

California ALPR FAQs

How do Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) Systems work?

Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) systems function to automatically capture an image of a vehicle and the vehicle's license plate, transform the plate image into alphanumeric characters using optical character recognition, compare the plate number acquired to one or more databases (also known as "hot lists") of vehicles of interest to law enforcement, and then alert law enforcement officers when a vehicle of interest has been observed.

The stored license plate data also provides law enforcement investigators with a pointer system that may help them identify vehicles associated with suspects, witnesses, or victims, and to develop exculpatory information that assists them with focusing their investigative resources. The data also allows law enforcement to connect serial criminal activities that may have occurred in disconnected law enforcement jurisdictions.

<https://www.theiacp.org/projects/automated-license-plate-recognition>

How do California Law Enforcement Agencies use ALPR?

Law enforcement agencies use ALPR systems for the authorized law enforcement purpose of rapidly identifying and locating vehicles of legitimate interest to law enforcement.

In one common use of ALPR technology, license plate encounters are compared against law enforcement databases, also known as "hot lists". The lists contain the license plate numbers and letters of vehicles associated with active investigations, such as those related to Amber Alerts or other missing persons, stolen vehicles, or stolen license plates. The information is also retained for a fixed retention period, though it is only re-accessible by law enforcement given a legitimate law enforcement purpose.

A second common use of ALPR technology is to canvas license plates around any crime scene to assist in the identification of suspects, victims, and witnesses. ALPR technology only acts as a pointer system that allows law enforcement to conduct searches with limited information, including partial license plate information.

Where is ALPR data stored?

ALPR data resides in a secure facility with 24/7 security measures in place.

Who has access to the ALPR database?

Only law enforcement personnel that have:

1. An official and legitimate law enforcement purpose for accessing the system.

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2. A criminal case or incident number/name.
3. A lawful purpose with a need to know and right to know the information.

What is a lawful purpose?

The lawful purposes required for users to access the system are

1. Locate Stolen, Wanted, or Suspect Vehicles.
2. Locate Suspect(s) of Criminal Investigation or Arrest Warrant.
3. Locate Witnesses or Victims of Violent Crime.
4. Locate Missing Children and Elderly individuals (Amber / Silver Alerts).
5. Protect the Public during Special Events / Situational Awareness.
6. Protect Critical Infrastructure.

What is a need to know?

This standard is established when the requested information is pertinent and necessary to the requesting agency in initiating, furthering, or completing the performance of a law enforcement activity.

What is a right to know?

This standard is established when the requester is acting in an official capacity and has statutory authority to obtain the information being sought.

How are personnel vetted to have access to the system?

Law enforcement agency personnel must be approved to have access to the system by their agency.

Once a law enforcement or public safety agency employee is approved to use the system how do they access the data?

Approved law enforcement agency employees access the system with a unique username and login.

Does the ALPR system collect my personal identifying information?

The ALPR system does not contain personal identifying information associated with data collected through ALPR devices. The system only contains the data sets of license plate numbers, photos of the vehicles, and geospatial locations from where the images were captured. There is no connectivity in the ALPR system to the vehicle's registration information or the driver's license information of the owner.

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How accurate is the ALPR technology?

As ALPR technology is translating optical characters to digital data there is a small error rate in translation of alphanumeric characters that are similar in shape. ALPR operators must recognize that the data collected from the ALPR device, and the content of referenced hot lists, consists of data that may or may not be accurate, despite ongoing efforts to maximize the currency and accuracy of such data. To the greatest extent possible, law enforcement agencies request that vehicle and subject information be verified from separate Law Enforcement information sources to confirm the vehicle or subject's identity and justification for law enforcement contact. Law enforcement users of ALPR Data must, to the fullest extent possible, visually confirm that the plate characters generated by the ALPR readers correspond with the digital image of the license plate in question.

Can members of the public request the images of where their vehicle has been seen by ALPR?

No, the ALPR systems are restricted to law enforcement personnel with a lawful purpose for searching the system. If a member of the public's vehicle or license plate is stolen, law enforcement agencies with a case number may search the database to search for the stolen vehicle or license plate and establish an alert to notify them if the license plate is encountered.

How many alerts occur each month for wanted vehicles?

Approximately 1 to 2 vehicles out of 1000 initiate an alert in the system.

How is the system audited?

