

Coming for the Kids: Big Brother and the Pied Pipers of Surveillance

BY BEN HAYES & MAX ROWLANDS

We were asked to write this article after giving a talk to privacy advocates in Canada in which we noted the widespread deployment of biometric identification systems — fingerprinting — in British schools.¹ This practice, we suggested, is but one feature of a rapidly developing ‘surveillance society’ in the U.K. in which so-called ‘kiddyprinting’ is among a host of measures aimed at keeping tabs on British children (Hayes, 2008).

“Are we sending our kids to school or prison”?

According to the *Leave Them Kids Alone* campaign (www.leavethemkidsalone.com), a staggering two million children have now had their fingerprints taken in 3,500 U.K. schools. It is estimated that twenty more schools introduce the practice every week. The most widely used systems are Micro Librarian Systems’ “Junior Librarian”, which uses fingerprint scanners in place of library cards to check books in and out, and VeriCool’s biometric class registration and cashless catering systems. VeriCool’s parent company, Anteon, also happens to be a leading supplier of technology and training to the U.S. military with controversial links to detention facilities in Guantanamo

Bay and Abu Ghraib, as well as news services in Africa and the Balkans that broadcast American views and propaganda.

Perhaps the most contentious aspects of 'kiddyprinting' (and there are many) is the way in which many schools have implemented these systems without notifying parents. Although the U.K. government has issued non-statutory guidance on the use of biometrics in schools, it stopped short of introducing a legal requirement for parental consent (Becta, 2007). More non-binding guidance from the U.K. Information Commissioner's Office [equivalent to the Canadian Privacy Commissioner] recommends that "the sensitivity of the issue [demands] schools follow best practice and ask permission of parent and pupil before they take fingerprints" (Information Commissioner's Office, 2007). However, this is frequently not the case, with some schools going as far as to threaten those who refuse to enrol with expulsion. Last year the [U.K. Government] Department for Education and Skills criticised several schools that refused to provide food to children who would not participate in their biometric catering system.

In a 2007 debate in the House of Lords, Baroness Walmsley argued that "the practice of fingerprinting in schools has been banned in China as being too intrusive and an infringement of children's rights. Yet here it is widespread." The *NO2ID* campaign (www.no2id.net/) is no less outraged, asking: "Are we sending our kids to school or to prison? We wouldn't accept fingerprinting for adults without informed consent so it is utterly outrageous that children as young as five are being targeted."

Spurious debate

The technology suppliers, together with the schools that use their systems, are quick to dismiss fears about privacy and children's rights, arguing that these are far outweighed by the benefits to school and child. Their claims range from the banal to the ridiculous. Micro Librarian Systems asserts that "Identikit biometric solutions encourage school library lending", but provides no evidence to corroborate the suggestion that there is a link between fingerprinting and the desire to learn. Similarly: "Absenteeism. Could it be a thing of the past?" asks the VeriCool website, as if high-tech registration systems in place of traditional class registers could somehow tempt truant children back to school.

Another major concern is that such routine breaches of children's privacy are occurring at an age where they can scarcely be expected to understand the implications. VeriCool boasts that children like the system because "they feel like they are in *Doctor Who*" [a popular British sci-fi television series]. Our fear is that taking personal data from children in wholly unnecessary situations is conditioning them into accepting the wider development of a 'surveillance society'.

In any case, the debate about whether it is acceptable to fingerprint children may be all but over. In 2005, the European Union agreed on the mandatory fingerprinting of *all* EU passport-holders (European Council, 2004; Statewatch, 2006). It is now discussing the practical implementation of this Regulation. As far as children are concerned, the only question now is whether this practice will begin at six-years-old, the current position of the EU member states, or twelve-years-old, the current position of the European Parliament (see "Coming to a Jurisdiction Near You" later in this issue for more information).

