



Takeaways as Florida A&M's offense stalls in loss to South Carolina State

SPORTS, 1B

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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To reveal the officers' surveillance, USA TODAY analyzed more than 75 million searches of Flock license plate reader data spanning three-and-a-half years and more than 6,300 agencies – a fraction of the total number of searches by Flock users during that period. BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS FILE

Flock blocks audit data that led to misuse probes

Plate reader camera investigation sparks police firings, arrests

Kenny Jacoby, Austin Fast and Jack Lemnus USA TODAY NETWORK

At least 19 police and sheriff's office employees in five states were arrested, fired, put on administrative leave or placed under investigation over the past two months for using Flock Safety's vast network of license plate reader cameras to track cars' locations for potentially improper or illegal purposes. • But it was USA TODAY reporters, not their police supervisors, who spotted their irregular search activity.

In Dallas, Georgia, state investigators arrested a 911 director who searched more than 2,500 times for cars belonging to her estranged husband and his new girlfriend.

In Sarasota, Florida, an officer who tracked an ex-girlfriend's car at least 335 times over two months was fired and arrested.

The Lufkin Police Department in Texas suspended all Flock use after Rangers arrested an officer who had repeatedly tracked seven license plates, one more than 3,400 times. He is charged with at least 100 felonies.

In each of those cases and more than a dozen others, USA TODAY flagged their patterns of questionable searches before their own agencies did. Only after reporters contacted their employers did the agencies spring into action.

Their cases illustrate a dynamic that is playing out in communities across the

country. As Flock and other brands of automated license plate readers become ubiquitous in nearly every state, many law enforcement agencies have done little to monitor how their own employees use them.

Some of that work instead has fallen on journalists, activists and others concerned that anyone with access to the company's private camera networks can follow virtually any driver's movements with a query as effortless as a Google search.

Yet in direct response to increasing public scrutiny over abuse of its technology, Flock in December changed its systems to make officers' misuse exponentially more difficult for the public to unearth.

To reveal the officers' surveillance, USA TODAY analyzed more than 75 million searches of Flock license plate reader data spanning three-and-a-half years

and more than 6,300 agencies – a fraction of the total number of searches by Flock users during that period.

The analysis identified hundreds of examples of law enforcement personnel searching single license plates hundreds or even thousands of times over prolonged periods, while justifying many of their searches with vague or nonsensical reasons, such as "SUS," "TRAFFIC," "INQUIRY," "INVESTIGATION," "TEST," or a single letter of the alphabet, like "A," "B" or "Z." Where reporters could determine the targeted cars' owners, they found several registered to the searching officers' ex-partners, co-workers, family members and other people they knew personally.

Altogether, USA TODAY's analysis surfaced 240 Flock users whose frequent and persistent searches stood

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Billy Taylor and Leandra Higgenbottom were searched on Flock by Taylor's estranged wife, Heidi Ann Taylor, a former 911 director for the Dallas, Georgia, Police Department. Heidi Taylor was arrested on two counts of misusing a license plate reader.

CHRISTOPHER KIMLING/
SPECIAL TO USA TODAY



"It's an invasion of privacy. Who gave y'all permission to look for me while I was going down the road?"

Billy Taylor

Three teens arrested after mall shooting

Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK

Three people, including a 15-year-old accused of opening fire in the parking garage at Governor's Square Mall, have been arrested following a Tallahassee Police Department investigation into a shooting that sparked widespread panic and a brief lockdown Saturday afternoon.

The shooting happened shortly before 3 p.m. in the mall's parking garage and prompted a large police response to one of the city's busiest shopping destinations. Authorities said no one was injured.

According to TPD, investigators determined a 15-year-old fired at a vehicle occupied by people who had been involved in an earlier altercation with him inside the mall. During the gunfire, a second vehicle occupied by an uninvolved family was also struck by bullets.

Despite the damage to both vehicles, no one inside either car was injured.

As detectives continued investigating, TPD's Violent Crime Response Team located the teen and several other individuals at a residence within Tallahassee city limits. All were taken into custody without incident, TPD said on Sunday.

During the investigation, officers recovered multiple firearms, including some reported stolen, as well as illegal drugs, police said.

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Registered sex offender faces charges

William L. Hatfield
Tallahassee Democrat
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

A Tallahassee man on the state's sexual predator registry was arrested Sunday night after police say he sexually battered an adult victim near the intersection of West Tennessee Street and Macomb Street.

According to a Tallahassee Police Department watch commander, officers responded around 7:30 p.m. on Sept. 6 to reports of a person sexually assaulting a victim in the area. After arriving, officers located the suspect and conducted an investigation that led to the development of probable cause for an arrest.

Police arrested 59-year-old Paul Pestel, of Tallahassee, who was taken into custody and booked into the Leon County Detention Facility.

Pestel faces charges of sexual battery on a victim age 18 or older, battery on a person 65 years of age or older, resisting an officer without violence, indecent exposure and intimidation or threats to a law enforcement officer.

The victim and suspect were not well known to each other, the watch commander told the Tallahassee Democrat.

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