



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on April 3, 2019

## Utah Police Offer Smartphone App That Takes Photos and Sends Them to Police

Want to be a cop, but don't have time to go to the academy? Are you looking for ways to help law enforcement "protect and serve"? Police in Salt Lake City, Utah, have an app for that!

Local media in the capital of the Beehive State report that the Unified Police Department (UPD) has developed "a new kind of crime-fighting tool": a smartphone app that will put significant power in the palms of residents anxious to assist in law enforcement.



"A ton of resources at your fingertips," said UPD Sergeant Melody Gray, as quoted in a story published by KSL.com. "What we find is a lot of people don't want to use those systems, so this makes it easy. Everyone has a smartphone."

Why call the police when you can text them?

Some of the features of the new app sound innocuous enough. With it, users can find anything "from simple contact numbers of police precincts in your area, to missing persons, to the Metro Gang Unit's most wanted, to crime maps."

Those things sound boring, though, compared to what the police are proudest of.

Unified Police call one of the features "Crime Tips." Here's the description from the KSL story: "Crime tips allow you to click on a pull-down menu and select the kind of crime you want to report. There is an option to send in a photo and write out a message. You can remain anonymous or you can provide your contact information."

"People know what's going on in their neighborhoods, and this is what ultimately helps fight crime, and solve crime by people getting involved," Gray said, in the KSL report.

Gray's statement elicits a question: If citizens have such power — power currently exercised by police — couldn't they use this technology to protect and serve themselves, without a government intermediary? In other words, could the police be privatized?

Privatizing the police, simply stated, means to return to the people the power of law enforcement, taking it from the government. As the situation stands today, almost all police power is possessed exclusively by some government entity — local, county, state, or federal.

As with so many other questions of the proper locus of power, our Founding Fathers rejected the idea that great power should be placed in the hands of government, at any level.

Hence, it should not be surprising that the Constitution grants no authority to the federal government to participate in law enforcement.



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Even state constitutions at the time of the ratification of the federal Constitution did not contain provisions granting police power to the government. Most of these constitutions plainly set out the universally accepted policy that law enforcement was, as one writer explained, “a universal duty that each person owed to the community, rather than a power of the government.”

With the rapid development of technology such as the UPD app, such a duty — a duty our Founding Fathers believed belonged to everyone — should be much easier to carry out than it ever was during their day.

There are those, of course, who would argue that while it may be true that, historically, much of the enforcement of laws in America was handled by the people in communities, times are different now and we have had publicly funded police for too long to go back.

In reality, however, according to the figures collected by analysts, there are today approximately three times as many private security personnel than government police officers employed in the United States today.

In fact, the railroads in Canada and the United States are secured by a private police force.

That’s a discussion for another day, but seemingly one that should be had among people dedicated to decentralizing power.

Back to the UPD “crime-fighting” app.

Another use of the tech sounds a bit less benign than the “Crime Tips,” tab described above. It’s called “Property Log.” Here’s how that feature functions:

The property log link allows you to take photos of valuable possessions in your home or place of business and type in a serial number. That log is something only you can see, but then can be used to email to police or the insurance company if your property is stolen.

“One thing we find is that when we go on burglaries, when people’s stuff has been stolen, they don’t know their serial numbers,” said UPD Sgt. Gray to KSL.

So, police in Salt Lake City have developed and are distributing a smartphone app (available for iOS and Android, of course) that allows users to upload pictures of their private property that police will then store on department servers.

I’m sure some of you see no potential problems with the “Property Log.” After all, it’s like Sgt. Gray says, if someone steals your stuff, the police will have pictures of it and that should, theoretically, make recovering your property easier.

Here’s a question that occurs to me, however: What stops someone from using the app to take pictures of someone else’s private property and uploading those pictures to the police servers?

Suppose you notice a neighbor seems to have several weapons — including an AR-15, perhaps — and you want to make sure police have evidence of that in case those firearms are ever used in the commission of a crime.

Now imagine you’re the gun-owning neighbor.

Now imagine that you own a bump stock.

Now imagine your neighbor knows that President Trump has ordered the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms to consider bump stocks “machine guns” and treat owners of the devices as



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felons.

I'm not suggesting that this was the purpose for which police in Salt Lake City developed their new app.

What I'm suggesting is that such power in the palm of people intent on, as the police say in their statement announcing the app's release, helping "fight crime" or helping to "solve crime by getting involved" could be used in ways that would violate the fundamental rights of those whose weapons, or other personal belongings, were photographed and filed by the police.

Such a scenario doesn't sound so far-fetched in a world where we are constantly being watched, where our faces are being scanned and uploaded to servers at Homeland Security, and where the president declares that pieces of plastic purchased legally are now "machine guns" and the owners of such items are now felons.



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