From 'kiddyprinting' to 'kiddychipping'

Perhaps absenteeism could be a thing of the past. Among its contracts with the U.S. government, VeriCool's parent company Anteon provides 'alien' ID cards to Mexican citizens on the U.S. border. The company also holds a patent over the "VeriChip", a human implant RFID (radio-frequency identification) chip that can be used for identity verification and location tracking. Several years ago it proposed the chip become mandatory for all immigrant workers entering the U.S.

Despite the common technological base, VeriCool insists that its defence and educational activities are entirely separate. It is certainly difficult to make any ethical distinction. Following the murder in August 2005 of Rory Blackhall, an eleven-year-old Scottish schoolboy, Anteon UK Ltd. e-mailed some 340 local authorities. "Dear Sir or Madam", read its communication, "like everyone else, we were shocked and saddened by the apparent murder of the young schoolboy in West Lothian. We believe that we can help reduce the possibility of such future tragedies and so wish to bring to your attention our new anti-truancy and first day contact system that is already in use by some schools in the UK." The U.K. Advertising Standards Authority banned the advert on

the basis that it was “offensive and distressing” to capitalise on “a recent probable murder as means of promoting the product.”

Although it does tread such dubious moral ground, it may be unfair to single out VeriCool. Countless information technology companies are now engaged in competition to gain a foothold in the rapidly developing and highly lucrative educational surveillance market. In October 2007, a school in Doncaster began trials of a system that uses RFID chips in school uniforms to track the attendance, location and movement of its pupils. Danbro, the local company which supplied the technology, cites fears about child safety as well as the usual administrative benefits. Trutex, “Britain’s favourite schoolwear supplier”, has also announced plans to chip schoolchildren via their uniforms (Williams, 2007).

Caring is sharing: childhood on file

It’s not just the private sector that uses tragedy to sell surveillance policies. The government’s “Every Child Matters” strategy of 2003 followed a public inquiry into the catastrophic failures of social services in the case of Victoria Climbié, an eight-year-old who suffered prolonged and horrific abuse before being killed by her foster parents. At the heart of the resulting strategy is the creation of a central database that will track the progress of every child in England and Wales from birth.

The *Children’s Act 2004* provided the government with the sweeping new powers it required to implement the strategy and a trilogy of interconnected databases are now being constructed. First is “ContactPoint”, an index of the name, address and date of birth, along with contact details for parents, doctors and schools, of every single child. This system will be launched towards the end of 2008; every child will have a unique number from birth. Later, it will be joined by the “Electronic Common Assessment Framework” (eCAF), an in-depth profiling mechanism designed to monitor children’s progress and well-being. Information about parents, relatives and caregivers will also be included in the belief that this will help identify and protect vulnerable or at risk children. The third system is the “Integrated Children’s System” (ICS), which will hold the records of social services and child protection officers.

Together, ContactPoint, eCAF and ICS will provide schools, social workers, police, doctors and local authorities with a previ-

ously unimaginably detailed picture of our children's lives. Not surprisingly then, calls to scrap the system have come from far and wide. The case against can be summarised as follows: 1) it will stigmatise children, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, potentially well into their adult life; 2) the vast sums of money being thrown at the technology (ContactPoint alone has already cost close to £250 million) would be far better spent addressing a chronic shortage of social workers, particularly in deprived areas; 3) it is quite probably illegal, far exceeding the permissible limits of U.K. law regulating the collection of personal data and European law protecting personal privacy; 4) it will be all but impossible to ensure the integrity and security of the data due of the breadth of access envisaged (a point conceded by government appointed auditors). An extensive report on children's databases prepared by the Foundation for Information Policy Research (2006) and Action on Rights for Children website (www.arch-ed.org) provide further information on this issue.

For all the apocryphal claims that the MySpace and Facebook generation no longer cares about privacy, qualitative research by the U.K. Children's Commissioner suggests that older children in particular are in fact deeply concerned and sceptical of the government's motives. We should in no way confuse the desire to be seen by other people with a desire to be watched by the state.

