



Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) Technology Myths vs. Facts

Policymakers and communities deserve clear and accurate facts about how ALPR works, the limits of the technology, and its proven role in helping protect communities and save lives. Law enforcement is committed to ensuring that ALPR technology is used responsibly, with strong safeguards, transparency, and meaningful accountability.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR is new and untested technology.

✓ **FACT:** For more than 20 years, ALPR has been a proven public-safety tool that provides critical leads when information is limited and time matters.

ALPR helps law enforcement find missing and endangered children, rescue human trafficking and kidnapping victims, identify vehicles linked to violent crimes, apprehend dangerous suspects and fugitives, and recover stolen vehicles.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR is always recording and continuously tracks people and vehicles.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR captures a still photograph of a license plate when a vehicle passes a camera in a publicly accessible area—not continuous video of a vehicle's movements. A series of discrete vehicle observations is not tracking.

The image includes the vehicle, its publicly displayed license plate, and the date, time, and location. It does not identify the driver or occupants or show everywhere the vehicle has traveled.

✗ **MYTH:** People are stopped and arrested based only on an ALPR alert.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR An ALPR alert is an investigative lead - not proof of a crime, identification of a person, or an automatic basis for arrest.

Officers must independently verify the license plate and the underlying alert and develop additional facts before taking enforcement action. ALPR does not establish guilt or, on its own, probable cause for an arrest.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR causes people to be stopped unnecessarily.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR The opposite is true. ALPR helps prevent unnecessary stops by allowing officers to identify a specific vehicle instead of relying on a general description and stopping vehicles en masse.

A description such as a dark sedan or white pickup truck may match hundreds of vehicles. License plate information helps officers narrow the search and avoid stopping drivers based only on those general characteristics.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR obtains information that is otherwise unavailable to law enforcement.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR automates what officers have always lawfully done: observe publicly displayed license plates and compare them to lists of license plates associated with stolen vehicles, active warrants, and vehicles related to criminal investigations or missing people.

Instead of requiring officers to enter each plate manually into an in-car computer, ALPR reads and checks the plate against "hot lists" more quickly and efficiently.

✗ **MYTH:** Sharing ALPR information across jurisdictions is a privacy violation and is unnecessary.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR Criminals cross jurisdictional lines; investigations have to follow them. Responsible sharing of ALPR information is essential to allow law enforcement to follow legitimate investigative leads across jurisdictions.

Sharing helps agencies connect crimes, locate missing or kidnapped individuals, identify trafficking activity, and apprehend dangerous offenders. It must be limited to authorized law enforcement purposes and governed by consistent safeguards.

✗ **MYTH:** Historical ALPR information has little investigative value.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR Reasonable retention periods are critical because serious crimes may not be reported immediately and investigations develop over time.

A relevant vehicle may not be identified until days, weeks, or months later. If the ALPR record has already been deleted, an important investigative lead may be permanently lost.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR use is largely unregulated, and misuse goes undetected or unpunished.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR law enforcement agencies already operate ALPR systems under safeguards requiring authorized access, documented queries, verification, auditing, and meaningful consequences for misuse. That is how publicly reported instances of misuse have been caught.

Searchable audit logs identify who accessed the system, when a search occurred, and why it was conducted. When misuse has occurred, these logs have helped uncover it, leading to discipline or termination and, in some cases, criminal prosecution. These safeguards should be the consistent standard for every law enforcement agency using ALPR.

✗ **MYTH:** Law enforcement sells ALPR information for commercial gain.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR Law enforcement ALPR information is used solely for authorized public safety purposes.

License plate images collected by law enforcement agencies and ALPR query data are controlled law enforcement records, and are not a government or commercial revenue source. Responsible agency policies and provider agreements expressly prohibit the sale of law enforcement ALPR data.

✗ **MYTH:** ALPR violates individuals' Fourth Amendment expectation of privacy.

✓ **FACT:** ALPR Courts across the country have repeatedly held that ordinary use of ALPR systems does not violate the Fourth Amendment or require a warrant.

License plates are publicly displayed, and ALPR documents when and where a vehicle was photographed. A publicly displayed license plate does not become private simply because technology makes the observation. Courts have distinguished this limited ALPR information from the tracking of a person's movements through cell phone location history at issue in *Carpenter v. United States*.

Over forty court decisions, including *United States v. Porter*, *Robinson v. Commonwealth*, *United States v. Sturdivant*, have rejected Fourth Amendment challenges to ordinary investigative use of ALPR.

Law enforcement remains committed to using ALPR in compliance with the Constitution and applicable federal and state laws.

The Bottom Line

ALPR is a proven investigative tool that helps law enforcement find victims, solve serious crimes, protect communities, and save lives. It provides leads, not conclusions, and its use must include verification, strong safeguards, and meaningful accountability.

Law enforcement is committed to working with policymakers and communities to prevent misuse without preventing legitimate use.