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*Surveillance or Safety? The Ethics and Legality of Facial
Recognition in UK Law Enforcement*

Cameron Edwards 2245731

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Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BSc Policing and Criminology.

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This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

This dissertation aimed to explore public perception of facial recognition technology in UK policing and what factors contribute to and affect this opinion. The researcher carried out an in-depth analysis of existing academic literature discussing the benefits and concerns of Facial recognition technologies' use in policing, focusing on aspects such as legal regulation, ethical concerns and individual privacy.

To gain primary research on public and practitioner perceptions of facial recognition technology, a questionnaire was created with the intention of gathering concerns and perceived benefits of the technology, and to identify themes among participants.

The findings of the questionnaire broadly supported academic literature discussions, with themes identified being the contextual and conditional acceptance of facial recognition technology and a general support of its use.

Upon analysing primary research results and existing academic literature, the dissertation achieved its main aim by addressing the question, which was to assess whether the deployment of facial recognition technology is perceived as enhancing public safety or contributing to surveillance, and to identify the conditions under which its use is considered legitimate.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Facial recognition technology and surveillance are considered controversial topics within policing, where there is a fine line between preventing and detecting crime and maintaining public privacy as a human right. As technology becomes increasingly advanced, police forces are developing various methods to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their tactics. Facial recognition is a recent development in UK policing and is being deployed in a limited number of police forces, with others trialling it nationwide. In tandem with this, public opinion and scrutiny are being closely monitored to ensure a prolonged use of this specialised technology and eventually using the technology in common practice in police forces around the country.

Facial recognition technology in the context of policing refers to the use of specialised biometric software and advanced imaging tools such as fixed cameras or mobile phone cameras to take a still image or live video of a person's face and extract unique facial features such as nose shape, ear shape, or jawline shape. This data is then used to compare these features to a preexisting database containing images of individuals with a criminal record, driver's license, or passport photo to find potential matches. The technology will then display the most similar match with a rating of how probable both images are of the same individual. This entire process is typically done in a matter of seconds.

However, as useful as this technology sounds, many ethical and legal issues surrounding its use have already been identified. This literature review examines the main arguments and existing research on facial recognition and its application in law enforcement, focusing primarily on the legal framework in place to regulate its use, the ethical considerations associated with its use, and the public's opinion on its use.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Legal Uncertainty and Lack of Regulation

Due to facial recognition being a new technology in law enforcement, there are no actual laws that govern its use in public. Although laws such as the Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Act 2018 and the Human Rights Act 1998 do exist, these laws were created before facial recognition technology was introduced to UK policing. At present, the only forces in the UK that are actively progressing the use of facial recognition technology are the Metropolitan Police and South Wales Police. Both the Met and SWP have trialled and successfully implemented the use of this technology into routine policing and act as pioneers in its use for the future.

The case of *Bridges v. South Wales Police* (2020) is a well-known landmark case study diving into the topic and bringing facial recognition technology and specifically live facial recognition into the limelight. The court of appeal found that the noticeable lack of legal regulation and clarity fell short of the requirements of The Data Protection Act of 2018, The Equality Act of 2010 and The Human Rights Act.

Rights Act of 1998. It was found that, as there is no legal framework to hold Police Forces accountable for the use of facial recognition technology and no legal guidance, the use of the technology can be considered a violation of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the right to a private life.

The Ada Lovelace Institute also touches on this in a legal review, where it is stated that the UK's legislation on the use of facial recognition technology is "Diffused and insufficient". The report goes on to point out the fragmented nature of governance in the UK when it comes to the use of this technology in law enforcement. The review led by Matthew Ryder KC states that the current laws are "unclear, ineffective and failing to keep pace with technological developments." The report concludes that there is a need for an independent regulatory body and new legislation focusing on biometric surveillance to manage the use of facial recognition technology if its use is to be continued in UK policing. (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2021).

Further to this, an independent report on the Metropolitan Police's use of facial recognition technology by Fussey and Murray (2019) expands on this opinion a potential issue arising where UK police forces would be using facial recognition based off of force policies rather than a statutory authority potentially creating a situation where biometric surveillance is normalised, undermining public trust due to its intrusive nature and lowering the accountability placed in police forces.

However, despite there being noticeable gaps in the legislation surrounding facial recognition technology, the Information Commissioner's Office has issued guidance on its use. The ICO states that facial recognition technology is "sensitive processing" under part 3 of the Data Protection Act 2018 and, due to its sensitive nature, should meet the requirement of its collection being proportionate and necessary and should be backed by a legal basis (ICO 2019). Despite this, there is technically no legal requirement to follow this guidance. An article written by Wagner (2024) states that "soft regulation through ethical principles and internal protocols cannot substitute for enforceable, statutory safeguards."

2.2 Ethical Considerations

As facial recognition technology is considered an intrusive method of policing, there is no doubt that there are ethical concerns that come with its use. In particular, this technology raises concerns of bias, consent, and discrimination.

The main concern in relation to ethical issues with facial recognition is algorithmic bias. Studies have been conducted internationally that support this theory, where error rates of the technology have been studied, showing a different degree of error when used on different demographics. A report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology, a US-based organisation, found that facial recognition software performed noticeably worse when used on individuals with darker skin tones and, in particular, black women (NIST 2019). This raises alarming concerns as the use of this technology can be deemed 'racist', subsequently undermining its reliability and its use in modern

Police forces. Although this study was conducted on US facial recognition technology, it can also apply to the UK, as UK forces are known to rely on commercial services such as this software.

Expanding on the topic of commercial software, ethical issues can also be seen here due to many live facial recognition technologies being privately developed and owned. This highlights the question of transparency in police forces as private companies can be known to hide the processes and how the technology works, making it difficult for regulatory bodies to oversee the operations to ensure that its use is reliable and cannot be manipulated. Elizabeth E. Joh coined the term 'black box policing' which describes police forces using algorithmic tools such as facial recognition technology that make decisions on policing that police forces don't necessarily understand themselves or cannot describe Joh E. E, 2016).

Another angle of ethical debate for the use of facial recognition is informed consent and public awareness. With facial recognition being a live method of surveillance, unlike other forms of surveillance, questions can be raised on the subject of consent. Although obtaining consent defeats the core purpose of most methods of surveillance, by obtaining and processing biometric data en masse in a public area, members of the public may understandably disapprove of having their pictures taken without knowing, as they go about their days. Lyon (2018) defines "normalisation of surveillance" as a gradual shift in which mass biometric monitoring becomes an accepted feature of everyday life, even when it lacks democratic legitimacy or public support.

The Ada Lovelace Institute (2021) also discusses this and argues that facial recognition technology has the possibility to cause behavioural change and a sense of distrust among minority populations who may already feel discriminated against by police forces. Several studies outline the effects and the behavioural change exhibited by people once they are aware that they are being watched. This could further public distrust of police forces in the UK and hinder cohesion.

Furthermore, Bert-Jaap Koops (2021) coined the term 'Function Creep' as the expansion of a system or technology beyond its original purposes, which could be argued as an ethical concern in terms of facial recognition technology. Relating this to policing, the deployment of this technology is becoming ever more common in routine policing practices; however, it can be argued that the purpose for the use of facial recognition technology was intended to be used for specific purposes, such as counter terrorism. An example of this can be seen at the 2025 Notting Hill Carnival, where facial recognition technology was deployed by the Metropolitan Police, with critics such as Big Brother Watch (2025) referring to the deployment as "invasive" and "discriminatory".

