

VIDEO SURVEILLANCE AND SECURITY

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Key Takeaways:

- Both security professionals and members of the public tend to view CCTV favorably.
- Offenders typically do not consider the presence of CCTV as a serious threat and use simple techniques to evade detection.
- Experiments of CCTV in retail environments show positive effects on product shrinkage, but the effects can diminish over time.
- The overall research shows CCTV has a modest, but significant, impact on crime.
- The largest effects are on drug crime followed by vehicle crime and property crime. Overall, CCTV does not significantly impact violent crime.
- The effect of CCTV on offender apprehension is mixed, with video surveillance systems on private railway networks generally having more success than systems in public places.
- Research on CCTV's effect on fear of crime is not well developed and suffers from several conceptual and methodological shortcomings.
- Cost-benefit analyses have found that CCTV can be cost-effective, offsetting expenses when crime reductions are generated.
- Research has yet to measure how computer vision technology improves surveillance.

Research Summary:

This report critically examines the effectiveness of video surveillance—particularly CCTV—in crime prevention, detection, and public safety, with a focus on implications for private sector security practices. Drawing on decades of research and empirical evaluation, the report evaluates CCTV's impact across multiple domains, including public perception, crime control, cost-effectiveness, and emerging technologies like computer vision.

Research shows broad public support for CCTV, with surveys indicating that most individuals feel safer and more willing to attend venues equipped with surveillance systems. However, the deterrent effect on offenders is inconsistent. While some shoplifters acknowledge CCTV's presence, many rely on their belief that cameras are not actively monitored or are dummies, and often use simple tactics to avoid detection, such as staying in blind spots.

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of CCTV evaluations reveal that CCTV has a modest but statistically significant impact on crime reduction. Crime decreases by about 13% in areas with CCTV, with the most substantial reductions in drug offenses followed by vehicle crime, and property crime. No significant effect was found for violent crime. The greatest impacts were seen in car parks, followed by residential areas. Actively monitored systems and those integrated with complementary interventions—such as improved lighting or directed police patrols—performed better than passive or standalone camera systems.

Video surveillance can enhance offender apprehension, especially when integrated with proactive policing. CCTV can also support retroactive investigations, though effects are higher in transportation settings than other places.

One of the most underexamined areas is CCTV operator performance. Studies reveal that surveillance activity is relatively rare, often due to “surveillance barriers” such as long police response times or unclear protocols. Operators frequently refrain from reporting incidents they deem too minor or believe won’t prompt a timely response.

While CCTV may reduce fear and increase feelings of safety, the research is underdeveloped. A systematic review found only 15 studies directly assessing CCTV's impact on fear of crime. Results were mixed, with about half showing fear reduction, but most lacked control groups or used inconsistent survey methods.

Cost-benefit evaluations show mixed results. CCTV can be cost-effective, but this depends on how CCTV systems are financed and how crime costs are calculated.

Modern CCTV systems increasingly incorporate computer vision technology (CVT), which uses AI to detect weapons or suspicious behavior. Studies show promising results in detecting guns with high precision, but challenges remain in poor lighting or detecting small weapons.

Overall, CCTV can be a valuable security tool, but its effectiveness depends on strategic deployment, active monitoring, integration with other interventions, and contextual factors such as location and crime type. For private sector entities, the report encourages a tailored approach that considers unique operational needs, cost structures, and business outcomes when investing in surveillance technology.