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Full-Body Scan Technology Deployed In Street-Roving Vans

As the privacy controversy around full-body security scans begins to simmer, it's worth noting that courthouses and airport security checkpoints aren't the only places where

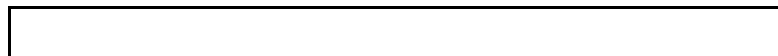


backscatter x-ray vision is being deployed. The same technology, capable of seeing through clothes and walls, has also been rolling out on U.S. streets.

American Science & Engineering, a company based in Billerica, Massachusetts, has sold U.S. and foreign government agencies more than 500 backscatter x-ray scanners mounted in vans that can be driven past neighboring vehicles to see their contents, Joe Reiss, a vice president of marketing at the company told me in an interview. While the biggest buyer of AS&E's machines over the last seven years has been the Department of Defense operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Reiss says law enforcement agencies have also deployed the vans to search for vehicle-based bombs in the U.S.

"This product is now the largest selling cargo and vehicle inspection system ever," says Reiss.

Here's a video of the vans in action.



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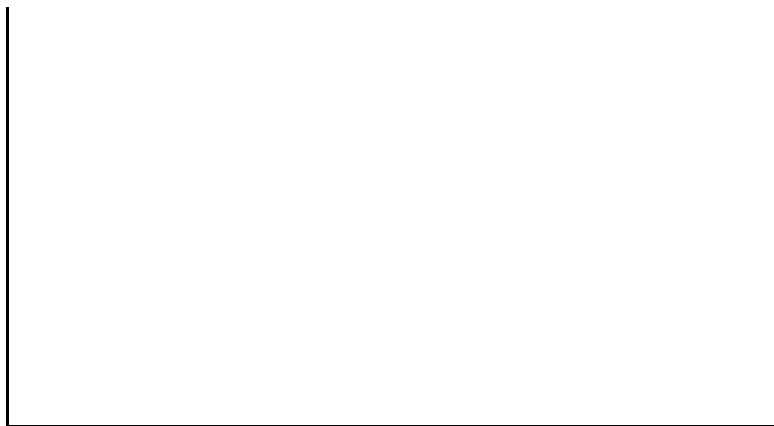
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The Z Backscatter Vans, or ZBVs, as the company calls them, bounce a narrow stream of x-rays off and through nearby objects, and read which ones come back. Absorbed rays indicate dense material such as steel. Scattered rays indicate less-dense objects that can include explosives, drugs, or human bodies. That capability makes them powerful tools for security, law enforcement, and border control.

It would also seem to make the vans mobile versions of the same scanning technique that's riled privacy advocates as it's been deployed in airports around the country. The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) is [currently suing](#) the DHS to stop airport deployments of the backscatter scanners, which can reveal detailed images of human bodies. (Just how much detail [became clear](#) last May, when TSA employee Rolando Negrin was charged with assaulting a coworker who made jokes about the size of Negrin's genitalia after Negrin received a full-body scan.)

"It's no surprise that governments and vendors are very enthusiastic about [the vans]," says Marc Rotenberg, executive director of EPIC. "But from a privacy perspective, it's one of the most intrusive technologies conceivable."

AS&E's Reiss counters privacy critics by pointing out that the ZBV scans don't capture nearly as much detail of human bodies as their airport counterparts. The company's marketing materials say that its "primary purpose is to image vehicles and their contents," and that "the system cannot be used to identify an individual, or the race, sex or age of the person."

Though Reiss admits that the systems "to a large degree will penetrate clothing," he points to the lack of features in images of humans like the one shown at right, far less detail than is obtained from the airport scans. "From a privacy standpoint, I'm hard-pressed to see what the concern or objection could be," he says.



But EPIC's Rotenberg says that the scans, like those in the airport,

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ABOUT ME

I've covered the cybersecurity and privacy beat for Forbes since 2007, with frequent detours into digital miscellanea like switches, servers, supercomputers, search, e-books, online censorship, robots, and China. My favorite stories are the ones where non-fiction resembles science fiction. My favorite sources usually have the word "research" in their titles.

Since I joined Forbes, this job has taken me from an autonomous car race in the California desert all the way to Beijing, where I wrote the first English-language cover story on the Chinese search billionaire Robin Li for Forbes Asia. Black hats, white hats, cyborgs, cyberspies, idiot savants and even CEOs are welcome to email me at agreenberg@forbes.com. [See my profile »](#)

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potentially violate the fourth amendment. “Without a warrant, the government doesn’t have a right to peer beneath your clothes without probable cause,” he says. Even airport scans are typically used only as a secondary security measure, he points out. “If the scans can only be used in exceptional cases in airports, the idea that they can be used routinely on city streets is a very hard argument to make.”

The TSA’s official [policy](#) dictates that full-body scans must be viewed in a separate room from any guards dealing directly with subjects of the scans, and that the scanners won’t save any images. Just what sort of safeguards might be in place for AS&E’s scanning vans isn’t clear, given that the company won’t reveal just which law enforcement agencies, organizations within the DHS, or foreign governments have purchased the equipment. Reiss says AS&E has customers on “all continents except Antarctica.”

Reiss adds that the vans do have the capability of storing images. “Sometimes customers need to save images for evidentiary reasons,” he says. “We do what our customers need.”

What do you think? Do AS&E’s vans threaten your privacy? Do airport full-body scans? Or are either one—or both—a fair price for the security they could provide? Let me know your thoughts in comments below.

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