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From nanny state to police state

Given the current government mania for risk management along with technological advances in risk profiling, it seems inevitable that once implemented these databases will not just be used to identify potentially vulnerable children, but potentially 'dangerous' ones as well. In contrast to all the government's talk about protecting children, it has also introduced the most authoritarian 'youth justice' policies in Europe. The "*Anti-Social Behaviour Order*" (ASBO) has been the cornerstone of Labour's deeply conservative campaign to restore a 'culture of respect' in British society for the past five years.

For those unfamiliar with the legislation, it allows police or local authorities to apply to a magistrate or county court for an ASBO banning an individual from committing any specified act or entering specific geographical locations (or both) for a minimum of two years (no maximum period was mandated, and in extreme cases people have received life-time ASBOs). Because they are civil (rather than criminal) orders the procedure is accelerated, there is no jury and 'hearsay' evidence is admissible.

By the end of 2006, some 12,675 people had received an ASBO. Prior government assurances that they would be used against children only in "exceptional circumstances" proved wholly false; more than 50 % of ASBO applications concern children under sixteen. Individuals as young as ten (the minimum age limit) have received ASBOs banning them from — and effectively criminalising them for — playing football in the street, riding a bike, wearing a hood or using certain words. As preposterous as this seems, breaching an ASBO is a criminal offence punishable by up to five years in prison for adults, and a two-year detention and training order for children.

Indeed, the greatest achievement of anti-social behaviour legislation may actually have been to speed entry into the criminal justice system. The fact that half of all ASBOs are breached demonstrates just how spectacularly ineffective they are as deterrents. On the contrary, children frequently embrace their ASBO as a 'badge of honour'. ASBO-related issues are tracked on the Statewatch website (www.statewatch.org) under ASBOwatch (listed under "observatories")

Taking DNA samples from children

Since April 2004, anyone over the age of ten years who is arrested in England or Wales, for any recordable offence (i.e. however minor), can have their DNA and fingerprints taken without their consent, or that of their parents in the case of minors. Both records are kept forever in police databases, *regardless of whether the arrest is followed by a criminal charge*, let alone conviction. Of 4.3 million profiles added to the U.K. DNA database since 1995, as many as 1.1 million belong to people who were under eighteen at the time the sample was taken (Hope, 2008).

Criminologists have long warned that police officers might target children they see as potential troublemakers and arrest

them for minor offences so as to secure their inclusion in the database, believing that this will make their job easier in the future. This was confirmed as police policy in March 2008 by Gary Pugh, DNA spokesman for the Association of Chief Police Officers, who suggested that children as young as five should be considered eligible for the database if they exhibit behaviour consistent with criminality in later life (Townsend, 2008).

Coming to a jurisdiction near you?

British society is indeed plagued by anti-social behaviour and a lack of respect for other people. The tragedy is just how much of it emanates from government policy.

The authors are researchers with London-based Statewatch, an organisation established in 1991 that monitors state policy and practice in Europe, and its effect on civil liberties and democracy. For more information see www.statewatch.org.

ENDNOTES:

¹ "Privacy Rights in a World Under Surveillance", Civil Society Workshop, 29th International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners, Montreal, 25 September 2007.

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Coming to a Jurisdiction Near You

STATEWATCH NEWS ONLINE JULY 2006

EU States Will Be Free to Fingerprint Children From Day One of Their Life as Soon as it is Technologically Possible

scanning of fingerprints: up to 12 years of age.. if provided for by national legislation... from 12 years of age: Compulsory (EU doc no: 9403/1/06)

The decisions are being made in secret meetings based on secret documents — people and parliaments are to have no say in the decision

When the EURODAC Regulation (adopted 2000) was being discussed there was a charged political debate about the minimum age for the children of refugees to be fingerprinted. Some EU member states wanted 10-12 years old, while the European Parliament argued for between 16-18 years old. Back then the parliament merely presented an “opinion” and could be ignored. Although 14 years old was agreed by the Council of the European Union (the then 15 governments) the issue was contested and well-reported — and the decision was seen as a “political issue”.

