# Facial recognition hits UK high street and festivals as AI policing debate grows



Live facial recognition (LFR) is becoming an everyday presence in UK public life. From high-street shops to large-scale events, AI-assisted vigilance is expanding fast—generating more than 10,000 suspect alerts a week in retail alone, according to new data from Facewatch.

The firm, which provides biometric alerts to subscribing stores, logged over 43,000 alerts in July 2025—more than double the figure for the same month last year. The sharp rise comes as shoplifting and abuse continue to rise, with many retailers turning to rapid, non-confrontational tools to protect staff and deter crime.

“July’s record numbers are a further stark warning that retailers and their employees are facing unprecedented levels of criminal activity,” said Facewatch chief executive Nick Fisher. Alerts, he added, allow staff to act swiftly and calmly. The technology has been welcomed by some frontline workers; one charity shop experimenting with LFR described a renewed sense of safety after a spate of verbal abuse and theft.

The system works by notifying staff when someone on a watchlist enters the store, allowing non-intrusive monitoring and decision-making. But the broader rollout of facial recognition has not gone unchallenged.

At Notting Hill Carnival this August Bank Holiday, the Metropolitan Police will deploy LFR cameras outside the event boundaries to identify people on police watchlists, locate missing persons and enforce public protection orders. The operation will be backed by around 7,000 officers each day, with LFR matches reviewed by police before any action is taken. Non-matches are deleted immediately.

The Met says the goal is a safer environment with minimal disruption, but civil liberties groups warn the move risks normalising “mass surveillance.” Big Brother Watch has called the Carnival deployment invasive and discriminatory, urging the government to scrap the technology or, at minimum, legislate clear oversight.

The episode reflects a broader debate about the role of AI in policing and public safety. The Met argues the technology has matured since early trials, with greater accuracy and safeguards, and cites hundreds of arrests across 2025. But critics remain concerned about bias, transparency and the speed at which biometric surveillance is spreading.

An FOI disclosure confirms LFR was not used at Notting Hill in 2023—making this year’s deployment a notable shift. The force says data handling now meets stringent standards, but campaigners insist the policy framework remains incomplete.

The picture in retail is no less complex. Facewatch's July figures show rising adoption, but also raise questions about public consent and oversight. Privacy advocates argue that biometric tools, while useful in deterring theft, should be governed by clear limits and open reporting of performance and error rates.

Meanwhile, the underlying infrastructure powering this expansion is increasingly centralised. Cloud providers such as Amazon, Microsoft and Google supply the majority of European AI compute, prompting new discussions in Brussels about digital sovereignty and dependency.

For the UK, the moment is pivotal. Biometric systems are delivering safety gains—but the country’s ability to lead in responsible AI will depend on embedding public trust. That means independent oversight, transparent safeguards, and ongoing dialogue between law enforcement, industry and civil society.

The direction is clear: facial recognition is here. Whether it can serve both security and rights will depend on how the UK navigates the fast-evolving balance between innovation and accountability.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15014187/Facial-recognition-cameras-shops-flagging-astonishing-10-000-suspects-week-latest-stark-reminder-crimewave-facing-UKs-retailers.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/science-and-technology/2025/08/19/facial-recognition-alerts-to-prevent-crime-in-uk-shops-hit-a-record-10000-every-week/> - Retail crime prevention firm Facewatch has reported a record month of suspect alerts from its live facial recognition systems in UK shops. In July 2025 the company logged 43,602 alerts to subscriber stores, equating to more than 10,000 suspects flagged each week for the first time. Facewatch notes a 134.8% rise on July 2024 (18,564) and tallies 407,771 alerts in the year to 31 July 2025. An alert occurs when a suspect of interest on a watchlist is recognised at a shop door. Staff receive alerts on devices and can take non-confrontational action. Privacy advocates warn of rising surveillance pressure.
3. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2025-07-18/facial-recognition-cameras-to-be-used-at-notting-hill-carnival-met-says> - Notting Hill Carnival will be policed with crime-cutting measures, including live facial recognition cameras, according to the Met. The cameras will be positioned on the approach to and from the west-London event, outside its boundaries, to spot suspects before crowds form. Deputy Assistant Commissioner Matt Ward noted a tiny minority intend serious harm, and the operation will run over the August Bank Holiday weekend with around 7,000 officers and staff deployed daily. LFR will search for individuals wanted on the Police National Computer, and for missing persons, and those under sexual-harm orders, with biometrics deleted if not a match there.
4. <https://news.met.police.uk/news/met-appeals-for-publics-help-to-keep-carnival-safe-in-2025-499483> - Metropolitan Police launched a public appeal to help keep Notting Hill Carnival safe in 2025, outlining measures including live facial recognition on approaches to the event outside its boundaries. The force, working with Crimestoppers, aims to deter violence, knife crime and offences against women and girls. Around 7,000 officers and staff will be deployed each day over the August Bank Holiday weekend. The Met says it is sharing pre-emptive intelligence with forces, pursuing banning orders against dangerous individuals, and conducting intelligence-led arrests and searches for weapons or drugs. LFR alerts are reviewed by officers before any further action is taken.
5. <https://bigbrotherwatch.org.uk/press-releases/big-brother-watchs-response-to-facial-recognition-at-notting-hill-carnival/> - Big Brother Watch published a press release reacting to plans to use facial recognition at Notting Hill Carnival. The organisation describes the move as invasive and discriminatory, with mass biometric collection risking bias against minority groups. It calls for the technology to be scrapped and for a legislative framework to govern use, oversight to be established, and accountability to be increased. The charity highlights privacy concerns and argues that resources should be redirected toward visible policing instead of surveillance. The statement emphasises that volunteers and carnival-goers deserve protections against unwarranted profiling and public intrusion. This position reflects civil liberties concerns.
6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/notting-hill-carnival-facial-recognition-met-police-b2791665.html> - Notting Hill Carnival is set to rely on facial recognition cameras as part of a wider Met policing package, despite ongoing civil liberty concerns. The Independent reports that live facial recognition will be deployed to scan for people on police watchlists as crowds gather for Europe’s largest street festival. About 7,000 officers and staff will be on duty, with measures including screening arches. So far in 2025 there have been deployments and arrests linked to LFR, while the Met stresses that matches trigger alerts reviewed before any stop or arrest. Campaigners warn of mass surveillance and bias.
7. <https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/metropolitan-police/disclosure-2024/july-2024/policing-notting-hill-carnival/> - FOI disclosure confirms Notting Hill Carnival information: live facial recognition was not used at NHC 2023. The page reveals digital policing roles, such as radio provision and IT support during the weekend, and notes no voice recognition was employed in 2023. It also links to a digital policing strategy and confirms that race and gender impact analysis are not separately created, with the strategy incorporating diversity considerations within projects. The response highlights that facial recognition was not used in 2023 but does not preclude its use in future events. No data has been published on post-2023 deployments for NHC yet.