

Tech

Privacy watchdogs worried

Are 'robotic' police dogs friend or foe?

HONOLULU, Aug 2, (AP) — If you're homeless and looking for temporary shelter in Hawaii's capital, expect a visit from a robotic police dog that will scan your eye to make sure you don't have a fever.

That's just one of the ways public safety agencies are starting to use Spot, the best-known of a new commercial category of robots that trot around with animal-like agility.

The handful of police officials experimenting with the four-legged machines say they're just another tool, like existing drones and simple wheeled robots, to keep emergency responders out of harm's way as they scout for dangers. But privacy watchdogs — the human kind — warn that police are secretly rushing to buy the robots without setting safeguards against aggressive, invasive or dehumanizing uses.

In Honolulu, the police department spent about \$150,000 in federal pandemic relief money to buy their Spot from robotics firm Boston Dynamics for use at a government-run tent city near the airport.

"Because these people are homeless it's considered OK to do that," said **Jongwook Kim**, legal director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii. "At some point it will come out again for some different use after the pandemic is over."

Acting Lt. Joseph O'Neal of the Honolulu Police Department's community outreach unit defended the robot's use in a media demonstration earlier this year. He said it has protected officers, shelter staff and residents by scanning body temperatures between meal times at a shelter where homeless people could quarantine and get tested for COVID-19. The robot is also used to remotely interview individuals who have tested positive.

"We have not had a single person out there that said, 'That's scary, that's worrisome,'" O'Neal said. "We don't just walk around and arbitrarily scan people."

Police use of such robots is still rare and largely untested — and hasn't always gone over well with the public. Honolulu officials faced a backlash when a local news organization, Honolulu Civil Beat, revealed that the Spot purchase was made with federal relief money.

Outcry

Late last year, the New York Police Department starting using Spot after painting it blue and renaming it "Digidog." It went mostly unnoticed until New Yorkers starting spotting it in the wild and posting videos to social media. Spot quickly became a sensation, drawing a public outcry that led the police department to abruptly return Digidog to its maker.

"This is some Robocop stuff, this is crazy," was the reaction in April from Democratic US Rep. Jamaal Bowman. He was one of several New York politicians to speak out after a widely shared video showed the robot strutting with police officers responding to a domestic-violence report at a high-rise public housing building in Manhattan.

Days later, after further scrutiny from elected city officials, the department said it was terminating its lease and returning the robot. The expensive machine arrived with little public notice or explanation, public officials said, and was deployed to already over-policed public housing. Use of the high-tech canine also clashed with Black Lives Matter calls to defund police operations and reinvest in other priorities.

The company that makes the robots, Boston Dynamics, says it's learned from the New York fiasco and is trying to do a better job of explaining to the public — and its customers — what Spot can and cannot do. That's become increasingly important as Boston Dynamics becomes part of South Korean carmaker Hyundai Motor Company, which in June closed an \$880 million deal for a controlling stake in the robotics firm.

"One of the big challenges is accurately describing the state of the technology to people who have never had personal experience with it," Michael Perry, vice president of business development at Boston Dynamics, said in an interview. "Most people are applying notions from science fiction to what the robot's doing."

For one of its customers, the Dutch national police, explaining the technology includes emphasizing that Spot is a very good robot — well-behaved and not so smart after all. "It doesn't think for itself," Marjolijn Smit, director of the special operations unit of the Dutch national police, said of the remote-controlled robot. "If you tell it to go to the left, it will go to the left. If you tell it to stop, it will stop."

Earlier this year, her police division sent its Spot into the site of a deadly drug lab explosion near the Belgian border to check for dangerous chemicals and other hazards.

Weaponization

Perry said the company's acceptable use guidelines prohibit Spot's weaponization or anything that would violate privacy or civil rights laws, which he said puts the Honolulu police in the clear. It's all part of a year-long effort by Boston Dynamics, which for decades relied on military research grants, to make its robots seem friendlier and thus more palatable to local governments and consumer-oriented businesses.

By contrast, a lesser-known rival, Philadelphia-based Ghost Robotics, has no qualms about weaponization and supplies its dog-like robots to several branches of the US military and its allies.

"It's just plug and play, anything you want," said Ghost Robotics CEO Jiren Parikh, who was critical of Boston Dynamics' stated ethical principles as "selective morality" because of the company's past involvement with the military.

Parikh added that his company doesn't market its four-legged robots to police departments, though he said it would make sense for police to use them. "It's basically a camera on a mobile device," he said.

There are roughly 500 Spot robots now in the wild. Perry said they're commonly used by utility companies to inspect high-voltage zones and other hazardous areas. Spot is also used to monitor construction sites, mines and factories, equipped with whatever sensor is needed for the job.

It's still mostly controlled by humans, though all they have to do is tell it which direction to go and it can intuitively climb stairs or cross over rough terrain. It can also operate autonomously, but only if it's already memorized an assigned route and there aren't too many surprise obstacles.

"The first value that most people see in the robot is taking a person out of a hazardous situation," Perry said.