Summarising these points, there are many ethical concerns surrounding the use of facial recognition technology in UK policing and these concerns are intensifying given its increase in deployment nationally. Although these concerns are acknowledged in academic literature, whether these concerns are being adequately addressed in legislation and practice can be questioned. As with every police tactic being trialled and used, facial recognition must also face public scrutiny in order to be developed and implemented into UK policing.

2.3 Public Perception

The success of the implementation of facial recognition technology in policing is heavily influenced by the general public's opinion and support of such a policing strategy. Academic literature emphasises that the approval of facial recognition technology does not solely fall with legal and technical requirements but also factors in public acceptance of its use. Because of this, the public attitudes towards FRT are therefore treated as a key ethical and governance concern. According to academic and governmental sources, the public's opinion on FRT can be consistently described as conditional and context-dependent, shaped by trust in policing institutions and perceptions of fairness and proportionality (Fussey and Murray, 2019; Home Office, 2025).

In addition to this, research suggests that members of the UK public are expressing limited support for FRT with concerns that its routine deployment is not proportionate to its initial intended use of serious crime or counter terrorism prevention. Recent case studies show that the public support of FRT is fragile and declining, with cases such as *R (Bridges) v Chief Constable of South Wales Police* highlighting that public attitudes mirror legal principles governing necessity and intrusion.

The methods and strategies of FRT deployment are one of the major public concerns. Typically, the use of FRT in controlled environments such as custody settings and border control environments, for example, airports, generally results in a higher rate of public approval as opposed to more open and public areas such as high streets. Understandably, when FRT is used in public settings, concerns of large-scale privacy intrusion are raised, with the result typically being members of the public feeling as though their right to privacy is being infringed upon and their daily lives being surveyed. Public space deployments to which this relates can be perceived as indiscriminate, and the element of individual suspicion removed, which can be argued is the intention for FRT's deployment in smaller-scale, controlled environments such as airports. While survey-based studies support this distinction, the literature relies heavily on hypothetical data with minimal longitudinal research examining clearly defined public opinion on FRT and its impact on privacy in large-scale deployments. There is little evidence to examine whether repeated FRT use impacts the general public's individual lives and their participation in public life (A. Sagana et al 2025).

Another concern impacting the public's approval of FRT is trust in policing institutions. Several studies indicate that accountability, proportionality and transparency increase public approval of such policing strategies, and these principles, along with adherence to data protection regulations, support the public's general willingness to tolerate FRT. However, high-profile controversies such as findings of unlawful image retention or disproportionate usages of FRT are highly likely to damage police forces' reputation and undermine public confidence in FRT (Fussey and Murray, 2019).

Although the public opinion of FRT is heavily influenced by its governance and its adherence to existing legislation, there is limited evidence to assess whether specific changes need to be made to improve public trust or whether changes being implemented are leading to an increasing and sustained state of improved trust between the public and the police in the context of FRT.

Following on from this, Veale et al (2018) highlight public concerns that FRT systems, particularly in sensitive environments such as protests and demonstrations, where arguments can be made that FRT can potentially threaten freedom of expression and assembly. This concern also highlights that, as well as individual privacy, other human rights can also be put at risk with the deployment of FRT. This, in turn, raises further concerns about surveillance and state power over the general public. Similarly to the previously mentioned academic studies, while survey evidence supports these concerns, a lack of qualitative research and longitudinal studies can be seen as a potential weakness, especially in the form of community experiences with FRT and how various community groups can be affected by FRT deployment.

To summarise this topic, the mentioned literature provides a variety of public perception concerns highlighting its fragile and context-dependent nature and its close tie to governance and fairness in relation to FRT. This research also highlights the gap in studies including qualitative research within various community groups and the relation between FRT governance and public approval of its deployment. These limitations support scholarly arguments for an evidence-led approach to FRT deployment and the need to balance public safety concerns against ethical issues.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Methodological Framework

The previous chapter addresses one of the objectives of the study, being a critical examination of academic literature into the field of FRT in UK policing, identifying social, ethical and legal concerns surrounding its public use. During my research, gaps were identified in the existing academic literature of the absence of public perception data, limited qualitative insight and evidence linking governance frameworks to public trust.

This chapter will aim to identify and justify an appropriate research methodology for examining public perception towards FRT in UK policing, and at what point does the public feel that FRT becomes a surveillance tactic over a public safety tactic.

Bryman (2016) distinguishes between two principal forms of research, primary and secondary. Secondary research. Secondary research refers to the analysis of existing literature and data, while primary research involves the collection of original data for a specific research purpose.

Due to the lack of primary research addressing public and practitioner perception of FRT within the UK context, I felt as though primary research was needed to fill the gap of theoretical analysis conducted in the literature review. This chapter will outline and justify the methodological approach adopted for the collection and analysis of primary data.

The structure of this research design followed in this dissertation follows the Research Onion framework coined by Saunders et al. (2019). This approach is best suited for this study due to its

Systematic approach to research design guiding the researcher through key methodological layers such as research philosophy, approach, strategy, time horizon and data collection techniques.

Each section of the “Onion” outlines a deliberate methodological choice informed by the nature of The research question and the gaps identified within existing literature.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the assumptions a researcher holds regarding the nature of knowledge and the process through which it can be acquired (Saunders et al. 2019). For this study, an interpretivist research philosophy has been adopted.

Bryman (2016) defines interpretivism as a philosophy particularly suited to studies seeking to explore subjective meanings, social perceptions and human behaviour over attempting to establish objective causal relationships. This philosophy aligns well with the aims of this research, which primarily focuses on perceptions of public trust and ethics, as well as the legitimacy surrounding FRT, rather than factual statistics and technical accuracy of the policing strategy.

Taking this into account, ethical concerns such as a breach of privacy, cultural bias, and the normalisation of surveillance are typically socially constructed and value-based. Because of this, an interpretivist approach will allow a deeper understanding of public opinions and views on FRT being practised across UK police forces. This makes an interpretivist philosophy the most appropriate for examining social tensions where evidence of such research is limited in existing literature.

3.3 Research Approach

Saunders et al. (2019) outline two dominant approaches to research. Deductive and inductive. Deductive research introduces a theory or hypothesis that is examined using empirical data, often using interviews and observations. Alternatively, the aim of inductive research is to generate themes and understanding from collected data.

This study adopts an inductive approach. As opposed to deductive research, this study aims to identify public opinions of FRT and attempts to identify whether public concerns of FRT align with the legal and ethical concerns raised in existing literature. This approach is justified due to the exploratory nature of the study and the gaps identified in existing literature surrounding public perceptions and opinions of FRT.

Through analysing responses and identifying merging patterns, the inductive approach can prompt conclusions to be drawn from the perspective of members of the public and practitioners of FRT in UK policing, therefore contributing an original insight into a research area identified as limited.

3.4 Research Strategy and Choice

For this study, a mono-method design with the addition of quantitative descriptive data was adopted. Primary data was collected through the use of an online questionnaire with both open questions to gather qualitative data and closed questions to gather quantitative data and to identify demographics.

Despite a mixed approach initially being considered, given the sensitive nature of surveillance technologies and time constraints, the most practical method would be an online questionnaire strategy. Questionnaires give the option for participants to remain anonymous, which benefits the ethical considerations of this study, especially given that a portion of the participants were serving police officers. The sensitive nature of surveillance technology was also a consideration which led to the decision to use a questionnaire.