The Council is now discussing at what age the finger-prints of children can be compulsory taken for EU passports.

The issue will not be decided by parliaments — national or European — but by a "comitology" committee meeting in secret: this “Article 6” committee is composed of representatives of the 25 governments and is chaired by the European Commission. The “line” to be taken by the governments is being discussed in Council Working Parties and the documents (see below) are secret (see Endnote 1).

A report from the EU Council Presidency at the end of June (<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/jul/9403-rev1-06.pdf> EU doc no: 9403/1/06) proposes that for EU passports:

Ally (noun) One in helpful association with another, one with common interests, backer, benefactor, booster, champion, colleague, companion, comrade, endorser, friend, helper, partner, patron, supporter, upholder

Ally (verb) To place in a friendly association, to connect in a personal relationship, band together, combine, come aboard, come together, consolidate, cooperate, fuse, hook up, join together, meld, merge, mingle, network, plug into, pool, relate, stand behind, sympathize, team up, tie in, unite



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1. The “scanning of the facial image” should be:

*o to 12 years of age.. storage in the chip [to be] on the basis of national legislation [and] from 12 years of age: **Compulsory**. (emphasis in original)*

The scanning and storage on a “chip” of a “facial image” meets the ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation) guidelines and is simply based on “digitizing” the normal passport picture sent in by post — it is not a biometric and does not require the physical presence of the child.

The report notes “small children.. will not normally be suitable subjects for biometric face recognition by means of a photograph”. Moreover, a study from the Netherlands (circulated in the Council) showed that:



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The facial changes taking place up to the age of 12 are so marked that face recognition is not possible without highly sophisticated software and the considerable expense which goes with it

What the report fails to mention is that “digitized” facial images taken from passport photos only work on “one-to-one” checks and not “one-to-many” (ie: against a database of 25 million people).

2. The taking of finger-prints is a wholly different issue.

Here the EU Council Presidency proposes that:

Scanning of fingerprints up to 12 years of age.. is permissible if provided for by national legislation

*From 12 years of age: **compulsory** (emphasis in original)*

And if any member states wants to set a lower limit, eg: 10, 8, 6 or 4 years, or 1 day, old they can do so and from 12 years old the compulsory taking of fingerprints from children.

This process will mean the taking of a unique biometric from children at an “enrolment centre”.

The EU Presidency clinically comments:

Scientific tests have confirmed that the papillary ridges on the fingers are not sufficiently developed to allow biometric capture and analysis until the age of six. Even then, account must be taken of the fact that major changes take place as children grow and this will entail considerable expense in the form of computer programs. When checks are carried out, the software must make allowance for age-related changes, or else no match will be possible.

and the Netherlands study of fingerprinting says:

Children over the age of six do have measurable fingerprints, but these are subject to particularly marked changes as the child grows, with the result that special algorithms must be used in order to calculate the changes and arrive at a result which is as accurate as for an adult

Prior to the EU Council Presidency Note (26 June) the issue was discussed at the meeting of the Visa Working Party (<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/jul/10540-06.pdf>) EU doc no: 10540/06). The UK delegation said that:

storage of the facial image (at any age) in a chip represents a security feature even if it can not be used for facial recognition

The German delegation said that the minimum age for the collection of “biometric data from German nationals for passports was 14 years according to national legislation”. It also favoured a “differentiated approach”:

and wished to stick to 6 years for collecting biometric data from visa applicants

[Note: EU nationals will have to give two finger-prints while visa applicants will have all ten taken]

The Netherlands said fingerprints “would not be collected before the age of 6” and Sweden “could agree with a minimum age of 6 years for passports”. While the UK chipped in with the fact that it had collected fingerprints from the “age of 5” with no “significant problems” (see Endnote 2)

Tony Bunyan, Statewatch editor, comments:

All the discussions by EU governments in the Council about the age at which children should be subject to compulsory fingerprinting are based on the technological possibilities — not on the moral and political questions of whether it is right or desirable.

