INNOVATION



DAILY COVER

Flock Installed AI Cameras In This Small City And Claimed Crime Went Down. It Went Up.

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SUMMARY OF FOLLOWING ARTICLE

San Marino California - small wealthy municipality in LA county

- Violent crime is unheard of. Usually has non-violent property crime
- Used to have ALPRs from different company, someone (police? flock?) pitch to the City Council using these cameras instead
- In 2023 - Part 1 (terrible crimes) in San Marino ticked up a tiny bit (no number) after cameras installed
- Flock reported that burglaries were reduced over this particular time in San Marino by 70%, but this data is somewhat distorted or exaggerated. Flock used a very specific window of time of a few months compared to that period previously (in the previous year?). But when you dig into the data that San Marino publicly offers, you find that the period right after would often have a small spike in burglaries.
- Not to say that the cameras don't do anything, but flock seems to be exaggerating a bit
- San Marino's police chief, Cointreau, couldn't explain why the burglaries went down other than they were using the Flock cameras, though he did admit that to claim that crime went down by 70% in San Marino wasn't totally accurate either.
- ALPRs have existed for over a decade… including Oakland… can't argue that there has been a substantive decrease in crime.
- Flock is expanding all over the country. Over 4000 communities. Flock claims to cover 70% of all citizens.
- When Flock presents to a city they tend to have lots of support from police departments.
- State grant money has gone all over California in the last year, and lots of that money is going to Flock cameras
- Academic research by flock (in consultation with academics in Texas), was given to criminology experts (6 in total) they did not find Flock's own research convincing. Paper would not pass peer review. "Every camera set up in the community should result in a x% reduction in crime" felt that statement would not stand up to scrutiny. Lot of problems with methodology of the study
- Flock is using this unconvincing research to sell them
- Bottom line understanding: The benefit of flock cameras is not what the flock organization claims it to be
- Received hundreds of millions of dollars in venture capital from Andreessen Horowitz, Founders Fund.

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The $4 billion surveillance startup has been selling law enforcement clients on the promise of dramatic reductions in crime. But it's not clear that the company lives up to its own hype.

By Cyrus Farivar and Thomas Brewster, Forbes Staff

For a brief time in 2021, the affluent town of San Marino in Los Angeles County saw a dramatic decrease in residential burglaries, its most common crime. Between January and May, they dropped 80%, down to seven from 32 in the same period of 2020.

For Flock Safety, which had installed AI-powered license plate readers for the San Marino Police Department in June 2020, the statistic was marketing gold. The company seized on this data, claiming its technology was key in decreasing not just burglaries, but all crimes in the town by 70%.

Taking a wider lens tells a different story. Despite that initial five month drop in 2021, residential burglaries on the whole rose after Flock's cameras were deployed. In 2019, San Marino reported 60 residential burglaries. In 2023, three years after Flock's arrival, there were 63 — a 5% increase.

Meanwhile, Part 1 crimes – more serious offenses including larceny and murder – have stayed almost completely flat: 231 in 2023, compared to 230 in 2019, the year before Flock cameras were installed.

Even the town's police chief John Incontro admits the 70% claim — still trumpeted on Flock's website today — isn't accurate. "I definitely need to talk to their marketing folks," he told *Forbes*.

This isn't the only example of Flock taking liberties with crime statistics to bolster its marketing. The company, whose license plate cams identify cars not only by license plate, but by a "fingerprint" that can include cargo racks, bumper stickers, and more, has routinely handpicked and oversimplified data to support its crime cutting claims, according to a *Forbes* analysis of four of its most often-cited jurisdictions. In addition to San Marino, the company, which

is now worth over $4 billion, has made similarly embellished claims about Fort Worth, Texas; Dayton, Ohio; and Lexington, Kentucky.

"We do not claim that because San Marino, California reported an 80% drop in residential burglaries, the city of Los Angeles would see the same," Flock spokesperson Josh Thomas told *Forbes* in a statement. "The purpose of these case studies are to show how different cities and communities across the U.S. — urban, rural, suburban — are using this technology to help increase case clearances," referring to the time it takes for law enforcement to close a case.

"There are a lot of people who are really questioning why the city is putting so many resources into these Flock cameras when it can't show they're effective."

Katie Kersh, Dayton attorney

As additional evidence of its cameras' efficacy, Thomas pointed to a company white paper written by two Flock employees and two academics that analyzed data from 246 of its customers. The paper concludes that "10% of reported crime in the U.S. is solved using Flock technology."

Six criminal justice academics found the study's conclusions and resulting marketing claims problematic.

This "borders on ludicrous barring clear evidence of what would be considered a four-alarm [fire] research finding," Michael Sierra-Arévalo, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, and the author of *The Danger Imperative*, a new book about policing in America.

Columbia University law professor Jeffrey Fagan bluntly said of the paper: "I doubt that this would survive peer review."

Local leaders and top law enforcement officials in cities like Hall County, Nebraska, Blue Springs, Missouri and Campbell, California have used Flock's marketing claims around crime reduction to sell their communities on the startup's license plate readers. Some cities have spent hundreds of thousands on the technology, spurring exceptional growth for the startup, which has attracted over $482 million worth of venture funding from major VCs like Andreesen Horowitz and Founders Fund. CEO Garrett Langley recently said the Flock's cameras are operational in just over 4,000 US cities, covering almost 70% of the American population. He claimed Flock solves about 2,200 crimes daily. *Forbes* previously reported that in its rush to grow, Flock

installed its cameras without the necessary permits, repeatedly breaking laws in five states in the process.