The system logs each user's activity by agency, name, date, time, and purpose of search. Designated law enforcement personnel may perform sample audits to the system to confirm that it is functioning properly, and that required data is being appropriately submitted.

Is vehicle information shared with private sector companies?

No, the law enforcement ALPR systems are restricted to law enforcement personnel with a lawful purpose for using the system.

Where are ALPR cameras located?

ALPR units are attached to law enforcement vehicles or deployed at fixed locations, where they collect license plate information from vehicles on public roadways, public property and vehicles that are within public view. As the ALPR devices are a law enforcement investigative tool we do not provide the locations of the cameras. If subjects engaged in violent and/or serial criminal activities are made aware of the location of the devices, they could take measures to avoid detection.

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How long are ALPR records maintained?

Most ALPR records are maintained for a set period within California that ranges by jurisdiction from sixty (60) days to five (5) years with records purged unless the data has become, or it is reasonable to be believed that it will become, evidence in a criminal or civil action or is subject to a lawful action to produce records. [The Northern California Regional Intelligence Center/High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area \(NCRIC/HIDTA\) has a one \(1\) year retention period for ALPR records, unless the information is collected from a local agency ALPR in an area wherein the local government has requested a shorter retention period for their agency's ALPRs.](#)

Why are records maintained for any specific time?

The retention of records allow time for witnesses and victims of crime to report incidents to law enforcement. It also allows law enforcement to connect serial criminal activities that occur in disconnected law enforcement jurisdictions. The greatest potential value of an ALPR system is in identifying vehicles associated with the investigation of violent and serial criminal events. In this capacity the ALPR system aids law enforcement investigators by providing a pointer system that may help them identify vehicles associated with suspects, witnesses, victims and to develop exculpatory information that assists them with focusing their investigative resources.

Do ALPR systems provide constant surveillance of the location of members of the public?

No, ALPR systems only provide authorized law enforcement personnel with a pointer for one moment in time and location where a vehicle was located to provide potential leads to support criminal investigations.

Can ALPR devices see into my vehicle?

Unlike red light cameras, ALPR devices do not have illumination to aid in identifying the driver of the vehicle. The purpose of the ALPR is to identify the vehicle, not the occupants. If ambient lighting is sufficient or a subject is outside and near the vehicle their image may be captured.

Is every ALPR image reviewed?

No, images are only reviewed by law enforcement personnel when required and based upon the need to:

1. Locate stolen, wanted, and subject of investigation vehicles.
2. Locate and apprehend individuals subject to arrest warrants or otherwise lawfully sought by law enforcement.
3. Locate witnesses and victims of violent crime.
4. Locate missing children and elderly individuals, including responding to Amber and Silver Alerts.

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5. Support local, state, federal, and tribal public safety departments in the identification of vehicles associated with targets of criminal investigations, including investigations of serial crimes.
6. Protect participants at special events.
7. Protect critical infrastructure sites.

What laws are there regarding the use ALPR devices?

After California Senate Bill 34 became law, it required transparency of ALPR implementation, policies, security, and notifications of any data breach. The law also requires law enforcement agency ALPR system operators to have and post ALPR usage and privacy policies to ensure that the collection, use, maintenance, sharing, and dissemination of the information is consistent with respect for individuals' privacy and civil liberties.

(https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160SB34&showamends=false in SEC. 3. Title 1.81.23 (commencing with Section 1798.90.5) Part 4 of Division 3 of the Civil Code)

Is ALPR data shared for the purpose of immigration enforcement?

No authorized law enforcement user or agency may access California ALPR databases for the sole purpose of immigration enforcement. In gathering, sharing, and storing information, California law enforcement agencies comply with all applicable laws, rules, and regulations, including but not limited to, to the extent applicable, the California Values Act (Government Code Section 7284 et seq.). Each California law enforcement agency, consistent with California Government Code Sections 7282, 7282.5, and 7284.8 (b), works to ensure that databases are governed in a manner that limits the availability of information therein to the fullest extent practicable and consistent with federal and state law, to anyone or any entity for the purpose of immigration enforcement.

What is the privacy impact of ALPR?

To learn more about the privacy impact of ALPR please read the NCRIC privacy impact assessment at <https://ncric.org/html/NCRIC%20ALPR%20PIA.PDF>. Comments or questions regarding the ALPR impact assessment may be directed to privacyofficer@ncric.ca.gov.