The open-ended questions included in the questionnaire prompted participants to give their views and opinions on FRT, which is the primary focus of this study. In addition to this, qualitative data and open-ended questions address the lack of qualitative data in existing literature, contributing original data to studies on FRT in policing. Similarly, the closed-ended questions provided valuable quantitative data to identify general trends and allow comparison to similar survey-based studies in this field.

3.5 Time Horizon

Saunders et al. (2019) define the time horizon as the duration over which data collection occurs. In the context of this study, a cross-sectional time horizon was used with data collected from a single point in time.

While other methods, such as longitudinal research, may have provided a better insight into changing attitudes over time in line with FRT's development, this falls outside the parameters of this study. This, however, presents the opportunity for further research.

3.6 Data Collection

Primary data was gathered by members of the public and individuals employed by a UK police force using an online questionnaire. The first section of the questionnaire included quantitative questions to gather descriptive data such as age and gender demographics. The next section gathered more quantitative data containing a scale-style set of questions to assess general opinions on FRT and its use. Further to the end of the questionnaire, a section of open-ended questions with the intention to gather qualitative data allowed participants to express concerns, approval or general opinion on FRT. These questions also prompted ethical considerations and perceptions on the regulation of FRT.

The format of the questionnaire ensured anonymity, accessibility and encouraged honest participation by giving participants multiple options per question.

3.7 Sampling Strategy

This study employed a non-probability convenience sampling. During the research, participants were selected based on availability and willingness to participate. For exploratory studies such as this, a non-probability convenience sampling aligns with the study's aims of identifying subjective themes and patterns over statistically accurate results.

Through combining both police participants and the general public participants, a comparative insight can also be achieved, looking at perspectives from individuals within the policing environments and individuals unfamiliar with this environment.

3.8 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse quantitative responses in order to identify patterns of agreement and disagreement with FRT. Alternatively, thematic responses were analysed using qualitative questions. These thematic responses allowed for the identification of concerns such as regulation issues, privacy intrusion and the normalisation of surveillance using FRT.

This links into the interpretivist research methodology and allows the data to be analysed in line with ethical and legal issues identified in existing literature.

The results of the questionnaire were analysed using Google Sheets, which was used to lay the responses out and draw themes using the data.

3.9 Reliability and Validity

Reliability, as explained by Saunders et al. (2019), is the consistency of research findings, where validity relates to the accuracy and credibility of the conclusions drawn. According to Bryman (2016), credibility identifies credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as key indicators of research quality.

In this study, credibility was enhanced through clear question design. Transferability was limited given the sample size and method. Dependability was maintained by using consistent data collection methods. Finally, conformability was supported through linking the findings to participant responses instead of the assumptions of the researcher.

3.10 Limitations

Limitations identified in this study are the sampling method, the cross-sectional time horizon, and the absence of interviews. By using convenience sampling, the generalisability of the study is limited to those available to the researcher at the time rather than the wider population. The cross-

The sectional time horizon can be seen as a limitation, as it does not portray the change and development of opinions of FRT as the technology becomes more common. Subsequently, the absence of interviews limits the quality of the data gathered and the depth. Through interviews, expert primary data can be gathered from participants in the police to provide a more specialist opinion on the use of FRT.

3.11 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw, and the anonymous nature of participation. No personally identifiable data was collected, and all responses were stored securely in accordance with data protection principles.

Given the ethical sensitivity surrounding surveillance technologies, particular care was taken to ensure informed consent and confidentiality throughout the research process.

3.12 Conclusion

This methodology has justified and outlined the methodological approach adopted for this dissertation. The aims of this study have been suitably addressed, and gaps in existing literature have been identified and expanded on. The following chapter will present and analyse the responses from the questionnaire as primary research.

Chapter 4 - Analysis of Questionnaire Results

This chapter provides the findings and results obtained from the questionnaire that was distributed to participants. The nature of the questionnaire was exploratory, and its purpose was to gauge public and practitioner perceptions of FRT in UK policing and to assess the attitudes towards the technology and the difference in what is perceived as public safety or routine surveillance. The data collected was in the form of both quantitative and qualitative data. This methodology allowed for a mixed analysis of trends and underlying attitudes. The findings of the questionnaire are compared to ethical and legal concerns identified in the literature review.

4.1 Participant Demographics and Awareness of Facial Recognition Technology

The responses received in the questionnaire were from a mixed sample of participants, including members of the general public and individuals currently employed by UK Police Forces. Using this mixed sample group allowed for a comparative insight between professional and non-professional perspectives. Figure 1 displays the demographics of respondents, including age, gender and occupational background.

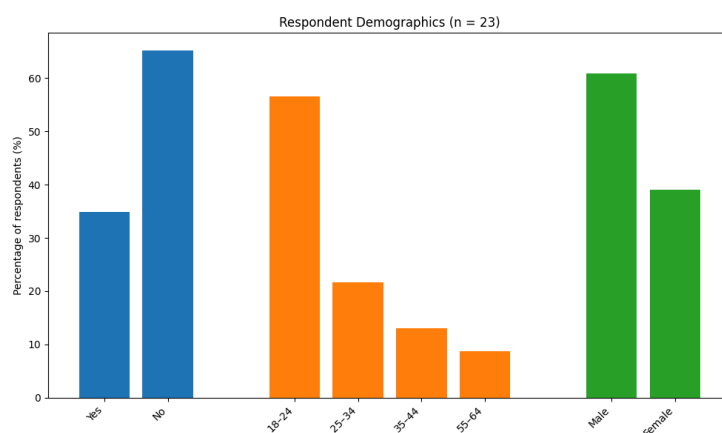


Figure 1 – Chart of questionnaire respondent demographics

As shown in Figure 2, the general awareness of facial recognition technology among participants was high. This strongly indicates that the participants are aware that UK police forces currently use or are in the process of implementing FRT. Looking into these results, an assumption can be drawn that FRT is no longer a niche policing strategy and has entered the public spotlight recently.

However, despite the general knowledge that FRT exists in policing, results vary when participants were asked about their understanding of FRT and how the technology actually works.

Have you heard of facial recognition technology (FRT) being used by police in the UK?

23 responses

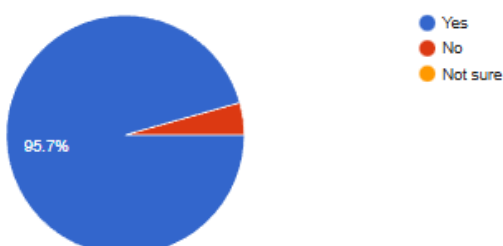


Figure 2 – Chart demonstrating respondents' knowledge of FRT in UK Policing

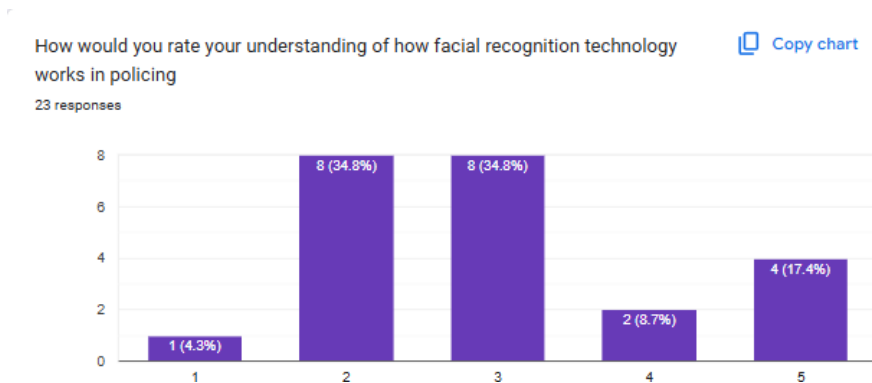


Figure 3 – Chart demonstrating respondents' knowledge of how FRT works. Figure 3 demonstrates that while participants know that FRT is being used in UK policing, the understanding of how the technology works is reported to be moderate or low. The gap between awareness and understanding is important as it highlights that public opinions of FRT may potentially be shaped by a general idea of surveillance rather than a detailed knowledge of the technology and its use. Furthermore, this supports existing academic concerns that the limited transparency shown by UK police forces in relation to FRT and public education is potentially contributing to public mistrust in the deployment of FRT.