There will be special cases for the taking of fingerprints where a child is “at risk” in order to ensure their safety. But this does not in any way justify submitting all young children to this intrusive process.

The decisions are being made in secret meetings based on secret documents — people and parliaments are to have no say in the decision.

Under this proposal EU states will be free to fingerprint children from day one of their life as soon as it is technologically possible.

ENDNOTES

¹ This Article 6 Committee was set up to decide on the “technical specifications” for visas. It then asked to look at documents for third country nationals in the EU, and then asked to look at EU passports, and then asked to look at EU ID cards.

² Asylum toddlers get fingerprinted. “Tests” carried out on the children of asylum-seekers under five years of age at detention centres in Croydon and Liverpool. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4773005.stm

DOCUMENTS

1. EU doc no: 9403/1/06

2. EU doc no: 10541/06

Source: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/jul/08fingerprinting-children.htm>

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STATEWATCH NEWS ONLINE, AUG. 2006

EU: Fingerprinting of Children — the Debate Goes On

*Spain taking fingerprints and facial images from children at birth
Czech Republic taking fingerprints from 5 and facial images from birth
Latvia and France in favour of fingerprints from 6 and facial images
from birth*

The debate on the age for fingerprinting children goes on within the confines of secret Council (25 EU governments) meetings. Our previous report (reproduced above) covered the meeting of the Visa Working Party. The issue was then considered by the Mixed Committee — Working Party Frontiers/False Documents (Mixed Committees are the 25 EU member states plus Norway, Iceland, Switzerland) (<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/aug/11014-06.pdf> EU doc no: 11014/06).

Portugal, Hungary and UK were in favour of the Council Presidency proposal for “facial images”:

*0 to 12 years of age.. storage in the chip [to be] on the basis of national legislation [and] from 12 years of age: **compulsory**.
(emphasis in original)*

and the taking of finger-prints:

Scanning of fingerprints up to 12 years of age.. is permissible if provided for by national legislation

*From 12 years of age: **compulsory** (emphasis in original)*

Germany was in favour of a minimum age of 14. However, Sweden is in favour of:

a lower minimum age for taking fingerprints, than proposed in the Presidency paper, and a minimum age which should be as low as possible, for capturing facial images

Latvia and France are in favour of:

taking fingerprints from the age of 6 and capturing facial images from birth

The Czech Republic said:

it was taking fingerprints from the age of 5 and capturing facial image from birth on

And Spain said:

it was taking both biometric identifiers [fingerprints and facial image] from birth on

In the Minutes the chair concludes “there was no agreement on the issue”.

1. EU doc no: 11014/06
2. EU doc no: 9403/1/06
3. EU doc no: 10540/06

Source: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2006/aug/02eu-finger-printing-children.htm>



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Speaker of the House

BY DAVE JAMIESON

When these cameras don't like what they see, they let you know about it.

Alicia Robinson likes to keep an eye on her kids. When the youngsters romp in the grassy courtyard of the Faircliff Plaza West apartments in Columbia Heights, she prefers that they stay close enough to Robinson's ground-level unit to chat through the window.

On a recent afternoon, somebody else was keeping an eye on them, too. As Robinson's 7-year-old son, Justin, was hanging outside near the window and talking with his mother, an unidentified voice boomed over Faircliff's new intercom system.

"Hey, you in the red shirt at 1432 — step away from the window. This is private property. You're under surveillance," a woman's voice said, according to Robinson.

Justin, clad in red, obeyed the order and stepped back onto the sidewalk. Robinson had heard similar commands broadcast at Faircliff in previous weeks, but she didn't think the voice had been addressing Justin. Then her 11-year-old niece and 8-year-old nephew stepped outside.