On other occasions, Flock has exaggerated the effectiveness of its cameras by omitting key details from its marketing. The company often touts Dayton, Ohio's Twin Towers neighborhood as a success story, claiming it "experienced lower crime rates by 43%" thanks to its cameras. That metric is pulled from a Dayton PD report on Flock's impact, which does indeed show a 43% decline in crime rates during the March 1 to July 20 window between 2018 and 2020. But, Flock wasn't installed until March of 2020. So its cameras are, at best, associated only with the 28% decline reported between 2019 and 2020.

In December of 2023, Dayton city commissioners voted 3-2 to expand Flock Safety's presence citywide, committing $825,750 to nearly double the total number of cameras installed and cover their costs through 2028.

"Ultimately, this is about the victims in our community, in many of the most oppressed parts of the community, where folks have very limited resources," said Commissioner Chris Shaw during that meeting.

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Local activists concerned about the proliferation of Flock cameras found the news exasperating.

"There are a lot of people who are really questioning why the city is putting so many resources into these Flock cameras when [the city] can't show they're effective," Katie Kersh, a Dayton attorney who helped draft and advocate for a recently-enacted local surveillance ordinance, told *Forbes*.

In Fort Worth, Texas, it's a similar story. Police there installed their first Flock cameras in September 2020. In its marketing materials, the company touts a "violent crime decrease of 22%" in the city's Las Vegas Trail neighborhood between January and August 2021 compared with the same period during 2019, which it says police "partially" attribute to Flock. (Other marketing materials simplify this to a "22% reduction in crime" in that neighborhood.)

“It’s Exhibit A of lying with statistics. I always compare it to drug trials. Imagine you only looked at your treated group for one year and called it good.”

Jonathan Hofer, Independent Institute

But between 2021, the first full year Flock's cameras were installed citywide, and 2023, Group A crimes like aggravated assault and residential burglary rose by 5 percent across the city. As of April 2023, Fort Worth had 170 cameras on which the city spends over $500,000 annually.

Flock’s Thomas attributed the post-Flock crime increase in Fort Worth to “black swan events that disrupt life as we know it, like the global pandemic and subsequent unrest.”

Jonathan Hofer, a social science researcher who’s studied license plate reader efficacy for a non-partisan think tank, the Independent Institute, told *Forbes* that Flock appears to be cherry-picking snapshots of crime statistics to tell the story that’s best for its business.

“It’s Exhibit A of lying with statistics,” Hofer said. “I always compare it to drug trials. Imagine you only looked at your treated group for one year and called it good.”

Regardless of its true impact on crime rates, many law enforcement officials say they find Flock’s tech useful.

Matthew Murray, the police chief of Yakima, Washington, a town of around 100,000 in the southern part of the state, told his city council on January 2 that Flock cameras – which arrived in town in the spring of 2022 – are the “greatest thing since DNA… I’m telling you guys, it is really hard to commit a crime in this city, if you’re in a car.”

In San Marino, police chief Incontro also lauded Flock, even as he took issue with the company's exaggerated marketing claims.

“Within my city it’s been helpful,” he told *Forbes*. “It’s been helpful for us to find suspects and it has helped us eliminate leads that are taking us in the wrong direction and it has substantiated other evidence that we have.”

And Flock has certainly helped police track down suspects. Federal court files reviewed by *Forbes* show police used Flock cameras to catch an alleged

Oklahoma drug dealer and an alleged Michigan bank robber. Nearly every day, Flock trumpets local news stories across the United States that cite the company's role in aiding arrests.

Some law enforcement officials are more skeptical of Flock's claims. In Lexington, Kentucky, where crime has dropped only slightly since Flock's arrival in spring 2022, Lieutenant David Richardson told *Forbes* he didn't believe the technology was going to have "a demonstrable impact on crime rates." Instead, he said, "I think what you're going to see is the time for solving cases is going to be helped."

But that will be difficult to prove as the department does not keep track of the time between when a crime occurs and when a suspect is identified and referred for prosecution. "So many variables that go into [the speed of clearing a case], it's really not quantifiable," Richardson explained. Lexington currently pays $236,000 annually for its installation of 100 Flock cameras.

Meanwhile, more cities are lining up for Flock deployments. Last year, Berkeley, California approved spending $425,000 on 52 Flock cameras over the next two years. And dozens of other California jurisdictions ranging from Beverly Hills to Oakland to Salinas to San Francisco were collectively awarded $24 million to combat retail crime – a considerable portion of that money is earmarked for new Flock Safety cameras.

That's a lot of public funding to spend on surveillance technology whose true efficacy is tough to assess, says Sarah Brayne, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and the author of *Predict and Surveil*, a book about police surveillance.

"Estimating the factors that causally impact crime rates is difficult because it turns out the world is super messy," she told *Forbes*, raising an eye at Flock's marketing claims. "It's like saying I talked to only my friends and I'm predicting the outcome of an upcoming election. Your friends are not a random sample. Flock's customers are not a random sample."



By Cyrus Farivar
Cyrus ("suh-ROOS") Farivar is a Forbes senior writer who covers retail, scams, surveillance, and more across Silicon Valley. He joined Forbes in 2022 and is based in Oakland, California. He has covered Temu, TikTok Shop, and the collapse of Cruise, the autonomous vehicle arm of GM.

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