

Big Brother takes over Sydney

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By Solveig Walkling
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IF you want to be in pictures, just stroll through Sydney's CBD where thousands of surveillance cameras monitor your every gesture.

From the security camera at the convenience store, through the five along the bus commute to those monitoring your walk into the office, CCTV coverage now blankets the city.

Even the experts are unsure how many are in place.

"It is very hard to get numbers," Dr Don Weatherburn from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research said.

His review, Effects of Closed Circuit Television Surveillance on Crime, has found that the cameras' use had been growing markedly in recent years.

At the heart of Sydney's extensive surveillance network is the so-called Situation and Emergency Control Room.

It is located in a room reached through a maze of corridors, security doors and an inconspicuous office kitchen and it resembles a scene from a science fiction movie.

On New Year's Eve, up to six operators watched Sydney's streets via 16 screens displaying footage from up to 2200 cameras.

The positioning of the City of Sydney cameras is based on advice from police. Control room operators constantly monitor hotspots like the Rocks, Kings Cross and George St.

In the event of an incident, police can respond in minutes.

People sometimes tried to run from the cameras (and the police), security operations manager Alex Kennedy said.

"But they're pretty puffed before they get out of our camera range," he said.

"And tricking operators by running into a bar and out the back door into an alley in Chinatown would not get them very far either.

"The camera is already waiting for them there."

City of Sydney's acting CEO Garry Harding said the cooperation between the surveillance system's operators and police worked so well that they had been able to spot, report and stop a robber in Hyde Park before the mugging had even finished.

Dr Weatherburn said the CCTV phenomenon started in the early 1980s as a response by private citizens and business to the increasing crime rate. "And then terrorism has just given it this big boost," he said.

The studies included in his review showed CCTV had a modest but significant effect on crime prevention with most effect in reducing vehicle crimes in car parks.

However, evaluations of CCTV in city and town centres showed mixed results. Dr Weatherburn said there hadn't been significant investigation of their effectiveness.

Kristina and Isabel Xavier, two sisters from Bondi, said it wouldn't have crossed their minds that somebody would be watching them throughout their commute to work.

Neither knew about the extensive network above ground, but neither felt it was an effective crime prevention tool.

"I don't think it's working very well though," said Kristina.

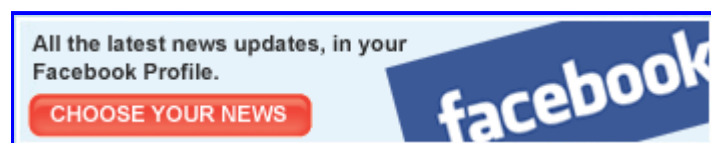
"I don't think the crime rates are dropping.



"And to know all this footage is out there can be a bit scary."

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Watching you ... Sisters Kristina and Isabel Xavier are captured in CCTV on their way to work.