4.2 General Support for Facial Recognition Technology

Participants were provided with a series of statements and asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement to assess the level of general support towards FRT. By using a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, each statement links to a concern outlined by existing academic literature, such as ethical concerns, privacy concerns and legal concerns. Figure 4 shows the level of general support of FRT by the participants, with a strong majority of participants strongly agreeing with the use of FRT within UK policing.

To what extent do you support the use of facial recognition technology by UK police?

 Copy chart

23 responses

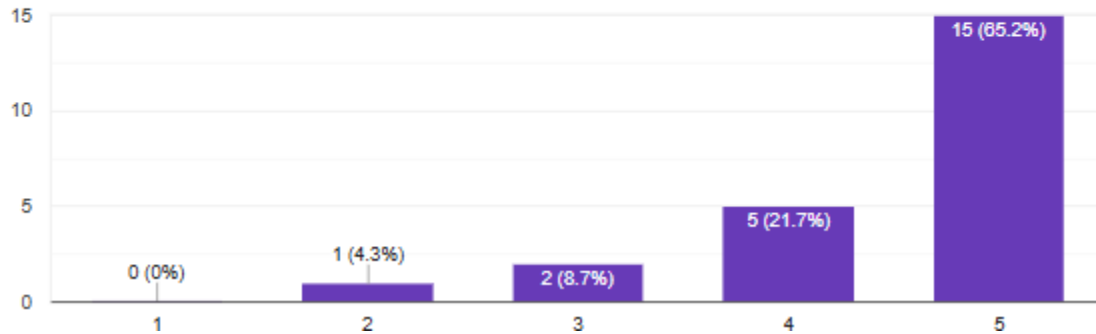


Figure 4 – Chart demonstrating the level of general support for FRT in UK policing

Looking further into the general support of FRT at specific concerns, such as its ethical use, when participants were asked if they trust UK police forces to use FRT responsibly and ethically, the results demonstrated a strong trust in UK police forces addressing trust and ethical concerns detailed in academic literature. Figure 5 outlines this, with a strong majority of participants stating that they agree or strongly agree with the statement.

I trust UK police forces to use facial recognition technology responsibly and ethically.

 Copy chart

23 responses

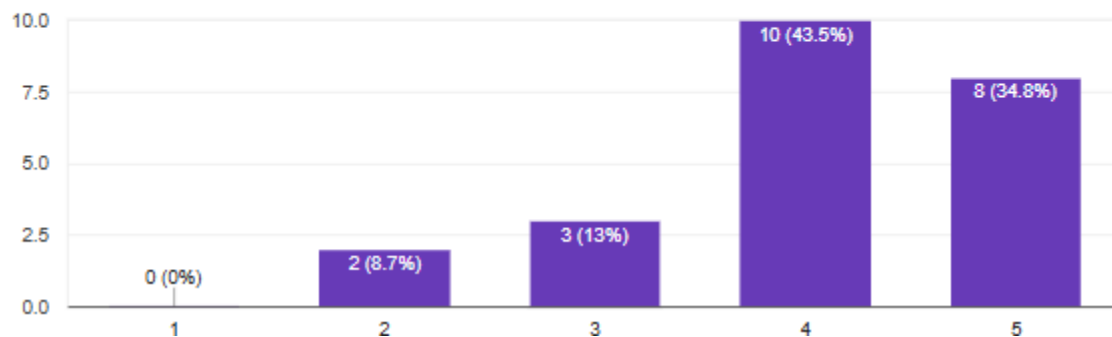


Figure 5 – Chart demonstrating the level of trust of participants in FRT being used ethically

Similarly, participants were also asked to rate their level of agreement when given a statement stating, 'The use of facial recognition technology by police poses a serious threat to individual privacy'. As shown in Figure 6, the level of agreement with this statement proved to be moderate to low. This ties in to concerns identified in academic literature surrounding the breach of human

Rights, specifically the right to a private life. By analysing this result, a conclusion can be drawn that a strong majority of the participants do not feel concerned about the potential threat to individual privacy.

The use of facial recognition technology by police poses a serious threat to individual privacy. [Copy chart](#)

23 responses

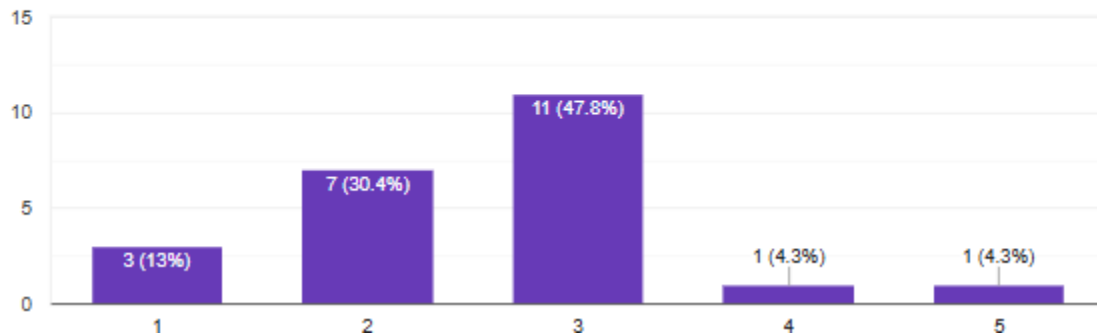


Figure 6 – Chart demonstrating the level of concern that FRT is a breach of individual privacy

4.3 Ethical Concerns

Despite a general approval of FRT by the participants, ethical concerns were featured prominently in qualitative data results. Particularly, when participants were asked to outline their main concerns about FRT, several references to misidentification and data protection concerns were identified. Expanding on this, participants also commented on the concern of inaccuracies in the technology, potentially providing false negatives and thereby reinforcing existing inequalities in policing. These concerns closely align with academic research highlighting accuracy issues in facial recognition systems.

Concerns were also highlighted surrounding data protection. Several participants expressed concerns that it is not known where the data gathered by FRT is then sent or stored. This ties into a previously mentioned point of the lack of education of FRT for the public, as judging from the concerns outlined in the questionnaire, concerns typically stemmed from the lack of understanding of FRT rather than the disapproval of FRT.

4.4 Legal concerns

Another statement participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with was 'Facial Recognition technology should only be used by police under strict legal regulation and oversight. The results of this question demonstrated a very high level of agreement with the idea that the use.

FRT should be heavily regulated, and appropriate legislation should be implemented alongside clear nationwide policies in UK police forces. Figure 7 displays these results, which support existing literature and the stance that FRT needs strict regulation and the identification of gaps in legislation.

