Protesters call for a ban on facial recognition technology in Pittsburgh

PUNYA BHASIN
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More than 60 protesters marched along Forbes Avenue on Monday in an effort to ban the use of facial recognition technology.

The protest, organized by the Against Carceral Tech organization and its allies, called out Carnegie Mellon University and the city of Pittsburgh for their "active part in amplifying mass surveillance, violence against marginal communities and endorsing tech-enabled family separation, apartheid, and gentrification."

In July, Carnegie Mellon University issued a draft video surveillance policy that would allow police on campus to utilize facial recognition technology during criminal investigations. The draft was overturned a few weeks later after harsh community feedback against the policy.

Now the same community organizers are looking for the city of Pittsburgh to ban facial recognition technology.

Protesters and activists march down Forbes Avenue during a rally organized by Against Carceral Tech to call out Carnegie Mellon University's role in mass surveillance on Monday, Sept. 26, 2022, in Oakland.
Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette

"We know that former Mayor Bill Peduto saw Pittsburgh as CMU and Pitt's urban laboratory, one where university research and technology helps cops and militaries enact surveillance, fear and violence to build their shiny vision of smart city Pittsburgh," said Bonnie Fan, one of the protest organizers. "Although he is out, that agenda continues via the universities. We are not rats, to be experimented on without our consent to refine death machines, or to be policed out of a new luxury development."

Against Carceral Tech defines carceral technology as "technology that police use to infiltrate our homes and communities." Examples of these technologies include facial recognition technology and predictive policing, according to the organization.

The protesters held signs stating "break the lineup, ban facial recognition" and "surveillance is not safe." The protest lasted two hours, with the march starting at Hamburg Hall on CMU's campus and ending at Flagstaff Hill.

Dasha Pruss, an Against Carceral Tech organizer, said carceral technology is harmful to the Black and brown communities in Pittsburgh.

"Facial recognition in particular jeopardizes civil rights and our rights to privacy," Ms. Pruss said." People need to understand that with this type of technology and predictive policing basically any citizen can become

identified as a criminal suspect, and it will especially target Black and brown communities."
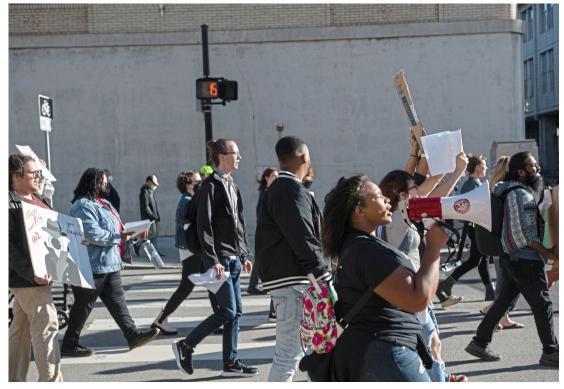

Laura Perkins, the emergency response organizer for Casa San Jose, participates in chants during a rally organized by Against Carceral Tech to call out Carnegie Mellon University's role in mass surveillance on Monday, Sept. 26, 2022.
Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette

Ms. Pruss said it is important to ban the use of carceral technology before it becomes more widespread.

"So facial recognition is the kind of thing where once the cat is out of the bag, it's really hard to put it back in and we really just need to ban the technology in the first place." Ms. Pruss said. "So right now is a really crucial time because facial recognition technology is not yet widespread, but it may become that way and we really need the public to mobilize together against the use of this technology to protect our fellow minority communities."

Franky Spektor, a Carnegie Mellon graduate student who participated in the protest, said it is important to speak up against the use of facial recognition technology before people lose their rights.

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Emily Matthews/Post-Gazette

"I showed up to make my voice heard because this is an issue that, if continues, will inevitably infringe upon civil rights," Ms. Spektor said. "CMU is so deeply entrenched in bureaucracy we barely have a voice as it is so we need to speak up and be loud, and make sure they hear us, before the city and CMU use this technology even more and take away our voices and our rights."

Carnegie Mellon University could not be reached immediately for comment.

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