



## A Survivor's Guide to Cameras: Misuse and Strategic Use

Security cameras and home surveillance systems have become more affordable, easy to install, and more commonplace. The intended purpose is to increase safety by deterring crime, or by capturing evidence that can be used to prove a crime. Although current research<sup>1</sup> is mixed about whether or not video surveillance truly reduces all forms of crime, for many it still can create a feeling of greater safety and well-being. Unfortunately, some people misuse surveillance as a tactic of abuse and a means to monitor or control other people. Cameras are often misused in the context of intimate partner abuse and stalking. Additionally, some uses of public cameras may leave people feeling less safe, particularly in communities that are subject to over-policing.

Some survivors might worry that someone is monitoring them through cameras in their home or other locations. Other survivors might think about using cameras for peace of mind, for example to make sure that pets or children are okay when they are away from home or to get notifications if anyone approaches their door.

This resource provides information for survivors about both addressing potential misuse, as well as safe and effective use. We'll begin with strategies to counter surveillance by an abusive person and then discuss how cameras could be used strategically by survivors.

**Trust your instincts.** If it seems like someone else knows too much about you, they might be monitoring your devices, accessing your online accounts, tracking your location, or gathering information about you online. If you suspect someone else is monitoring your devices at home (like your phone or computer), consider using different devices such as a friend's

phone, or a computer at a library, school, or at your work. Read more about [phone safety and privacy](#).

**Get more information.** Navigating violence, abuse, and stalking can be difficult and dangerous. Advocates can help you figure out options and local resources and help you create a plan for your safety. You can [contact a national helpline](#) to be connected with local resources.

### **Misuse of Cameras**

Cameras of all sizes are now more affordable and easier to install. Video and images can be viewed remotely later or in real-time using a web site or an app. Many video and picture files downloaded from cameras embed time, date, and location information in the file.

An abusive person could install camera surveillance and monitor all your activity remotely over the Internet. Cameras can also be hidden somewhere in the home, or in everyday household items (i.e., smoke alarms, clocks, toys, etc.), making them difficult to detect.

### *Finding Cameras*

**Safety first.** Before taking steps to search for or remove hidden cameras, think about your safety. If someone is monitoring you with a camera, they may see you searching for it. They may escalate their abusive behavior when cameras, other devices, or accounts tied to those devices are secured, or their ability to monitor you is changed in some way. Before making a change, you can [talk with an advocate](#) about safety planning.

- Many “smart” or internet-connected devices have cameras built in. If you have smart devices in your home, review the security and privacy settings of those devices and the accounts they are connected to in order to make sure that others cannot access it. These devices usually

come with a default password which should be changed to increase security. You can search on the internet for the name of the device and “change password” to find instructions. Read more about [smart home technology](#).

- Review the devices using your home wireless network to make sure there aren't any devices connected that you're not familiar with. Some hidden cameras will use an internet connection to stream video. If you see an unknown device on your network, consider removing that device or changing the password on your wireless network to prevent unknown devices from using it.
- Some camera detector apps or devices can help find wireless cameras that are transmitting a data signal, but may not detect a wired camera. Wired cameras might have a physical connection (a wire) running through a wall or air duct, and connects to a receiving device in an attic, crawl space, or in another apartment in an apartment building. Law enforcement may be able to help search for hidden cameras.
- If your phone has a camera, you may be able to use it to scan for infrared signals. Most cameras that would be used for spying have infrared capability – otherwise they wouldn't be useful in the dark. To do this, make the room you are checking as dark as possible, and then slowly sweep the phone camera (or each camera in turn, if the phone has two of them) all around the room. The lens of any active camera with infrared capabilities should show up as a purplish light.

### *Options If You Find a Camera*

If you find out that a camera is being used to monitor you, you have a few options:

- You may want to **document what's happening** before you take any steps to remove the camera or cut-off someone else's access. You could

take a picture of the camera, note the date and time, and where you found it. You can also write down what led you to think you are monitored, for example something the person said in a conversation or a message they sent. If it was a message, you could save a copy or a screenshot of that message.

- If you are interested in making a report or bringing the **evidence** to law enforcement or a court, consider asking law enforcement or a private investigator to look at the camera and/or remove it to preserve the camera as evidence.
- If you want to **take action yourself** to remove the camera or shut off the other person's access, you can cover up the camera with a sticker or tape, turn off the camera or remove the power source, or try to gain control of the video feed through the app or account.

In any case, remember that you can [talk with an advocate](#) about safety planning at any time.

### **Security Cameras You Control**

Cameras are increasingly being used for security in homes. Options include cameras that look at the outside of your home or ones you place inside. In both cases, there are privacy considerations for other people living in your home and your neighborhood. You will also want to make sure to set up any cameras in the most secure way possible to prevent any unwanted access.

Survivors may consider using security cameras for many reasons, including to make sure the abusive person isn't coming to their home, or to reassure that pets or children are safe. If you plan to check on children or other people in the home, make sure that they know that you are using a camera,

and give them choices about how and when a camera is being used. It's always best to ensure consent and communication around camera use. This is often the difference between a helpful use and an abusive use. You should also [be aware of legal issues](#) regarding where cameras are placed and whether they record audio as well as video, especially if you live in [a two-party \(also known as "dual consent" or "all-party"\) state](#). Ask an attorney if you have legal questions.

Consider what you need from the device when looking to get one. There is a wide range of costs, features, security, and reliability. Some things to consider are whether you want real-time access to the video feed, or to just be able to review it later if something happens. Do you need a high-quality image? Will you want it always be on, or only be activated if there is motion? Will you want to easily (or automatically) turn the camera on and off to protect privacy when you or other people are home? Do you need it to be able to function effectively in a dim or dark room?

No matter what kind of camera you use, be sure to set up security features including changing the default password for the camera, for any account connected to it, and to your home network. This can help prevent an abusive person from getting access to the camera.

### **Cameras, Surveillance, and Privacy Away from Home**

Some survivors may also be concerned with cameras in their workplace, school, community center, or shopping areas. For survivors who have been monitored or are being monitored by an abusive person, surveillance anywhere can trigger trauma. While it might be difficult to change the use of cameras in more public spaces, you could consider talking with employers or school administration about the placement of cameras, or ask more about how the cameras operate and who has access to the

recordings. You can also [talk with an advocate](#) about your feelings and to come up with a plan to increase privacy and safety.

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<sup>i</sup> Piza, EL, Welsh, BC, Farrington, DP, Thomas, AL. CCTV Surveillance for crime prevention: A 40-year systematic review with meta-analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy*. 2019; 18: 135– 159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12419>

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