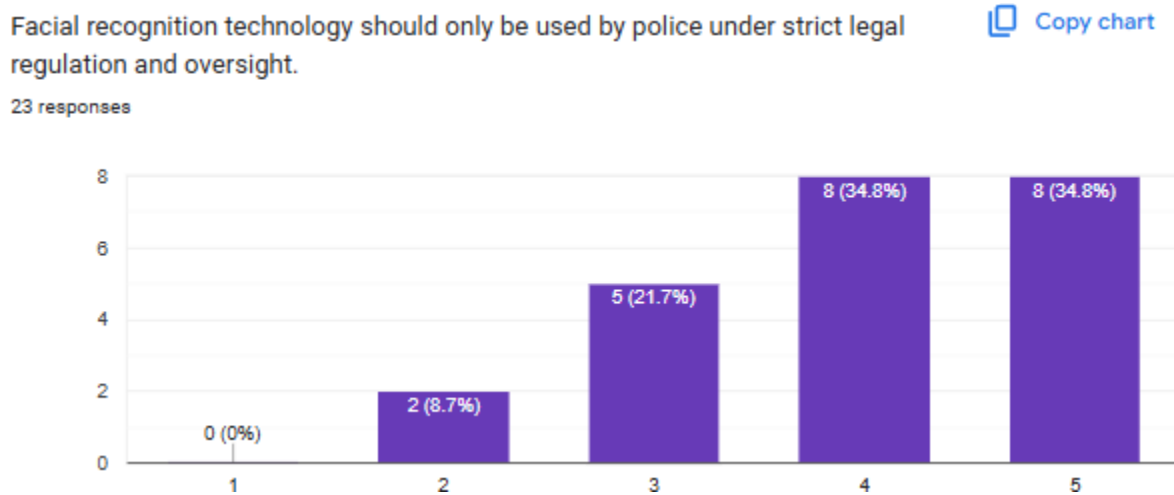


Figure 7 – Chart demonstrating participants' support for strict legal regulation in the use of FRT

4.5 Acceptable Context for the Use of Facial Recognition Technology

Participants were asked where they believe the use of FRT can be considered appropriate. The results of these findings demonstrated well that the acceptance of FRT is highly context-dependent. Figure 8 demonstrates these results when provided with examples of instances in which FRT is commonly used. The results show that the acceptance of FRT is significantly higher in instances of serious crime and public safety, such as counter terrorism. In contrast, a lower level of acceptance was observed for instances of public events and protests, and a significantly lower level of acceptance for general duties such as routine street surveillance. This supports concerns raised in academic literature of indiscriminate monitoring and function creep, highlighting a general disapproval of FRT deployments in open public spaces and their routine use.

In which situations, if any, do you think police use of facial recognition technology is acceptable?

 Copy chart

23 responses

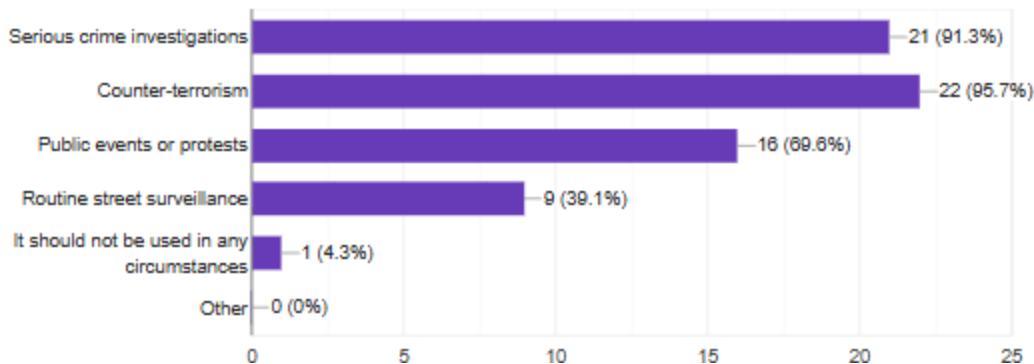


Figure 8 – Chart demonstrating participants' beliefs of where FRT is appropriately used

4.6 Surveillance or Safety? Participants Perspectives

The final open-ended question of the questionnaire asked participants whether they believed that FRT prioritises public safety or surveillance. The responses to this question directly addressed the primary research question of this dissertation.

While the majority of the participants expressed a general support of FRT, Various concerns were outlined in the ethical and legal field. These concerns were in the form of a lack of education on FRT, a lack of transparency from police forces on how FRT data is stored and the invasion of individual privacy. Further adding to the concept that the acceptance of FRT is primarily conditional, several respondents are acceptant of FRT being used in UK policing; however, the level of acceptance is dependent on factors such as legal regulation, police transparency and public education on the technology.

4.7 Summary of results

In summary, the questionnaire results demonstrate that general acceptance and perception of FRT in UK policing is primarily cautious and conditional. The results also highlight that FRT is being used in UK policing; however, the public's understanding of how the technology works is limited and contributes to its perception. The findings reinforce the argument for the necessity of a legal framework in relation to FRT and that its use needs to be governed appropriately to prevent FRT from being seen as a surveillance tool rather than a tool to enhance public safety.

Chapter 5 – Discussion of Findings

This chapter will summarise primary data gathered by the questionnaire answered by the participants and the findings of FRT debates found within academic literature. The aim of this chapter is to interpret the questionnaire results and to relate them to legal, ethical and public perception concerns highlighted in existing literature. The findings are structured around key themes identified in the research surrounding FRT, conditional public support, ethical concerns and trust, and the perceived need for legal regulation.

5.1 Awareness and Understanding

After analysing the results from the questionnaire, there is a strong indication that awareness of FRT among participants is high, with a strong majority stating that they are aware of UK police forces using or trialling FRT. This argument links in to existing literature highlighting that FRT has entered the public consciousness and is no longer perceived as a niche or experimental policing tool (Fussey and Murray, 2019; Ada Lovelace Institute, 2020). Despite general awareness of the technology being high, participants in the questionnaire demonstrated a low understanding of the technicalities of FRT and the way in which it actually operates.

The identified gap in awareness and knowledge of FRT's use is an important detail and is raised by Joh's (2016) concept of 'black box policing', where advanced technology is used in policing without sufficient public education or transparency on its functions and capabilities. Expanding upon this, the findings indicate that the public perception and attitude towards FRT can be influenced by its association with surveillance rather than an informed opinion on its functions and deployment strategies. Taking this into consideration, (Binns, 2023; Veale et al, 2018) literature highlights claims that limited transparency and insufficient public education risk undermining legitimacy, even where opinions on FRT are not obviously negative.

5.2 Conditional Support and Context-Dependent Acceptance

An unsuspecting finding from the questionnaire is the generally high level of support for the use of FRT in UK policing. When provided with statements themed around opinions and level of support for FRT, the majority of participants expressed a very positive perception of the technology and later highlighted the benefits of its use for public safety and crime prevention. This stance supports existing literature suggesting that public perception of FRT is not binary but conditional and context-dependent (Smith and Leese, 2022).

Alternatively, findings from the questionnaire demonstrate that this support is highly sensitive and fragile, dependent on the context in which it is used. As seen in the results of the questionnaire, the level of support for FRT is high in contexts such as serious crime investigations and counter terrorism, which are instances that are typically linked to a high risk of public safety. However, this support begins to decline when opinions were asked on FRT's use in public settings such as protests or routine surveillance. The findings closely mirror literature mentioning 'function creep' (Koops, 2021), in which technologies introduced for exceptional circumstances gradually become normalised in routine policing.

These results highlight the argument that FRT support is dependent on proportionality and necessity, key points of human rights laws and data protection frameworks (Bridges v South Wales Police, 2020; ICO, 2019). This contextual support and the negative opinions on indiscriminate use as well as routine surveillance suggest that there is a line at which FRT goes from targeted policing into mass surveillance, highlighting concerns raised by Lyon's (2018) warning about the normalisation of surveillance practices in societies.

