

Objections to Rotterdam's Safety Cameras Reveal Underlying Problems

The city of Rotterdam's new plan for deploying safety cameras caused dozens of formal objections. Late October, the public debate about the issue demonstrated how cameras have become an unintended tool to address a variety of deeper issues.

By Inge Janse and Arthur De Jaeger

[At the end of June, the municipality of Rotterdam](#) announced where it intends to place its fixed security cameras for the next three years. This sparked a small storm of formal objections, both from supporters and opponents.

This analysis is part of the Start Making Sense research by the Centre for BOLD Cities into camera surveillance in Rotterdam. More information you find on our [website](#).

On 31 October, the independent **General Objections Committee** ([Algemene Bezwaarschriftencommissie](#)) of Rotterdam heard from the objectors, listened to the city's response, and asked follow-up questions.

What the committee will ultimately advise, and how the city will respond, is not yet known. In December, the municipal executives (college van burgemeester en wethouders) are expected to publish a formal response.

Many Narratives at Play

Regardless of the outcome, the discussion revealed a wide range of perspectives on the usefulness and necessity of the cameras and how these narratives often overlap.

First, there is the critical group. These critics are not categorically opposed to cameras, but strongly question how the municipality accounts for their use. Their criticisms are manifold. Warning signs are missing or placed incorrectly. The statistics meant to prove their usefulness are inconsistent or irrelevant. The city has barely discussed alternative solutions. The rules for defining "camera zones" are unclear. Even when cameras are installed, the situation rarely improves to the point where the camera would be removed again. There's too little publicly shared information about cameras, making it hard for citizens to lodge specific objections. The privacy downsides are not sufficiently weighed against the benefits.

The "Waterbed Effect"

Second, there is the group in favour of cameras. Supporters of the cameras raise their own concerns: they don't necessarily want *more* cameras, they simply want their neighbourhood's problems addressed. Because the city uses cameras as a last resort

and “heavy” measure, some argue that cameras are deployed precisely where the issues are most severe.

Yet they feel disadvantaged: their neighbourhood sometimes *doesn't qualify* for cameras, even though they believe the problems there are serious enough

Additionally, there is what they call a “waterbed effect”: when cameras are installed in adjacent areas, the nuisance shifts to their neighbourhood.

Ironically, some of these residents cannot even file formal complaints because they don't live or work *in* a defined camera zone. And when they try to express their concerns via the neighbourhood council (Wijkraden), that body often lacks detailed [police data](#) [and cannot give binding advice](#).

Thresholds

Third, there is the municipality. From their perspective, the rollout of cameras is very procedural. For an area to qualify for camera surveillance, there must be structural public order disruption and serious incidents that cannot be solved by other means. Once an area is designated, the city reevaluates every three years whether camera deployment is still justified.

These decisions are based on police statistics that measure the *severity* of problems, more so than frequency. If the severity meets the required threshold, the employment of cameras remains active and legitimate in the eyes of the municipality.

A complicating factor is that the city argues that in many “camera zones,” the problems are so serious, cameras are not a solution to remove the issue but a way to *prevent things from getting worse*. In fact, since last summer, only one camera zone (Katendrecht) has been discontinued. In line with this logic, police also tend to keep cameras when in doubt.

Black Boxes

The objections committee followed the procedure closely and made sure all points were discussed, whilst allowing the municipality freedom to respond. From this important insights emerged.

A first key insight from the Objections Committee meeting: the actual effects of the cameras are unclear. There are no “A-B tests” in Rotterdam to show exactly how people are affected by the cameras, who changes behaviour, or who is deterred.

The police data used by the city is also opaque in how it's defined. Essentially, the cameras function like “black boxes”: they *do something*, but it's not clear *what* or *how much*. Do people stop what they were planning to do? Do they just move their activities somewhere else? Could other methods work better than cameras? What unintended side effects are there? The municipality has none of the answers.

Punishing Poverty

A second key insight is that during the meeting, none of the discussion focused on how the *root causes* of crime or disorder can be prevented. Problems undoubtedly exist, but the municipality only seems to respond in terms of repression. The preventive aspect of why that the preventive, social side of why people commit certain offenses is barely addressed.

Some of the critical group went so far as to call the camera deployment “a punishment for poverty”, especially in areas where homelessness or poverty is visible; instead of tackling structural inequalities, the city just puts cameras there.

Rigid Framing

Perhaps the most important takeaway: cameras have unintentionally shifted from being a *means* to an *end*.

For some, the “end” is a more controllable and just government. For others, it’s simply about having a decent life in their own neighbourhood. For yet others, it’s about managing a city where problems feel out of control.

The committee meeting, with its formal structure, was not the right place to deeply discuss these broader visions. The authors suggest lowering the barriers: stakeholders (residents, officials, civil society) should step outside existing frameworks and talk openly about *why* they want or resist cameras and only once there’s a shared understanding, assess whether cameras should play a role.