"Then it was, 'You in the yellow shirt, you in the white shirt — step away from the window. This is private property,'" recalls Robinson. "It was unbelievable."

The tenants of Faircliff, a 112-unit low-income housing complex, are now enjoying the fruits of a recently completed \$16 million city-financed rehabilitation project. Along with the fresh carpeting, modish playground equipment, and new community center came a state-of-the-art security system, aimed at helping Faircliff shed its reputation as an open-air drug market and better meld with the \$400,000 condos sprouting up elsewhere on Clifton Street NW. The system includes not only cameras on all of the residential buildings but also what surveillance-industry types refer to as "one-way voice" intercoms, meaning tenants can be addressed by their watchers but cannot respond to them.

In recent months, residents and guests alike who have violated the stringent apartment rules have been singled out over the inter-

coms and given orders such as “get off the steps,” “no chairs allowed in the playground area,” or, perhaps most common, “no loitering.”

Wanda Griffin, who has seen children ordered to not eat ice cream on their steps, says the hardest residents respond to their unseen watchers with a flurry of f-bombs, which the intended targets can't hear, and a pair of middle fingers pointed in arbitrary directions. The intercom directives have also kicked off a

semantic debate at the complex: Is it possible to loiter in front of your own home, where you pay rent?

“They come on for nothing. They be describing your clothes and telling you not to be loitering.”

“I like the security,

and I like the upgrades,” Griffin says, “but it's like you're in a concentration camp.”

The surveillance has altered the way residents live and play at Faircliff, a 27-year-old housing project. On a recent Thursday afternoon, a group of about six young men have tucked themselves away in one of the complex's few outdoor alcoves, drinking sodas and chewing sunflower seeds just beyond the bulbous black eye of the camera. They say they're too old to hang out on the playground, and they would violate the rules of their lease if they were to sit on the apartment steps.

“We live up in this motherf*!#!, and we can't even chill,” says an exasperated 17-year-old named John Joseph (previously called out as “guy in front of 1428” and “guy with the white shirt and blue jeans on”). “That's what this motherf*!#! is — a jail.”

“Exactly. This place is Oak Hill,” says 18-year-old Rich Porter, referring to the District's juvenile detention center.

The folks at Edgewood Management Corp. in Silver Spring, the company that manages Faircliff, hope that in time disgruntled residents like Joseph and Porter will grow more comfortable with the surveillance. George Caruso, executive vice president at Edgewood, says the company installed its first one-way voice system into an apartment complex about three years ago. “They're effective, but that's about as much as we can say publicly,” says Caruso, who acknowledges that some residents might find the surveillance intrusive. “I think there's a net positive. We are extraordinarily cautious we're not looking into people's windows and that we're focused on the public areas.”

Another Edgewood employee estimates that 10 or 15 percent of the roughly 130 properties they manage include the camera-and-intercom systems — most of them in the District, Prince George's County, and Baltimore — and only in cases where management feels they're necessary. Despite high initial costs, over time the technology proves cheaper than stationing a corps of security guards on the ground. Two other Edgewood properties that now use the systems are Edgewood Terrace and Brookland Manor in Northeast, both of which accept federal housing vouchers.

"As the cost comes down, we're using them at more and more places," says Caruso. "Monitoring cameras, particularly in public places, are becoming a fact of life."

No one at Faircliff knows for sure when they're being watched or even where they're being watched from. While some believe the monitors are on-site, the more likely scenario is that residents of different Edgewood properties are observed from the company's Maryland offices. The company prefers to keep such things a mystery; Caruso would not disclose publicly when or where his employees are watching.

"This is an awful arrangement," says Lillie Coney, associate director of the D.C.-based Electronic Privacy Information Center. "It will be almost impossible for there not to be charges of misuse of authority. You create that kind of power dynamic when [the speaker] is unidentified. You can hide behind the curtain and act out your aggression, whatever's hidden in the darker part of whoever's been given this power."

