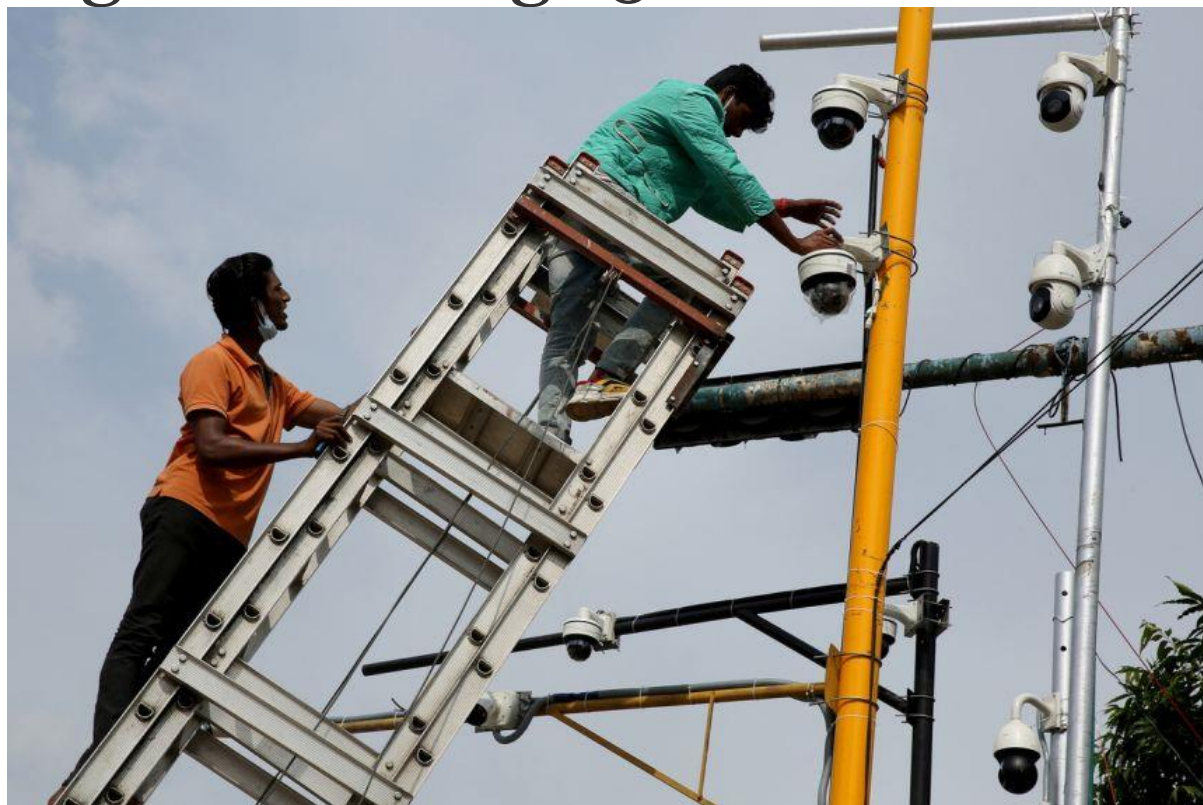


Critics not impressed that Delhi's tally of CCTV cameras is highest among 150 cities



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SEP 6, 2021, 4:00 PM

NEW DELHI - It is a claim to fame that has proved controversial.

On Aug 26, Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal tweeted to say that he felt proud that Delhi has the highest number of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras per square mile, beating cities such as Shanghai, New York and London.

He was quoting a report from Forbes India that cited data from Comparitech, a British website that focuses on improving cyber security and online privacy. According to data from the website, Delhi has 1,826.58 CCTV cameras per square mile, the highest among the top 150 cities analysed by Comparitech.

London was second with 1,138.48 such systems and Chennai took third place with 609.92. Besides Singapore which ranks eighth, all others in the top 10 are cities in China.

"My compliments to our officers and engineers who worked in mission mode n (sic) achieved it in such a short time," tweeted Mr Kejriwal, who has defended the use of CCTV cameras to improve public safety in Delhi.

This celebration has been greeted with criticism by digital rights activists who argue that surveillance does not necessarily correspond to safety and have questioned the widespread use of these CCTV systems.

