



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on October 13, 2009

FBI Putting Driver's Licenses in Virtual Lineup

The Federal Bureau of Investigation is now able to scan millions of driver's licenses using facial recognition technology as they seek to track down fugitives.

The project, initiated in North Carolina, has led to at least one suspect being apprehended. Now the Bureau wants to expand the program nationwide, but privacy experts are warning that this puts innocent people into a virtual criminal lineup.

"Everybody's participating, essentially, in a virtual lineup by getting a driver's license," stated American Civil Liberties Union attorney Christopher Calabrese. And there is no way to opt out of the lineup other than not having a driver's license.



The FBI had their first success story with a double homicide suspect named Rodolfo Corrales. Using a 1991 booking photo of Corrales as the standard, the Bureau used computers to hunt through the 30 million photos in the North Carolina motor vehicle agency database. Within seconds, the search turned up a dozen drivers resembling Corrales.

"Running facial recognition is not very labor-intensive at all," analyst Michael Garcia noted. "If I can probe a hundred fugitives and get one or two, that's a home run."

At this point, agents reviewed the images and zeroed in on a driver named Jose Solis. Once it was established that Solis was indeed Corrales under an assumed name, he was arrested. Corrales is now scheduled to receive a preliminary hearing before the end of October.

With a victory like this under its belt, the FBI wants to expand the program across the country. Officials have formed a panel of experts to determine the best way to use the facial recognition software. The panel is expected to take a year to finalize standards for driver's license photos, but there is no expected date for implementing the search capability nationwide.

The FBI itself is not authorized to gather and retain photos. That is why the facial recognition process must take place at the Division of Motor Vehicles in an individual state. The authority to make the driver's license information available to law-enforcement officials already exists under state and federal laws. "Unless the person's a criminal, we would not have a need to have that information in the system," pointed out Kim Del Greco, overseer of the FBI's biometrics division. "I think that would be a privacy concern. We're staying away from that."

Dan Roberts, assistant director of the Bureau's Criminal Justice Information Services Division, claimed: "We're not interested in housing a bunch of photos of people who have done absolutely nothing wrong."

Fortunately for the FBI, they don't have to store any photos; the state motor vehicle departments already handle that quite conveniently. This causes the ACLU's Calabrese to advise Americans to pay attention to how their driver's licenses are being used.



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Driver's licenses "started as a permission to drive," Calabrese said. "Now you need them to open a bank account. You need them to be identified everywhere. And suddenly they're becoming the de facto law enforcement database."

Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, wonders if the push for facial recognition systems after 9/11 is justified. "We don't have good photos of terrorists," Rotenberg noted. "Most of the facial-recognition systems today are built on state DMV records because that's where the good photos are. It's not where the terrorists are."

Once again, the federal government tightens its controls on innocent Americans in the wake of 9/11. Innocent Americans get strip-searched at airports, have their electronic communications spied on, and now willingly contribute their photos to databases that can be searched with facial recognition software. Criminals and terrorists are largely undeterred by these things, but the average U.S. citizen can't avoid them.

The seemingly benign intention of regulating who can drive an automobile has been twisted into establishing a national ID card and a ready-made database of potential criminals who have not done anything wrong. In the end, these things do little to make the average American any safer, but they do keep the government safely in control of its subjects.



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