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Finding the balance – an examination of police use of facial recognition technology and its relationship with citizens' human and data protection rights

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Examining how the police's understanding of citizens' human and data protection rights influences their use of facial recognition technology.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Surrey
Principal researcher(s)	Tyler Dadge t.dadge@surrey.ac.uk
Police region	South East
Level of research	PhD
Project start date	September 2021
Date due for completion	September 2025

Research context

In 2020 the Court of Appeal ruled South Wales Police's use of facial recognition was partially unlawful. Since then many people have called for specific legislation regulating the police's use of facial recognition to ensure the citizens' human and data protection rights are adequately protected.

The Court's decision did not ban the use of facial recognition but advised that certain aspects of its use were unlawful, and therefore needed reassessing before the use of facial recognition could continue. This was met with a flurry of guidance documents from varying sources leaving police forces to interpret these independently.

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The use of facial recognition in policing is growing rapidly, and the number of ways facial recognition can be used in policing is increasing.

This research project has five main objectives.

1. To understand how key stakeholders working in the field of facial recognition policing (police officers, software developers, civil liberty campaigners, academics, and civil servants) understand and are affected by the impact of legislation, guidance, and human and data protection rights on facial recognition for police use.
2. To understand the processes and regulations involved in the police's collection and storing of biometric data from facial recognition uses.
3. To understand how the automated decision-making processes affect the human-decision making processes and vice versa during facial recognition deployments.
4. To understand the barriers and facilitators that influence a police force's decision to use facial recognition or not.
5. To examine possible future uses of facial recognition and how this might impact the future of policing.

Research methodology

This research will conduct between 15 to 30 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (police officers, software developers, civil liberty campaigners, academics, and civil servants) in facial recognition policing. The research will then use their voices and experiences to examine how citizens' human and data protection rights impact the use of facial recognition in policing.

These interviews will be compared against each other, looking for similarities and differences across their experiences and perceptions. This will allow the researcher to build a picture of lived experiences of those who work with facial recognition in policing.

The interviews will indicate the participants' understanding of how legislation, guidance, and consideration for human and data protection rights influence they way facial recognition technology is used in policing. It will also highlight the potential differences in their interpretations of how best to protect citizens' human and data protection rights.

This will be done using a coded thematic analysis approach when examining the data produced from the interviews.

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Research participation

The researcher would like to hear from:

- Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and/or senior police officers from:
  - forces which do not and have never used facial recognition technology
  - forces which currently use facial recognition technology
  - forces which did use facial recognition in the past but don't use it any more

- Persons from facial recognition software companies (such as NEC or Reveal)
- Persons from civil rights groups (such as Big Brother Watch and Liberty)
- Academics who have researched facial recognition technology within policing
- Those who hold relevant positions within government and independent bodies who have dealt with facial recognition policing (such as policing minister and biometrics and surveillance commissioner)