S.T.O.P. Vision & Strategy

Problem to be Addressed
The history of discriminatory surveillance in America is older than the United States itself. In the eighteenth century, New York’s first surveillance law required Black and Indigenous people to carry lanterns with them. State surveillance grew to target immigrants, women, and other marginalized groups, incorporating the latest technology. Twenty-first century surveillance is deeply rooted in legacies of slavery and exclusion.

Today, it has never been easier to monitor millions at once or to pinpoint an individual. Spy tools like facial recognition pose an unprecedented threat, yet police continue to use them with little or no civilian oversight. While debates over the USA PATRIOT Act dragged on for decades, local police quietly buy new and untested technologies, spy on protests and mosques, share data with Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE), and put lives at risk. This trend is accelerated by the growth of “Smart Cities,” which promise better municipal services by capturing data on millions of residents – data accessible by law enforcement, ICE, and other agencies.

America’s privacy debate is not new, but it has taken on new urgency in 2021. This is especially true in light of COVID-19 public health surveillance and the response to historic protests against police violence. Last summer, the NYPD used social media scraping and facial recognition to track Derrick Ingram – a S.T.O.P. Community Advisory Board member and prominent activist – after a Black Lives Matter protest and sent dozens of officers to his home in riot gear. Privacy is not an abstract value: for some, discriminatory surveillance can be a matter of life and death.

In New York and elsewhere, police and governments are increasingly adopting surveillance tools designed for military operations on the neighborhood level. We are at an inflection point: if we fail to fundamentally reshape how America defines and defends privacy in the coming years, we will be locked into a dystopian future from which there is no return.

Mission & History
Founded in 2019, the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.) advocates and litigates for privacy, working to abolish local governments’ systems of mass surveillance. Our work highlights the discriminatory impact of surveillance on Muslim Americans, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, BIPOC individuals, and particularly the unique trauma of anti-Black policing.

Organizational Model
S.T.O.P. uses advocacy, legislation, education, and litigation to dismantle mass surveillance. Our campaigns push long-overdue reforms and cutting-edge innovations. We drafted the country’s first ban on “reverse search warrants,” which allow police to track thousands of individuals with a single warrant. Building on calls to defund the police, S.T.O.P. leads campaigns to outlaw facial recognition and geolocation tracking.

We reshape narratives around privacy with hundreds of articles and op-eds, ranging from the New York Times, NPR, and Fox News to community papers. Our community education program designs
custom privacy trainings driven by the needs of communities, partnering with trusted messengers to deliver the trainings. By moving away from a one-size-fits-none approach and focusing on communities’ most urgent needs, we address the need for equity in privacy advocacy.

Lastly, S.T.O.P. serves survivors of surveillance abuse through impact litigation, and sues government agencies and their vendors both to end surveillance abuses and to reveal records to the public. In court, we forced the NYPD to end its “hijab ban” policy, which required arrestees to remove head coverings for mugshots and fueled its facial recognition database. Most recently, S.T.O.P. represents Amnesty International, a leading human rights organization, in litigation to compel the NYPD to disclose surveillance records from 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

**Innovation**

Despite the urgency of surveillance issues, they don’t receive enough attention. National and international watchdogs spend a fraction of their time on local surveillance, overlooking the potential for rapid, transformational change there. It is not in Congress where surveillance systems are dismantled: it is in cities and towns across the country.

Yet local groups often lack the resources for anti-surveillance work. S.T.O.P. provides a vehicle for collective action by groups that support – but cannot lead – these efforts. We have demonstrated a unique ability to organize a diverse cross-section of impacted communities, advocates, and allies in the fight against discriminatory surveillance. As an example, S.T.O.P. is partnering with impacted community members, government officials, technologists, activists, academics, ethicists, and lawyers to design guidelines for “Smart Cities” technologies being installed in cities and towns across the country. This framework will equip local governments and advocates with the tools to counter the marketing claims and campaigns from surveillance vendors, whose sales pitches today often go unopposed.

This coalition multiplier effect allows S.T.O.P. to punch above our weight both in and beyond New York – a tactic that will only become more crucial as privacy fights continue to unfold in nearly every city around the world.

**Affirmation of Approach**

S.T.O.P.’s accomplishments prove that our model works. In 2020, we led 100 organizations to enact New York’s Public Oversight of Surveillance Technology Act – the first NYPD surveillance reform in a generation – forcing the NYPD to disclose every spy tool it uses. We also passed a statewide moratorium on K-12 facial recognition and the strongest privacy protections for COVID-19 contact tracing data in the country.

After enjoining the NYPD’s “hijab ban” policy going forward, we also secured class certification for those subjected to the ban in the past. In California, S.T.O.P. brought a putative class action lawsuit alleging Thomson Reuters illegally sold personally identifying data to private companies, police, and ICE. Recently, S.T.O.P. won our motion to dismiss, establishing a powerful precedent for future cases and chill investment in deadly data-driven policing.

Our open records litigation and research empower the public to understand complex surveillance systems and regulations. We have published dozens of research papers and posts on topics ranging from warrantless cellphone seizures to congestion pricing. Our more than 100 op-eds have made us
an international thought leader on privacy, technology, and law, addressing crucial issues of the day.

S.T.O.P.’s partnerships further amplify our impact, providing nearly $5 million in free legal services and campaigning on issues that previously received little public attention. We provide support and technical assistance to partners far beyond New York, including New Jersey, New Delhi, and countless places in between.

Path to Impact
S.T.O.P.’s strategic plan spans the next ten years, as we scale up the impact of our work to fight the growth of surveillance around the country and around the world. In phase one, S.T.O.P will use our community-driven model to replicate effective legislation and court decisions from around the country. Since New York has fallen so far behind in addressing the adverse impact of surveillance, we have a number of reforms we can quickly adapt and adopt in New York City. In phase two, we will place greater emphasis on statewide reforms and New York localities outside of New York City, while developing legislative and litigation strategies that go further than anywhere else in the country.

Phase three is where S.T.O.P. will have the broadest impact: building on successes in New York, we will work with our growing network of national partners to provide support to grassroots groups around the country and even abroad. We will equip local activists with model legislation, communications toolkits, legal consultation on potential litigation, and more. In short: first we make New York a model of privacy protection, and then we help others replicate our success.

Long-Term Vision
When S.T.O.P. achieves our mission, we will have fundamentally transformed New York from one of the worst surveillance states in the country into a model for privacy protection. We will demonstrate how to harness novel technologies without adversely impacting marginalized communities – improving roads, electrical grids, Wi-Fi and mass transit without the risk of personal data being accessed by the NYPD, ICE, and other government agencies. Governments will no longer automate discrimination under the guise of improving people’s quality of life.

As mass surveillance is dismantled, facial recognition, reverse search warrants, and “predictive” policing will once again be the stuff of dystopian fiction, not reality. New York and other localities will honor their commitments to protect immigrant families as true sanctuary cities. And crucially, states and localities will enshrine civilian oversight of police surveillance in their charter or constitution to ensure transparency and accountability for generations to come.

Conclusion
This fight is unfolding at the local level, but it’s also unfolding globally, as countless cities and towns rise up against the technologies that track their lives in the name of safety and progress. S.T.O.P.’s intersectional, community-driven model sets us apart, providing unique pathways to scale-up and amplify our calls against surveillance. Working with partners around the country and globe, we can tailor our tactics and messaging to provide the resources they need for this fight. And by convening movement leaders, lawyers, technologists, and impacted individuals, S.T.O.P. will remain at the forefront of this effort.