5.3 Trust in Policing and Ethical Concerns

One of the primary topics mentioned in literature is that of ethical concerns surrounding the deployment of FRT in UK policing. The findings of the questionnaire found a relatively high trust in the police forces' use of FRT being used ethically and responsibly. In addition to this, a majority of participants of the questionnaire disagreed with a statement provided, which asserted that FRT poses a serious threat to individual privacy. This challenges claims made by civil liberties groups and scholars who detail a general public distrust of biometric surveillance (Big Brother Watch, 2020; Couchman, 2020).

Despite this, the trust outlined in the questionnaire should not be treated as definite. The qualitative responses gathered from the questionnaire go on to identify concerns about FRT in the form of data storage, misidentification and potential bias. Participants of the study made comments in their responses to concerns regarding the possibility of false positives and the repercussions that could entail. This aligns with evidence provided from the NIST (2019) and Buolamwini and Gebru (2018), who raise concerns around error rates of FRT when used across demographic groups. As a whole, an assumption can be made that although participants trust police intent, there is less confidence in the technology itself.

In addition to this, concerns around data protection and the storage of data obtained by FRT are also reflected in literature by the Ada Lovelace Institute (2021) and Wagner (2024) with their criticism of the lack of regulation on FRT and the inconsistent practices between UK police forces. Referring back to the conditional acceptance of FRT, another contributing factor is the assurances of transparency, accountability and sufficient oversight on its use.

5.4 Legal Regulation and the Necessity for Oversight

A strong theme in the data gathered in the questionnaire is legal regulation. When provided with a statement stating that FRT should be used under strict regulation, a strong majority of participants agreed. This finding directly supports a central argument identified in existing literature stating that the absence of a clear, comprehensive statutory framework undermines the legitimacy of FRT deployment in UK policing (Woodhouse, 2021; Ada Lovelace Institute, 2021).

Alternatively, findings do, however, indicate that support for regulation does not necessarily mean rejection of FRT. Rather, regulation is viewed as a prerequisite for legitimate and legal use. This aligns with arguments raised in academic literature that governance, rather than technical capability alone, is vital to public acceptance of surveillance technologies (Bubata and Oswald, 2021; Dencik et al, 2022).

5.5 Surveillance or Safety? Participant Perspectives

The final qualitative question asked of the participants of the questionnaire relates to the core theme of the study, public safety or surveillance. The findings from the primary data gathered suggest that participants' acceptance of FRT is not black or white but is conditional. The findings indicate that perceptions of FRT are shaped by how, where and why FRT is used. The majority of participants expressed a general support for FRT, and that it can be used to enhance public safety; however, transparency and oversight are crucial for this support.

These conditions reinforce academic literature's stance on the public attitudes towards FRT as fragile and contingent (Fussey and Murray, 2019; Sagana et al, 2025). Without these necessary implementations, participants of the survey indicate that the use of FRT can surpass public safety into the realms of mass or routine surveillance. This aligns with Lyon's (2018) research on the normalisation of biometric surveillance, where unchecked expansion can erode public trust and cause a distrust in UK policing.

4.7 Summary of Results

To summarise, findings of the questionnaire demonstrate that public and practitioners' opinions on FRT in UK policing somewhat align with concerns and theories identified in academic literature.

Taking into consideration that general support for FRT exists, the condition of this support is dependent upon proportionality, strict legal regulation and transparency. Despite this, ethical concerns do remain, particularly in terms of accuracy, bias and data storage and governance. This research and its findings reinforce the argument that the focus on the deployment and development of FRT in UK policing should focus less on technological aspects and should focus more on the development of clear legal frameworks and national standards to which police forces should adhere to maintain a level of trust between the public and police.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This dissertation examined public perceptions of facial recognition technology in UK policing by looking at existing research and by gathering primary data through the use of a questionnaire. Through comparing findings from the questionnaire and academic research, the study demonstrates that public perceptions of FRT are not binary but conditional, context-dependent and closely tied to transparency and governance.

Legal uncertainty surrounding FRT was identified with existing frameworks, such as the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Human Rights Act 1998, which offer vague regulation. However, due to the relatively new introduction of FRT, laws such as these often take time to be passed and drafted.

Another aspect of legal regulation was also identified in the judgment of *R (Bridges) v Chief Constable of South Wales Police*, highlighting the absence of a clear regulatory framework, thereby reinforcing academic concerns with the use of FRT. Further to this, the mention of function creep and the normalisation of biometric surveillance also portrayed the ethical concerns alongside legal issues.

Upon analysing findings from the questionnaire, primary research identified that while general awareness of FRT in policing was high, the actual technical knowledge of the policing strategy was relatively low, further highlighting concerns surrounding the lack of public education and transparency. In addition to this, despite the use of FRT generally being supported by participants of the questionnaire, acceptance of the technology is fragile, highly context-based and conditional on the environment in which FRT is deployed, being a major factor in public support.

Environments such as counter terrorism and serious crime investigation gained a significantly higher level of approval compared to public environments such as protests and routine street surveillance. Although trust in police and the deployment of FRT is high among participants, qualitative data suggests that there are existing concerns around the storage of data, misidentification and bias towards demographic groups.

Most importantly, participants of the questionnaire showed a strong support for the need for strict legal regulation for the deployment of FRT and that public support for the strategy is not solely dependent on the technology but more on the presence of clear safeguards and national frameworks. This dissertation concludes that although FRT may improve public safety when used appropriately and transparently, in the absence of strong regulation, oversight and national frameworks, FRT risks being perceived as unjustified mass surveillance, thereby undermining public trust in UK policing.

Recommendation

This dissertation demonstrated that although Facial Recognition Technology has a strong potential to improve public safety in UK policing however its legitimacy and public perception is highly conditional. Addressing key concerns identified in this study, several recommendations are proposed to guide future development of the technology and legal frameworks around its deployment.

Firstly, a need for clear and comprehensive national framework governing the use of FRT is needed. Existing legislation, such as the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Human Rights Act 1998 only provides a limited regulation on FRT. The absence of this needed regulation undermines the accountability of UK police forces and risks breaches of Article 8 rights. New legislation needs to clearly define lawful practices of FRT, restricting its use to serious crime and public safety risks. Further to this, national standards need to be consistent across police forces for the deployment, retention and deletion of biometric data.

Secondly, a strict independent oversight should be established. This study identified strong support for regulation over rejection of the technology. An independent oversight or regulatory body should be established for the authorisation of deployments, audits, and to ensure compliance in order to prevent

function creep and the normalisation of surveillance.

Thirdly, UK police forces should implement a clear operational guidance strategy detailing the conditions and context of its deployment in public spaces. Findings from the questionnaire demonstrated that although public support for FRT is high, its public acceptance is strongly context dependant with its support declining significantly in open spaces on a large scale. FRT use in routine street surveillance should be highly restricted due to the elevated risk of breaches of freedom of expression and assembly.

Fourthly, transparency and public education should be prioritised to address the gap in public awareness of FRT and public understanding of FRT. To address this, public engagement initiatives such as community education sessions detailing the purpose and function of FRT can be discussed, thereby bridging the gap between awareness and knowledge fo FRT.

Finally, future research into FRT should prioritise longitudinal and qualitative studies over cross-sectional quantitative studies. Public perceptions have the ability to change and vary over time. Acknowledging this, Studies conducted over a larger time scale can accurately assess themes and the variation of perception overtime as FRT develops and becomes more common.

