technology".

20 Details were scant but immediately after, Starmer suggested that trouble-makers could be subject to "criminal behaviour orders to restrict their movements before they can even board a train" – implying a wider use of live facial recognition at transport hubs such as railway stations.

25 Daragh Murray, a senior lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, said: "There is a clear danger that in responding to a tragedy and public unrest we expand and entrench police surveillance without appropriate scrutiny. Given that the police have responded to disorder and riots for decades, why is facial recognition needed now?"

There is no specific law in the UK regulating the use of facial recognition software and as a result its implementation is broadly defined by police forces, which use it to locate missing persons and offenders, but also, the Met says, "people on a 'watchlist' who are sought by the police".

30 The Met's policy statement says those put on a watchlist include people "wanted by the courts", people subject to court or bail restrictions – but also people "where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the individual depicted is about to commit an offence" in the future.

35 Campaigners say that such broad definitions could allow police to target legitimate protesters, not just people with violent intent. Facial recognition has been used at the British Grand Prix for the past two years, scanning hundreds of thousands, after Just Stop Oil protesters ran on to the track during the first lap of the Formula One in 2022.

There have also been concerns about the accuracy of live facial recognition, with black people more likely to be misidentified than other racial groups. The Met says it can retune the face matching algorithm to eliminate demographic discrepancies, but Big Brother Watch said doing so made it less effective overall.

40 In a ruling in 2020, a court found South Wales police had failed to properly investigate whether the software exhibited any race or gender bias. Police say there has been a "substantial improvement" in its accuracy, with Met-commissioned research suggesting the chance of a false match was now one in 6,000 people.

45 Big Brother Watch is bringing a legal challenge to the Met's use of the technology alongside Shaun Thompson, an anti-knife-crime community worker, who says he was misidentified and wrongly detained at London Bridge station in February by officers who demanded he give his fingerprints to prove who said he was.

Earlier this year, Met officials described the technology as a "gamechanger" and said that when the technology had been deployed, it had helped make one arrest every two hours.