"CCTV deployment is without any legal basis or safeguards... This is encouraging private, warrantless surveillance across Delhi," tweeted the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a Delhi-based Indian digital liberties organisation.

A one-page standard operating procedure issued by the government in 2018 specifies footage from its cameras can be accessed by neighbourhood resident welfare and market associations, the Public Works Department and local police.

There is no mention of any data protection measure. The Delhi government later stated that resident welfare and market associations can access footage after securing clearance from the locally elected member of the Delhi Legislative Assembly.

Ms Anushka Jain, an associate counsel at IFF, told The Straits Times worrying questions still persist around the use of these cameras. "We don't know how these associations are asking for permission from the member of legislative assembly and on what basis he or she is granting the request," she said.

"Neither do we know the nature and extent of the information that is being shared. What is it that it is being used for and whether it is destroyed after its intended use?"

The Delhi government began a project to install CCTV cameras in 2018 and has set up 275,000 so far, with work under way to set up another 140,000. The IFF has said this project threatens progress achieved through "hard fought battles" to make privacy a fundamental right.

"What happens if passwords (for assessing CCTV footage) are shared or if copies of the feed are made? Are there any security audits? Can any penalties be imposed in the absence of a legal framework?" wrote Ms Jain and her colleague Apar Gupta in The Indian Express on Sept 4.

"We are winning a race against authoritarian states like China in terms of how much surveillance we are doing. This is not something we should be proud of," added Ms Jain.

The Delhi government has also deployed facial recognition technology in some of its schools in the city.

There has been little public opposition to the use of these cameras, with many resident welfare associations (RWAs) even petitioning the government to place them in their neighbourhoods. Mr Atul Goyal, president of United Residents Joint Action, a confederation of RWAs, said installation is "welcome" to ensure safety in a city with more than 20 million residents.

But he noted there have been complaints over how these cameras are positioned. Often because of lack of appropriate public spots that have access to electricity, cameras are placed on private houses that capture footage of opposite homes rather than the street. "That is objectionable. It should be focused on the street," Mr Goyal told ST. "We need to maintain a balance between the execution of such advanced equipment and the privacy of individuals as well."

The primary argument in favour of CCTV surveillance is that it contributes to improved law enforcement and crime prevention but this narrative has been found to be tenuous in several studies.

Even Comparitech, which compared the number of public CCTV cameras with crime indices reported by statistics site Numbeo, said a higher number of cameras "just barely" correlates with a lower crime index.

Dr Kalpana Viswanath, founder of Safetipin, an organisation that works with stakeholders, including the government, to make public spaces safer for women, said it is fallacious to argue that CCTV cameras prevent crimes. Sexual violence against women tends to take place within homes or in deserted stretches where perpetrators stalk victims to decipher a pattern of her movement before assaulting.

"These are not out-of-the-blue incidents," she told ST, adding that crimes against women also take place in crowded places, such as buses, where they often go unreported as well as undetected by cameras.

Data from Delhi Police indicates a mixed picture on reported crimes in the city. While non-heinous crimes such as thefts have gone up since 2015, there is a falling trend of crimes against women between 2015 and 2020, including rape and assault.

Dr Viswanath attributed this declining trend to a host of measures, including better street lighting as well as enhanced and safer access to public transport. "I would not attribute it all to CCTV cameras by any stretch of imagination," she said.

CCTV cameras help though by providing evidence to the police after a crime is committed and aiding prosecution. But the Delhi Police filed charge sheets only in 30.5 per cent of cases of crimes against women it investigated in 2017, and this fell to 29.76 in 2019. Cases pending investigation at the end of both years remained at 58 per cent.

"So where a CCTV camera should be helping, it is not even helping because the police are mostly just arresting and the case is not going to its logical end," added Dr Viswanath.

The conviction rate of crimes under the Indian Penal Code in Delhi also fell from 64 per cent in 2017 to 57 per cent in 2019, according to a report from the Praja Foundation. It flagged a 16 per cent shortage of police sub-inspectors responsible for critical investigation-related tasks in 2019-20.

Maintenance of CCTV cameras has been patchy as well. A 2018-19 government audit of 3,870 such devices installed by the Delhi Police, which is controlled by the central government, found only 55 to 68 per cent of them were functional.

Link:- <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/delhis-claims-of-having-most-cctv-cameras-prompt-criticism>