

Muslim “Community Mapping” in Los Angeles: *Muslim Advocates v. LAPD* and the Fight for Accountability

In October 2007, the LAPD announced plans to implement a “community mapping project” focused on mapping the city’s Muslim population. Following strong opposition from civil rights groups—including Muslim Advocates—who saw the program as a clear example of racial and religious profiling, the LAPD stopped the project. Muslim Advocates filed a request under the California Public Records Act (CPRA) to better understand the full extent of the program, and, after years of noncompliance from the LAPD, sued them to force the release of these records. This fact sheet provides an overview of the case and highlights the problematic records Muslim Advocates obtained as a result.

LAPD Mapping Program Origins

- The LAPD’s community mapping project was first publicly disclosed during the testimony of then-LAPD Deputy Chief Michael P. Downing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.
- In his prepared remarks, Deputy Chief Downing explained that the LAPD had partnered with an academic institution to conduct what he described as an “extensive” community mapping project that would “lay out the geographic locations of the many different Muslim population groups around Los Angeles.”
- Deputy Chief Downing also stated that the project would not end at mapping the areas in which Muslims lived—instead, the LAPD “intend[ed] to take a deeper look at [the Muslim communities’] history, demographics, language, culture, ethnic breakdown, social-economic status, and social interactions.”
- Deputy Chief Downing said that the LAPD would utilize its findings “to identify communities, within the larger Muslim community, which may be susceptible to violent ideologically-based extremism.”

Community Groups Respond

- Several prominent Muslim community organizations and civil rights groups voiced their strong opposition to the project in an open letter to Deputy Chief Downing, highlighting the fact that the LAPD’s project unfairly singled out individuals for increased investigation, surveillance, and information-gathering based solely on their religious affiliation.
- The LAPD subsequently agreed to meet with organizations opposed to the mapping project. In the days leading up to the meeting itself, the LAPD announced that it would abandon the initiative. In explaining this decision, then-LAPD Chief William J. Bratton noted that the Muslim community and civil liberties activists had “made it quite clear” that they felt the project was inappropriate and discriminatory.

The LAPD’s “community mapping program” focused on mapping the city’s Muslim population. Civil rights groups criticized the initiative for unfairly targeted and discriminated against individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs.

The LAPD’s Refusal to Comply with Muslim Advocates’ Records Requests

- **In December 2013, Muslim Advocates submitted a request under the CPRA** to obtain information concerning the LAPD’s community mapping program and any other policies or practices that were targeting Muslim, Arab, and/or South Asian communities. The purpose of this request was to shed light on details of the program – including the process of its development within the LAPD – that had not been publicly disclosed.
- Over the next few years, **the LAPD failed to engage in timely correspondence, refused to conduct adequate records searches, and denied the very existence of responsive records.** For example:
 - In its initial January 2014 response to Muslim Advocates’ request, the LAPD stated that it would not produce responsive records because no such records existed.
 - For nearly two years, the LAPD largely maintained that no records pertaining to the mapping program existed. In October 2015, however, the LAPD finally acknowledged that it had identified 4,500 potentially responsive emails in the post-2010 period alone. Of those, the LAPD produced only five.
 - The LAPD also refused to search any records stored on the Departments’ backup tapes that were created in or around 2007—the critical time period for the development and brief implementation of the Muslim community mapping project. The LAPD initially justified this refusal by claiming that the search would be overly burdensome; it subsequently changed its explanation, claiming instead that the search would be too costly.

MA v. LAPD: Suing to Compel Transparency

- **In July 2016, Muslim Advocates, along with the law firm Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, sued the LAPD in Los Angeles County Superior Court to compel the LAPD to comply with their long-standing records request.** The lawsuit alleged that the LAPD violated the CPRA in several ways, including through its serial delays in responding to Muslim Advocates’ requests and its failure to engage in a “good-faith” effort to search for responsive documents.
- In October 2017, the court found that some of the LAPD’s searches had been “unreasonable” and “inadequate,” and ordered the LAPD to conduct additional searches.
- **Over the next several months, after years of stalling, the LAPD produced more than 300 pages of responsive records.** In addition to undermining the LAPD’s claims that no responsive records existed, these documents offer a window into the program’s origins. Notably, the records indicate that the LAPD continued to view the initiative favorably in the years after it was met with public outcry. Such documents include:
 - An early draft of Deputy Chief Downing’s October 2008 Senate testimony, the existence of which Downing had repeatedly denied.
 - Slides from an undated LAPD presentation entitled “Countering Violent Extremism Outreach Strategies,” which situates the LAPD’s Muslim community mapping program within the highly controversial “countering violence extremism” framework.
 - Notes from one of Deputy Chief Downing’s staff members, Mark Stainbrook, pertaining to mapping programs that were pioneered in the United Kingdom and eventually inspired the LAPD’s own program. These notes recount surveillance tactics that may well infringe upon constitutionally-protected rights like free speech and association, describing, for example, the “detailed mapping of mosques, Islamic centers, and other locations where terror cells might form including bookstores, associations, cafes, restaurants, and social groups.”
 - **The LAPD also produced records of citizen correspondence that underscore the ways in which the community mapping program fostered prejudiced views of the Muslim community, such as:**
 - A letter, received by the LAPD in November 2007, which referenced a news article about the mapping program and assured LAPD Chief Bratton that the writer “endorse[d] what you are reported to be doing,” saying that Muslims “hate us!” and that it was ““war time.””
 - A letter, received by the LAPD in January 2008, telling Chief Bratton that he “w[as] right to keep track of the Muslims [because] their aim is to be the world’s ONLY religion,” and complaining that “[t]he number of Muslims in this area has increased... There is a large mosque in the city of Lomita. Too close!”

The documents ultimately produced by the LAPD illustrate the Department’s years-long attempts to misrepresent the origins, intentions, and life-span of its Muslim “community mapping” project.

- Throughout the duration of *Muslim Advocates v. LAPD*, the court repeatedly found the LAPD’s efforts to search for responsive documents to be insufficient.
 - In October 2017, for example, the court held that the LAPD had failed to conduct reasonable and adequate searches of several Department divisions, and ordered that these searches be performed again.
 - Following the court’s October 2017 order, the final issue remaining to be adjudicated was the LAPD’s ongoing refusal to search certain backup databases containing pre-2010 records. In March 2018, this matter was resolved. Finding that a substantial public interest exists in the disclosure of the community mapping records, and that conducting such a search would not represent an undue burden to the LAPD, the court ordered the Department to search its backup files and produce any responsive documents it found.