License Plate Readers:
A COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

In 2010, the GMU research team randomly sampled 2000 residents from Fairfax County, Virginia. Below, we summarize interesting findings from this survey, providing police agencies a community perspective on this technology.

1. As with most independent surveys of the police across many different types of cities and counties, the police generally enjoy trust and confidence by the majority of their citizens, who also find the police to be fairly respectful of their rights. However, an important caveat that has also been found in many policing surveys is a gap between perceptions of fairness and trust of ethnic majority and minority residents. It is important for police to be concerned about those who do not support or trust the police and to seek out explanations and possible remedies to this concern. Perceptions of fairness can be just as important in building police legitimacy as actual outcomes.

GMU Recommendation: Police agencies should make it a regular practice to conduct random-sample surveys of their communities to get a better measure and gauge of attitudes, values and concerns of their citizens. Such an approach may provide a much better and broader assessment of community feelings and ideas than community meetings, which may not be representative of the communities they represent. In these surveys, police should ask citizens, while remaining anonymous, to identify important characteristics that research evidence indicates may be linked to bias: race, ethnicity, age, gender, or occupation, for example. This will help police departments to better gauge which communities support police more or less, and in turn, allow the police to more adequately target trust and legitimacy-building efforts. Research indicates that increased legitimacy and public trust in the process of policing can lead to greater compliance and cooperation.

2. The survey revealed that citizen concerns about police technology are complex. Populations are often split, for example, between those willing to give up civil rights to combat terrorism and those who disagreed with such a notion. The complexity in beliefs regarding civil liberties, privacy, rights, and public security also was discovered in varying levels of support for different uses of LPR. Support for police technology depends on what types of crimes and investigations the machines are used for, as well as how data might collected, stored and reused. For example, most citizens supported their local police using LPR to check to see if passing vehicles were stolen or to monitor high-risk targets of terrorism. However, of all applications for LPR that we asked about, citizens were least likely to support police checking for parking violations

with LPR or using data collected to recreate travel patterns of those involved in low-level infractions.

GMU Recommendation: As with many types of police practices and policies (patrol, response to 911 calls, arrest, community interactions, investigations), "one size does not fit all". The variation of support for different uses of LPR technology and its data reflect a complexity that requires thoughtful policies which reflect the weighing of policies against crime prevention gains as well as effects on police legitimacy.

3. Many citizens had not heard of LPR before the survey and didn't know whether their local police used it. When asked what would most help to alleviate concerns about LPR, this community made three suggestions: (1) Obtain some kind of permission to use collected data; (2) consult with an attorney about its use; and (3) at least provide some forum for the public to discuss the issue.

GMU Recommendations: These are reasonable suggestions that can be accomplished by most, if not all, of police agencies that use license plate readers. Community legitimacy can be built not only by implementing practices that are effective in reducing crime and that reflect democratic values, but also by police consistently informing their communities.

4. With regard to LPR data collection, storage, and use, this community generally supported the idea of police saving LPR data for six months or more, but the extent of this support was conditioned by the purposes of which the data would be used. Data use for crime solving was more likely to be supported than data use without any specific purpose. If the police saved LPR data, responders were more likely to support police using this data to find the last location of a vehicle associated with a crime than to learn about the activities of parents who don't pay child support. Most people said that the police should be able to share LPR data with other government agencies.

GMU Conclusion: The important point to note is that support for LPR scanning, data storage and use varies across crime types and investigations. This implicates the need for more detailed policy about LPR use, as well as accountability measures put in place to ensure communities that personal data is protected and used in ways that reflect both the law and a genuine care for this particular community concern.