

NCRIC ALPR FAQs

Over the past decade Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) Systems have become a useful tool for law enforcement agency personnel to identify vehicles associated with criminal activity and to locate at risk members of our community, fugitives from justice, and suspects under criminal investigation. As the ALPR technology has developed to improve the use of the systems deployed by law enforcement, policies have also been developed to protect privacy, civil right and civil liberties.

This document was developed to provide responses to frequently asked questions regarding the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center's ALPR program.

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What is the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center (NCRIC)?

The Northern California Regional Intelligence Center (NCRIC) is a regional public safety program designated by the Governor's Office as the Fusion Center for the Northern District of California. The NCRIC operates under the guidance of the Northern California High Intensity Drug Trafficking (NCHIDTA) Executive Board. The NCHIDTA Executive Board is a balanced federal, state and local law enforcement board that provides guidance and direction to the Director of the NCHIDTA and NCRIC. The Executive Board was established in 1997 through the designation of the NCHIDTA by the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy.

The NCRIC's public safety role is to provide support to law enforcement agencies, public safety agencies, and key resource / critical infrastructure security managers through collaboration, cooperation, and information sharing across jurisdictions in Northern California. The NCRIC is staffed and managed by assigned representatives from local, state and federal agencies, including sheriff's offices, police departments, district attorney's bureau of investigations, fire departments, departments of emergency management, as well as state and federal law enforcement agency personnel.

How do Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) Systems work?

Automated License Plate Recognition (ALPR) systems function to automatically capture an image of a vehicle and the vehicle's license plate, transform the plate image into alphanumeric characters using optical character recognition, compare the plate number acquired to one or more databases (also known as "hot lists") of vehicles of interest to law enforcement, and then alert law enforcement officers when a vehicle of interest has been observed.

The stored license plate data also provides law enforcement investigators with a pointer system that may help them identify vehicles associated with suspects, witnesses, or victims, and to develop exculpatory information that assists them with focusing their investigative resources.

The data also allows law enforcement to connect serial criminal activities that may have occurred in disconnected law enforcement jurisdictions.

[http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/pdfs/IACP_ALPR_Policy_Operational_Guidance .pdf](http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/pdfs/IACP_ALPR_Policy_Operational_Guidance.pdf)

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How does the NCRIC use ALPR technology?

The NCRIC uses ALPR to support authorized law enforcement purposes of local, state, federal, and tribal law enforcement agencies, by organizing and analyzing ALPR data to enable the rapid identification and location of vehicles of legitimate interest to law enforcement.

In one common use of ALPR technology, license plate encounters are compared against law enforcement databases, also known as “hot lists”. The lists contain the license plate numbers and letters of vehicles associated with active investigations, such as those related to Amber Alerts or other missing persons, stolen vehicles, or stolen license plates. The information is also retained for a fixed retention period, though it is only re-accessible by law enforcement given a legitimate law enforcement purpose.

<https://ncric.org/html/NCRIC%20ALPR%20POLICY.pdf>

Where is the data stored?

NCRIC ALPR data resides in a secure law enforcement facility with 24/7 security measures and personnel in place. Physical access to the facility requires a pass code, a personal identity verification card with facility access permission, entry through multiple secured doors and is limited to personnel with a valid Secret clearance.

Who has access to the ALPR database?

Only law enforcement personnel that have:

1. Agreed to the NCRIC privacy policy and non-disclosure agreement.
2. A criminal case or incident number/name.
3. A lawful purpose with a need to know and right to know the information.

<https://ncric.org/html/CaliforniaSTTASPrivacyPolicy.pdf>

What is a lawful purpose?

The current list of lawful purposes required for users to select before accessing the system is:

1. Locate Stolen, Wanted, or Suspect Vehicles.
2. Locate Suspect(s) of Criminal Investigation or Arrest Warrant.
3. Locate Witnesses or Victims of Violent Crime.
4. Locate Missing Children and Elderly individuals (Amber / Silver Alerts).
5. Protect the Public during Special Events / Situational Awareness.
6. Protect Critical Infrastructure.

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What is a need to know?

This standard is established when the requested information is pertinent and necessary to the requesting agency in initiating, furthering, or completing the performance of a law enforcement activity.

What is a right to know?

This standard is established when the requester is acting in an official capacity and has statutory authority to obtain the information being sought.

How are personnel vetted to have access to the system?

Law enforcement agency personnel must submit an application to the NCRIC with a government e-mail account that includes their supervisor's contact information. Once submitted, NCRIC outreach officers review each application within their assigned counties of responsibility. After review and vetting that the law enforcement agency employee has a need to know, the user is approved to have a username and password to access the NCRIC ALPR system.

Once a law enforcement or public safety agency employee is approved to use the system how do they access the data?

Approved law enforcement agency employees access the NCRIC ALPR system through their NCRIC username and login. The system requires a second factor authentication through a randomly generated PIN that is sent to their government account. The user then must submit their username and password again to log into the system. The system then requires the user to certify that they agree to the terms and conditions of use of the system that includes the NCRIC Privacy and ALPR Policies.

<https://ncric.org/html/CaliforniaSTTASPrivacyPolicy.pdf>

<https://ncric.org/html/NCRIC%20ALPR%20POLICY.pdf>

Does the NCRIC ALPR system collect my personal identifying information?