Kim, of the ACLU in Hawaii, acknowledged that there might be many legitimate uses for such machines, but said opening the door for police robots that interact with people is probably not a good idea. He pointed to how Dallas police in 2016 stuck explosives on a wheeled robot to kill a sniper, fueling an ongoing debate about "killer robots" in policing and warfighting.

"There's the potential for these robots to increase the militarization of police departments and use it in ways that are unacceptable," Kim said. "Maybe it's not something we even want to let law enforcement have."



Kim



Honolulu Police Acting Lt. Joseph O'Neal demonstrates a robotic dog in Honolulu, May 14, 2021. Police officials experimenting with the four-legged machines say they're just another tool, like drones or simpler wheeled robots, to keep emergency responders out of harm's way. (AP)

Coronavirus

Florida breaks record for COVID-19 hospitalizations

More 'pain and suffering' ahead: Fauci

NEW YORK, Aug 2, (AP) — Dr. Anthony Fauci warned Sunday that more "pain and suffering" is on the horizon as COVID-19 cases climb again and officials plead with unvaccinated Americans to get their shots.

Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, also said he doesn't foresee additional lockdowns in the US because he believes enough people are vaccinated to avoid a recurrence of last winter. However, he said not enough are inoculated to "crush the outbreak" at this point.

Fauci's warning comes days after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed course to recommend that even vaccinated people return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the US where the delta variant is fueling infection surges. With the switch, federal health officials have cited studies showing vaccinated people can spread the virus to others.

Most new infections in the US continue to be among unvaccinated people. So-called breakthrough infections can occur in vaccinated people, and though the vast majority of those cause mild or no symptoms, the research shows they can carry about the same amount of the coronavirus as those who did not get the shots.

"So we're looking, not, I believe, to lockdown, but we're looking to some pain and suffering in the future because we're seeing the cases go up, which is the reason why we keep saying over and over again, the solution to this is get vaccinated and this would not be happening," Fauci said on ABC's "This Week."

According to data through July 30 from Johns Hopkins University, the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the US rose from 30,887 on July 16 to 77,827 on July 30. The seven-day rolling average for the country's daily new deaths rose over the same period from 253 on July 16 to 358 on July 30, though death reports generally lag weeks after infections and even longer after hospitalizations.

Currently, 58% of Americans 12 years and older are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC's data tracker.

However, people are "getting the message" and more are rolling up their sleeves amid the threat of the delta variant, according to the director of the

National Institutes of Health. Dr. Francis Collins said on CNN's "State of the Union" that vaccinations are up 56% in the US in the last two weeks.

Louisiana, which has the most new cases per capita among states in the past 14 days, has seen vaccinations up threefold over that period, Collins said.

"That's what desperately needs to happen if we are going to get this delta variant put back in its place, because right now it's having a pretty big party in the middle of the country," Collins said.

Collins also said that even with the prevalence of the delta variant, the shots are working "extremely well" and reduce a person's risk of serious illness and hospitalization "25-fold." The guidance for vaccinated people to start wearing masks indoors again in certain places with worsening outbreaks, he said, is mostly meant to protect unvaccinated and immunocompromised people.

The CDC has also recommended indoor mask-wearing for all teachers, staff, students and visitors at schools nationwide, regardless of vaccination status.

Vaccinations

Meanwhile, a day after it recorded the most new daily cases since the start of the pandemic, Florida on Sunday broke a previous record for current hospitalizations, as the number of patients in hospitals because of COVID-19 once again broke through the 1,000-patient threshold.

The Sunshine State had 10,207 people hospitalized with confirmed COVID-19 cases, according to data reported to the US Department of Health & Human Services.

The previous record was from more than a year ago, July 23, 2020, more than a half-year before vaccinations started becoming widespread, when Florida had 10,170 hospitalizations, according to the Florida Hospital Association.

Florida is now leading the nation in per capita hospitalizations for COVID-19, as hospitals around the state report having to put emergency room visitors in beds in hallways and others document a noticeable drop in the age of patients.

In the past week, Florida has aver-

aged 1,525 adult hospitalizations a day, and 35 daily pediatric hospitalizations. Both are the highest per capita rate in the nation, according to Jason Salemi, an associate professor of epidemiology at the University of South Florida.

The hospitalizations and increasing cases have come as the new, more transmissible delta variant has spread throughout Florida, and residents have returned to pre-pandemic activities.

"The recent rise is both striking and not-at-all surprising," Salemi said in an email late Saturday.

Federal health data released Saturday showed that Florida reported 21,683 new cases of COVID-19, the state's highest one-day total since the start of the pandemic. The latest numbers were recorded on Friday and released on Saturday on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website. The figures show how quickly the number of cases is rising in the Sunshine State: only a day earlier, Florida reported 17,093 new daily cases.

Republican Florida Gov Ron DeSantis has resisted mandatory mask mandates and vaccine requirements, and along with the state Legislature, has limited local officials' ability to impose restrictions meant to stop the spread of COVID-19. DeSantis on Friday barred school districts from requiring students to wear masks when classes resume next month.

Throughout Florida, from Jacksonville to Miami to Tampa, hospitals have become overwhelmed.