Coney's concerns are hardly hysterical. At Brookland Manor, along Saratoga Avenue NE, where a one-way voice system has been in place for at least two years, residents say they don't mind the presence of the intercom so much as the rudeness of its operators. A favorite loudspeaker tale among residents of the "Toga, as the complex is known, involves a recalcitrant, plump teenage girl who ignored several commands to stop loitering and get home. According to resident Deatra Brown and three other witnesses, a woman's exasperated voice finally blurted over the speakers, "Get your fat ass off the corner!"

Residents of Faircliff and Brookland Manor say the intercom put-downs aren't always verbal; sometimes they're musical. When a group of milling residents disregards an order to beat it, they are liable to hear reggae band Inner Circle's 1987 track

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“Bad Boys,” better known as the theme song to the TV show COPS. “When we don’t move, they play the police song and say the cops are coming,” explains Brookland resident Chris Brown, 14. “But the cops never come. Nobody moves, and then the people on the intercom just start cursing.”

Griffin, the Faircliff tenant, recently heard residents getting the “Bad Boys” treatment as she escorted some guests to their car after a get-together at her apartment. “That just pissed me off,” says Griffin. “That just tells me what you think of this property. My guests were like, ‘My God. Y’all are living like that up here?’ It wasn’t called for.”

That’s just one of the everyday activities that have led to public scoldings. Teenagers at Faircliff have started hanging out on the sidewalks and in the street, beyond the purview of the cameras, because they say there are few permissible places left to hang out. The stoops, for instance, are off-limits. Residents who drag lawn chairs outside, including the elderly, are told they’re violating their lease. And the new-and-improved complex came with merely two outdoor benches to accommodate more than 100 units. And while elementary-school-age children are free to roam the playground, they can’t stray far from the wood chips.

Seven-year-old Melvin Roberson (“boy with the red shirt”) says he and his friends rouse “the lady” when they play football and dodgeball and get too close to the apartment buildings. “They come on for nothing. They be describing your clothes and telling you not to be loitering,” says Roberson, who admits that he doesn’t know what the word “loitering” means. A few weeks ago, when the pint-size Roberson was trying to gain entry to a friend’s apartment, he was called out for hoisting himself onto a brick ledge to reach the call box; he says he’s too short to reach it otherwise.

Yvette Stephens (“You, in front of 1428”) was called out for sitting on her stoop as her laundry dried. Edna Avery (“Person standing in the doorway of 1430”) was called out for holding the door to her building open to allow two movers to bring a couch up to her unit. “I just block the speakers out,” says Avery, an 11-year resident of Faircliff. In the past two months, Stephens has heard the loudspeaker voices threaten to take photos of disobedient residents and hand them 30-day eviction notices. “And it’s so loud that everybody in the complex knows who they’re talking to,” says Avery.

And people beyond the complex, too; neighbors can hear the speakers a block away. “When you hear them going off on a Saturday or Sunday, they’re going off all the time,” says Mike Rosinbum, who lives in a nearby row house on Clifton Street. “It’s not crystal clear; it’s more like a loud blaring of words. For a period of time, it came out all static, so the whole neighborhood was hit with this awful chrrrrr sound.”

Rosinbum’s neighbor, Charlene Collins, says her co-op’s board has resolved to draft a letter to the complex’s management company denouncing the speakers, which wake her and other residents up at night. More troubling, says Collins, is the demoralizing spectacle she witnesses from her porch. “You see these prison movies, where they give people orders out in the yard — ‘Get off the steps,’ ‘Pick up that piece of paper’ — and it’s exactly like that,” she says. “There’s never a ‘please’; it’s always a demand. How are these children being affected by this?”

Faircliff residents themselves, apparently not yet as organized as their neighbors, are considering starting a petition against the speakers. In the meantime, longtime tenants like Avery find themselves doing what they never thought possible: pining for the old days.

“We know what we want and what we don’t want,” she says. “We want to live in peace, but we don’t want to live like this.”

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