The ALPR system does not contain personal identifying information associated with data collected through ALPR devices. The system only contains the data sets of license plate numbers, photos of the vehicles, and geospatial locations from where the images were captured. There is no connectivity in the ALPR system to the vehicle's registration information or the driver's license information of the owner.

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How accurate is the ALPR technology?

As ALPR technology is translating optical characters to digital data there is a small error rate in translation of alphanumeric characters that are similar in shape. ALPR operators must recognize that the data collected from the ALPR device, and the content of referenced hot lists, consists of data that may or may not be accurate, despite ongoing efforts to maximize the currency and accuracy of such data. To the greatest extent possible, the NCRIC requests that vehicle and subject information be verified from separate Law Enforcement information sources to confirm the vehicle or subject's identity and justification for law enforcement contact. Law enforcement users of ALPR Data must, to the fullest extent possible, visually confirm that the plate characters generated by the ALPR readers correspond with the digital image of the license plate in question.

Can I request the images of where my vehicle has been seen by ALPR?

No, the ALPR system is restricted to law enforcement personnel with a lawful purpose for searching the system. If your vehicle or license plate is stolen law enforcement agencies with a case number may search the database to search for your stolen vehicle or license plate and establish an alert to notify them if the license plate is encountered.

How many alerts occur per 1000 vehicles scanned?

Approximately 1 to 2 vehicles out of 1000 initiate an alert in the system.

How is the system audited?

The system logs each user's activity by agency, name, date, time, and purpose of search. Each month NCRIC Information Technology personnel perform sample audits to the system to confirm that it is functioning properly and that required data is being appropriately submitted by requesting agencies.

Is my vehicle information shared with private sector companies?

No, the ALPR system is restricted to law enforcement personnel with a lawful purpose for using the system.

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Is the data in the NCRIC ALPR program transferred to the Federal Government?

No, the NCRIC ALPR program does not transfer the ALPR data stored on NCRIC servers to the Federal Government. Federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agency personnel assigned to our region that meet our vetting criteria, agree to our policies, have a need and a right to know the information with a law enforcement purpose and a criminal investigative case may access the system for the purpose of making individual inquiries.

Where are ALPR cameras located?

ALPR units are attached to law enforcement vehicles or deployed at fixed locations, where they collect license plate information from vehicles on public roadways, public property and vehicles that are within public view. As the ALPR devices are a law enforcement investigative tool we do not provide the locations of the cameras. If subjects engaged in violent and/or serial criminal activities are made aware of the location of the devices, they could take measures to avoid detection.

How long are ALPR records maintained?

Most ALPR records are maintained for 12 months. If a record is connected to a criminal investigation or criminal intelligence file it may be retained for 5 years.

Why are records maintained for 12 months or 5 years?

The NCRIC information management systems are designed based upon 28 Code of Federal Regulations Part 23 (28CFR23) and the California Attorney General's Model Standards for Maintaining Criminal Intelligence Files and Criminal Intelligence Operational Activities (AG File Guidelines). The 12 month retention policy is based on the AG File Guidelines. Information may be entered into a temporary file when a determination has been made that, although the reasonable suspicion standard for an individual and/or organization has not been met, there is a reasonable likelihood that within one year the standard for entry into the file system may be available. Based on 28CFR23, files may be maintained for 5 years if criminal intelligence has been developed establishing a reasonable suspicion that the individual and/or organization is involved in a definable criminal activity or enterprise.

These standards allow time for witnesses and victims of crime to report incidents to law enforcement. It also allows law enforcement to connect serial criminal activities that occur in disconnected law enforcement jurisdictions over a 12 month period. The

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greatest potential value of the system is in identifying vehicles associated with the investigation of violent and serial criminal events. In this capacity the ALPR system aids law enforcement investigators by providing a pointer system that may help them identify vehicles associated with suspects, witnesses, victims and to develop exculpatory information that assists them with focusing their investigative resources.

Does the NCRIC ALPR system provide constant surveillance of my location?

No, the NCRIC ALPR system only provides authorized law enforcement personnel with a pointer for one moment in time and location where a vehicle was located to provide potential leads to support criminal investigations.

Can ALPR devices see into my vehicle and use facial recognition software?

Unlike red light cameras, ALPR devices do not have illumination to aid in identifying the driver or potential passengers of the vehicle. The purpose of the ALPR is to identify the vehicle, not the occupants. If ambient lighting is sufficient or a subject is outside and near the vehicle their image may be captured. The NCRIC ALPR system is not designed to be used with facial recognition.

Is every ALPR image reviewed?

No, images are only reviewed by law enforcement personnel when required and based upon the need to:

1. Locate Stolen, Wanted, or Suspect Vehicles.
2. Locate Suspect(s) of Criminal Investigation or Arrest Warrant.
3. Locate Witnesses or Victims of Violent Crime.
4. Locate Missing Children and Elderly individuals (Amber / Silver Alerts).
5. Protect the Public during Special Events / Situational Awareness.
6. Protect Critical Infrastructure.

What laws are there regarding the use ALPR devices?

At the time of writing, there are no laws in California that explicitly govern or limit use of ALPR technology or the photography of vehicles in public view by local or regional law enforcement agencies.

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What is the privacy impact of ALPR?

To learn more about the privacy impact of ALPR please read the NCRIC privacy impact assessment at <https://ncric.org/html/NCRIC%20ALPR%20PIA.PDF>.

Comments or questions regarding the ALPR impact assessment or NCRIC policies may be directed to privacyofficer@ncric.ca.gov.