Barry Burton, the Pinellas County administrator, told the Tampa Bay Times that some local hospitals are already having to divert ambulances to different locations because of capacity concerns.

There has been a startling rise in the number of children with the virus at hospitals in Miami, many of them requiring intensive care.

Memorial Health's Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood had seven patients with COVID-19. At Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami, there were 17 patients with COVID-19 on Friday, including six in the ICU and one who needed a ventilator, Dr. Marcos Mestre, vice president and chief medical officer, told the Miami Herald.

China for decades gifted friendly nations with its unofficial national mascot in what was known as "panda diplomacy." More recently the country has loaned pandas to zoos on commercial terms. China's president is **Xi Jinping**. (AP)

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Electricity demand rebounds: Electricity demand in the European Union has returned to pre-pandemic levels without a corresponding rise in emissions, according to a report published by the energy think tank Ember.

An analysis of data from grid operators showed that electricity demand in the EU during the first half of 2021 almost matched the demand in the same six-month period two years earlier, the report said.

However, renewable sources accounted for significantly more electricity generated in the first six months of this year compared with the first half of 2019, while power from fossil fuels declined since before the pandemic, the think tank found.

This resulted in the EU power sector producing 12% fewer greenhouse gas emissions over the two-year period, Ember said.

The relative decline in fossil fuel use partly resulted from rising costs, particularly for gas, during the first half of 2021, and higher carbon prices. The day price per ton of CO2 has increased from about 33 euros (\$39) to more than 50 euros (\$59) on the EU Emissions Trading System in the past six months. (AP)



A student receives a shot of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine by Tokyo Fire Department staff at the Tokyo Vaccination Center at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, Aug 2. (AP)



Xi



Delord

Discovery

Tree-cutting resumes: Tree-cutting is resuming on a \$1 billion electric transmission project in western Maine after a two-month hiatus over a federally protected bat.

The New England Clean Energy Connect was able to resume construction beginning as early as Sunday on a key part of a 145-mile (233-kilometer) power line that would serve as a conduit for up to 1,200 megawatts of Canadian hydropower to reach the New England power grid.

Tree-cutting was put on hold in June and July to protect the newly born young of a federally protected bat. Northern long-eared bats are tiny — the size of a small mouse — and they live in trees instead of caves. Like most hibernating bats, their numbers have been decimated by so-called white nose syndrome, a deadly fungal disease that has killed millions of bats since it first appeared in New York in 2006.

Northern long-eared bats are listed as threatened by the federal government and endangered by the state government.

While tree-cutting will be suspended in June and July, other construction including the setting of poles continued.

The project will be fully funded by Massachusetts ratepayers to meet that state's clean energy goals. Much of it follows existing utility corridors but the new section cutting through 53 miles (85 kilometers) of woods is the subject of a referendum in November. (AP)

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Panda gives birth to twins: A giant panda on loan to France from China gave birth to two female twin cubs early Monday, a French zoo announced, declaring "they are very lively, pink and plump."

The Beauval Zoo, south of Paris, said the twins were born shortly after 1 a.m. They weigh 149 and 129 grams (5.3 and 4.6 ounces).

Their mother Huan Huan and father Yuan Zi are at Beauval on a 10-year loan from China aimed at highlighting good ties with France. The twins are their second and third cubs after the first panda ever born in France, Yuan Meng, in 2017.

"Huan Huan is taking care of them very well. She took them in her mouth to lick them and clean them. We can hear little cries," the zoo said in a statement.

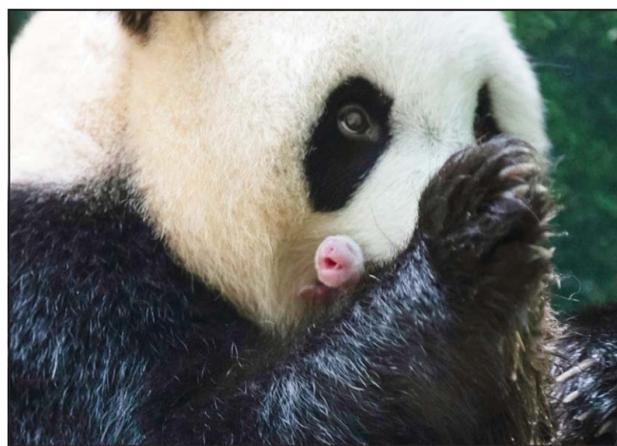
The zoo said the sex of the cubs were determined by the Chinese experts in charge of taking care of them but will need to be definitively confirmed since

external genitalia does not appear until they are several months old.

"We just lived a moment of rare intensity. These births are always very exceptional but they also bring some surprises,"

said **Delphine Delord**, director of the Beauval Zoo.

The cubs will not be named before 100 days. They will spend a few years in France before being sent to China, the zoo said.



This handout photo released by the Beauval Zoo shows panda Huan Huan holding her new born female cub in Saint-Aignan, central France, Aug 2. A giant panda on loan to France from China gave birth to two female twin cubs early Monday, a French zoo announced. The Beauval Zoo, south of Paris, said the twins were born shortly after 1 a.m. They weigh 149 and 129 grams (5.3 and 4.6 ounces). (AP)