In conclusion, these recommendations emphasis that the legitimacy of FRT does not solely depend on technological factors but primarily social factors such as education and transparency.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Survey on Ethics and Public Perception of Facial Recognition Technology in UK Policing

* Indicates required question

Are you a member of a police service in the UK? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What is your age group? *

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-35
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+

What is your gender? *

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Have you heard of facial recognition technology (FRT) being used by police in the UK? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

How would you rate your understanding of how facial recognition technology works in policing *

- | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Very poor | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | Very good |

Where have you mainly heard about police use of facial recognition technology? *

- ☐ News media
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ Government or police communities
- ☐ Academic or educational sources
- ☐ Friends or family
- ☐ Other

If answered "Other" to the previous question please specify

Your answer _____

To what extent do you support the use of facial recognition technology by UK police? *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly support

Facial recognition technology improves public safety by helping police prevent crime. *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

The use of facial recognition technology by police poses a serious threat to individual privacy. *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly Disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly Agree

I trust UK police forces to use facial recognition technology responsibly and ethically. *

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

How concerned are you about potential bias or discrimination in facial recognition technology (e.g. errors affecting certain groups more than others)? *

1 2 3 4 5

Not concerned at all ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Extremely concerned

Facial recognition technology should only be used by police under strict legal regulation and oversight. *

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

In which situations, if any, do you think police use of facial recognition technology is acceptable? *

- ☐ Serious crime investigations
- ☐ Counter-terrorism
- ☐ Public events or protests
- ☐ Routine street surveillance
- ☐ It should not be used in any circumstances
- ☐ Other

If answered "Other" to the previous question please specify

Your answer _____

What do you see as the main benefits of facial recognition technology in UK policing? *

Your answer _____

What are your main concerns about the use of facial recognition technology by the police? *

Your answer _____

Overall, do you believe facial recognition technology prioritises public safety or surveillance in the UK, and why? *

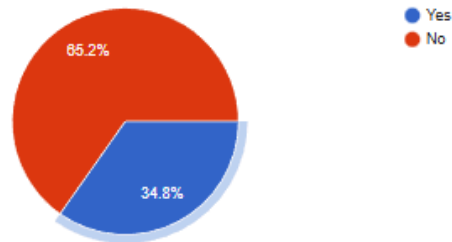
Your answer _____

Appendix B: Participant Response Sheet

Are you a member of a police service in the UK?

23 responses

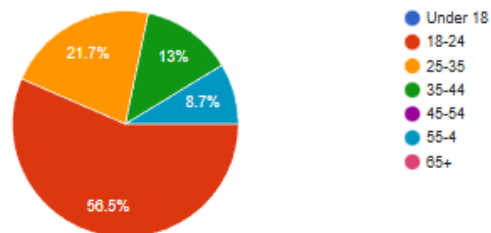
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What is your age group?

23 responses

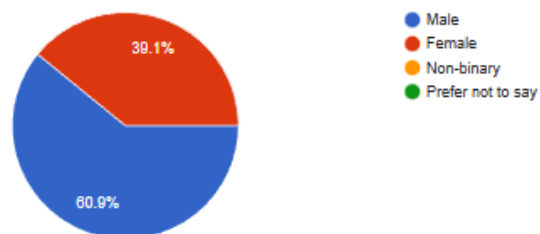
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What is your gender?

23 responses

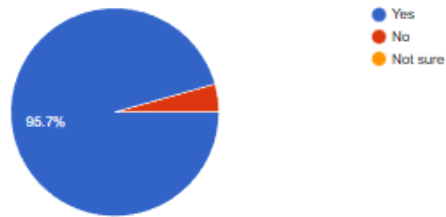
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Have you heard of facial recognition technology (FRT) being used by police in the UK?

 [Copy chart](#)

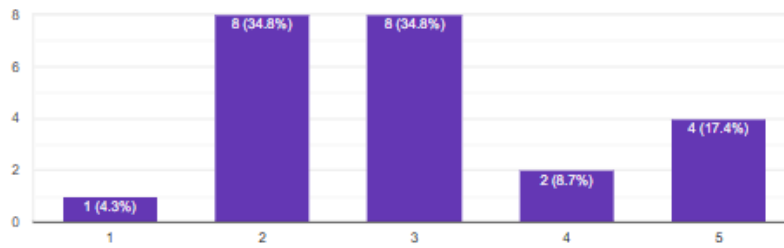
23 responses



How would you rate your understanding of how facial recognition technology works in policing

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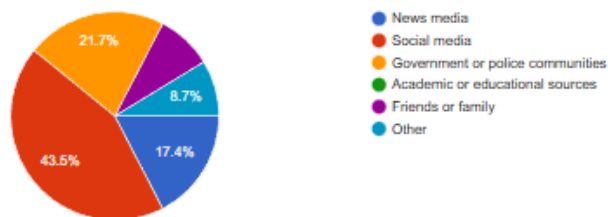
23 responses



Where have you mainly heard about police use of facial recognition technology?

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23 responses



If answered "Other" to the previous question please specify

2 responses

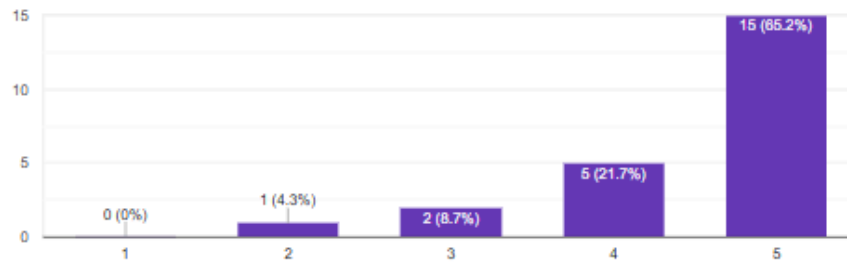
Being in the police

Films and TV series

To what extent do you support the use of facial recognition technology by UK police?

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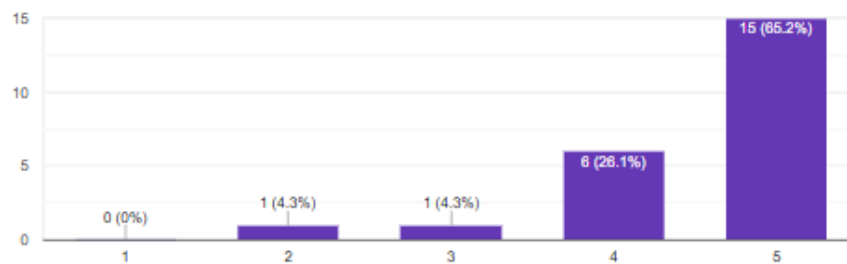
23 responses



Facial recognition technology improves public safety by helping police prevent crime.

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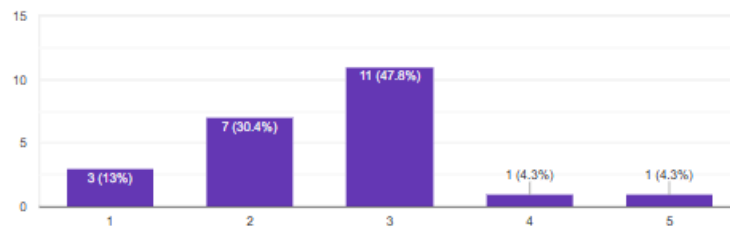
23 responses



The use of facial recognition technology by police poses a serious threat to individual privacy.

