# Police Departments in Austin and San Francisco Find Ways to Use Facial Recognition Despite Bans



Several police departments, including those in Austin, Texas, and San Francisco, have found ways to utilize facial recognition technology despite local bans. Officers in these cities have requested assistance from neighboring police departments with access to the technology to conduct facial recognition searches.

San Francisco, which banned the use of facial recognition in 2019, saw its police department request external agencies to run searches at least five times with no results. These actions violated the city’s ordinance. The San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) reported these incidents but faced no stated consequences or disciplinary actions.

Austin prohibited facial recognition in 2020, but police documents show the department continued to receive search results from nearby departments, such as Leander. In several cases, Austin police directly requested these searches, leading to identifications in some instances. One notable case involved John Curry Jr., identified for an alleged aggravated assault.

These practices question the enforceability of such bans. Facial recognition results often serve as investigative leads rather than formal evidence, avoiding disclosure in legal proceedings. Cases include wrongful arrests, primarily affecting Black individuals, and the technology’s noted inaccuracy, particularly concerning people of color, per a 2019 federal study.

Authorities often mask their use of this technology, complicating enforcement of the bans. Experts argue for more stringent oversight to address these loopholes.