

Getting access to private security camera footage is a little trickier. There are no real laws governing what non-government entities can and can't do with footage they've taken, or how long they need to retain it for. This means that companies who film things on their security cameras can give their film to anyone they like (including the police), or destroy it if they want.⁹ The only real way to get access to this footage is to file a request through the court. To do so, you'd need to prove that you need to see the footage--for instance, that you've been arrested for something you didn't do, or that your rights have been violated.⁸

In any case, you should probably talk to a lawyer if you feel you need to see footage from security cameras.

Sources

1. Brian R. Ballou. "Police to widen use of cameras." Boston Globe. Sept. 23, 2007
2. "Guidelines for public video surveillance." The Constitution Project. 2007.
3. James Vlahos. "Surveillance Society: New High-Tech Cameras Are Watching You" Popular Mechanics. Oct. 1, 2009.
4. Maria Cramer. "Boston Police launch 'real time crime center'." Boston Globe. March 2, 2010
5. Maria Cramer. "Watching from a distance." Boston Globe. May 3, 2010.
6. Mark Schlosberg and Nicole A. Ozer "Under the watchful eye: the proliferation of video surveillance systems in California." ACLU. 2007.
7. Massachusetts Law Reform Institute "Serving a subpoena." Masslegalhelp.org. 2008.
8. Trevor T. Adler. "Privacy Implications of Commercial Office Building Security Technology in the Post-9/11 Era." Columbia Science and Technology Law Review. 2007.
9. "Who's watching?" New York Civil Liberties Union, 2006.

Credits

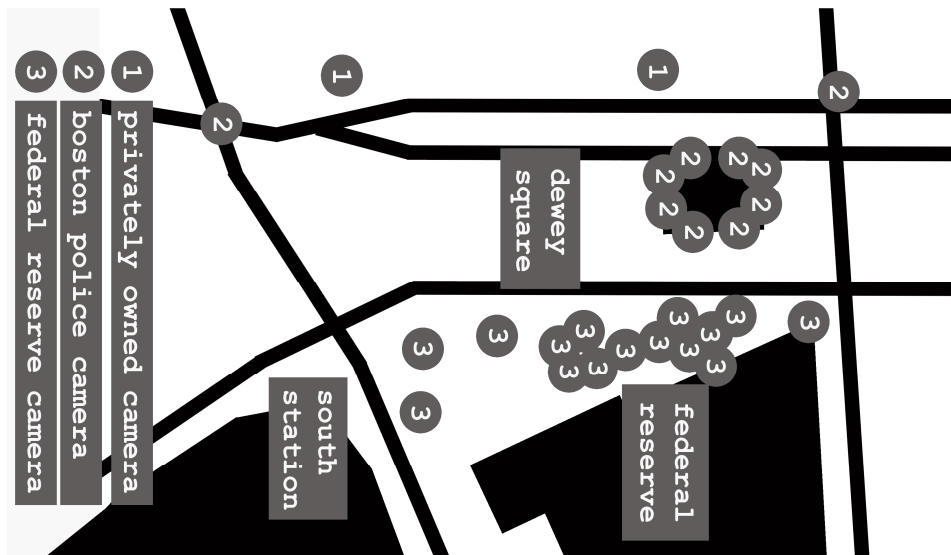
Written and printed by Tim Devin
Additional research by Brian Flaherty
Front cover image: Flickr user xcode
Map: Tim Devin

*with security
cameras...*



*...you're
the star!!*

**your guide to Dewey Square's
surveillance cameras**



map: surveillance cameras in dewey square

About surveillance cameras

It's estimated that there are about 30 million surveillance cameras in the US.³ Many are operated by various government agencies, while many more still are operated by private companies. There are two basic types of cameras: cameras that can rotate and move around (these are usually behind frosted glass domes), and fixed cameras that can't. Both types of cameras can zoom in, for a closer look.¹

Privately owned cameras across the street

These seem to be owned and operated by private companies. Both of them are fixed cameras--which means that they focus on one spot. They're monitored by private security guards; each company has its own policies on how to go about monitoring cameras, and how long to keep the film. As with all private security cameras, the police would have an easy job getting hold of any footage from these cameras, but it would be more difficult for you as a private citizen to get it.

Boston Police cameras in Dewey Square

These cameras are owned and operated by the Boston Police Department. The BPD uses both moving and fixed cameras. They are monitored by police working at the BPD's Real Time Crime Center in Roxbury; they work two shifts, and operate 17 hours a day.⁴ This center is part of an area-wide net of cameras funded by the Department of Homeland Security's "Urban Security Area Initiative."⁵ The footage the cameras capture is kept, in case anyone needs to view it. Area police and federal agents both have access to these cameras, and their footage--which means that anything caught on film can be used against you.⁵ But you can often gain access to this footage, too.

The Federal Reserve's cameras across the street

These seem to be owned and operated by the Federal Reserve. Notice all of them: fixed and rotating cameras, up high on poles and on the sides of the building. As with many federal security measures, it is unclear who monitors these cameras, and where this is done--but it's safe to assume that someone is looking at them from time to time, and that the footage is kept for a period of time after it has been taken. It's also safe to assume that both local police and federal agents have access to these cameras, since this is the way that local police cameras work. You can also access the films, if you follow the right procedures.

Gaining access to the footage

Depending on who operates the camera, you need to go about getting the footage in different ways. If you want to see the police's film, for instance, you can file a Freedom of Information Act request--even if you're not in the footage.⁶ However, your request can be denied, if the government feels that it would violate someone else's privacy if you saw at the footage.² If you're involved in a court case (say, to prove police abuse), you can request footage through the court. If you don't have enough money to file the subpoena, you can have the court waive the fee.⁷ The same holds true for the Federal Reserve's footage.