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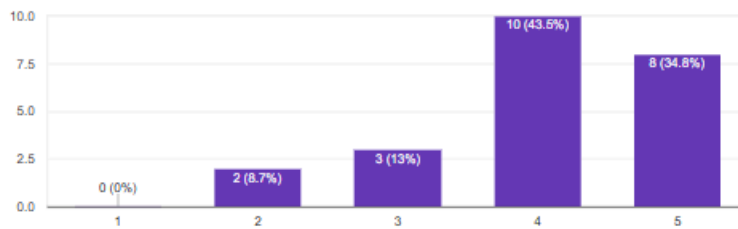
23 responses



I trust UK police forces to use facial recognition technology responsibly and ethically.

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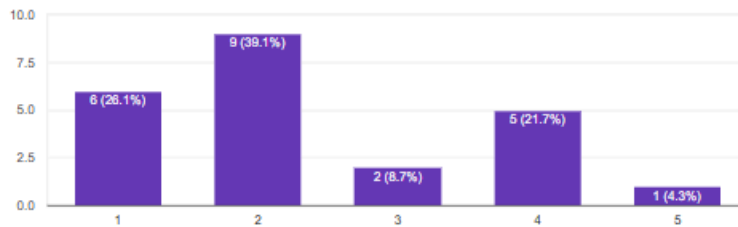
23 responses



How concerned are you about potential bias or discrimination in facial recognition technology (e.g. errors affecting certain groups more than others)?

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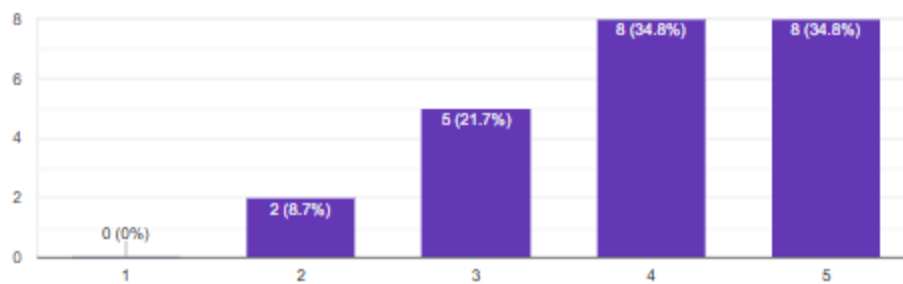
23 responses



Facial recognition technology should only be used by police under strict legal regulation and oversight.

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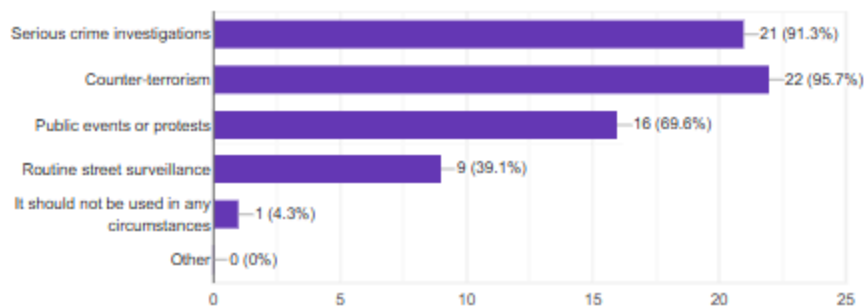
23 responses



In which situations, if any, do you think police use of facial recognition technology is acceptable?

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23 responses



What do you see as the main benefits of facial recognition technology in UK policing?

Finding outstanding suspects , locating mispers

Help to find wanted criminals who will be 'blending' in with the public

Quicker identification of offenders/people of interest

Apprehension of criminals attempting to evade police

Help catch convicts

Location of criminal/ suspects

Able to track criminals in a more efficient manner, which I assume is a more cost effective way of deploying police resources

Catching criminals.

Quickly identifying perpetrators

The recognition of wanted persons in a public setting that may have otherwise gone unnoticed

Clear identification of criminals without any doubt. Deterrent for crime. Deterrent for abuse towards police.

Ability to solve serious crimes quicker

Catching criminals

Helping the police track down suspects (especially potentially dangerous ones) early and before they can commit any more crime/put more people in danger

Locating serious offenders in hopes that the offender dies not cause more harm/damage

An extra layer of protection to the public especially in crowded areas

Preventing crime

Crime prevention, anti terrorism advancements, finding wanted individuals

Crime prevention, such as terrorist attacks

Crime prevention

Keeping tabs on suspected terrorists

To identify criminals and prevent crime/identity those involved in crime

Removing serious criminals from the streets quicker

What are your main concerns about the use of facial recognition technology by the police?

Members of the public not understand how beneficial this is

Still collected which prove to be negative, what happens to the...

How well it will be utilised by different forces encountering different scenarios

The lack of understanding of the technology by the public and the media

Cameras everywhere

None

The main concern is GDPR, whether all civilians' data will be captured and stored in the system.

Flagging the wrong person

Misuse and breach of data

Won't be used ethically - may cause an unnecessary collateral breach of right to anonymity

If not compliant with GDPR could cause some issues possibly? But would likely need regulations for storage of the data

Its use in an unregulated way e.g. discriminating against protesters or people of colour/minorities

None

Using it for unethical reasons/where it isn't justified. Also if a data breach was to occur. People cannot consent to this tracking of information

Biases, accuracy, privacy

I don't have any

No concerns

The use without regulation, the use of the technology for day to day police work where the risk of using does not outweigh the right of individual privacy

Recognition accuracy

None

Mis identification

.

New technology which is still being developed therefore could lead to mistakes.

Overall, do you believe facial recognition technology prioritises public safety or surveillance in the UK, and why?

Yes

Yes. It will benefit communities ensuring the correct wanted person is caught directly and with minimal risk to public

Yes because it will allow faster identification of people of interest which will free up other resources that would otherwise be used for this purpose

FRT prioritises surveillance however measures are implemented to preserve individual privacy as much as practicable

Yes it does but, crime and criminals will always exist and find ways around it

I think that surveillance enhances public safety and if it provided an opportunity to identify suspects or criminal activity it's a positive

Yes, seeing a facial recognition system in public gives reassurance that there are no criminals in the area. Although there are data concerns, if there were strict protocols surrounding data it would make it more comforting

Yes

Yes

Public safety - policing via traditional methods is no longer suitable for a vastly more complex and technologically advanced society. As such, policing needs to move with the times and adapt. This technology will allow police to sift through crowds and identify potentially dangerous people

Yes - it will act mostly as a deterrent but also will be of use in crime/criminal identification which will allow for quicker convictions and will improve correct conviction statistics.

Surveillance - I have seen more about its negative effects like wrongful discrimination than any positive outcomes

Yes

I believe it does prioritise public safety, but only when used responsibly and ethically.

I believe it prioritises surveillance as it monitors large numbers of people without their consent, however, I understand that it cannot be used to help the police unless everyone is monitored. I believe that there is not enough laws and restrictions in place right now for this technology to be used.

Argument for both but prioritises public safety knowing who's in the area

Public safety. Trying to catch issues before they happen

Yes, but correct measure need to be in place. Strict regulation, quantitative reasoning on why it is being used. If this is the case then this technological advancements could greatly improve police work whether that is serious crime investigation or anti terrorism

Yes. Should be able to assist in serious crime prevention and the arrest and tracking down of serious criminals.

Public safety first, then surveillance

Yes because it can help with criminal investigations

Combination of both

Depends how it's used but mainly surveillance