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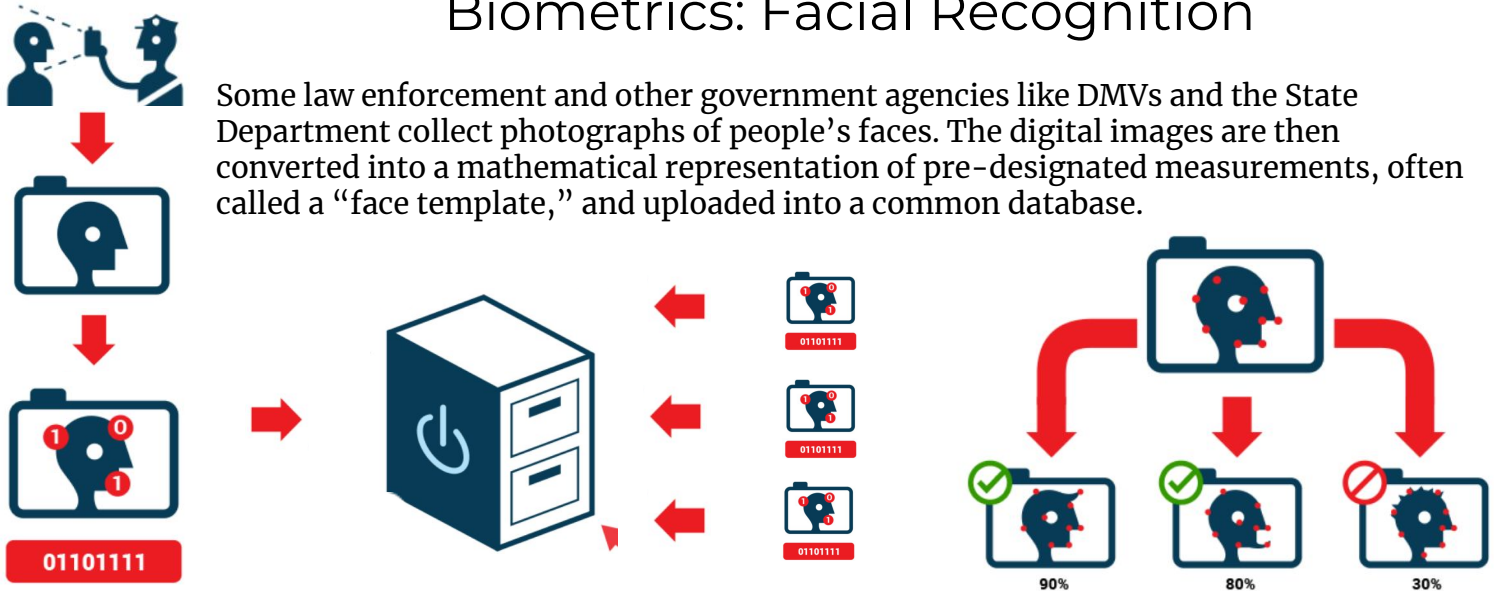
Biometrics: Facial Recognition

Some law enforcement and other government agencies like DMVs and the State Department collect photographs of people's faces. The digital images are then converted into a mathematical representation of pre-designated measurements, often called a "face template," and uploaded into a common database.

When the government wants to identify someone in a photo collected from such places as social media, CCTV, "Smart city" traffic cameras, or in the field, they can compare the face template from the photo with the known photos in the database(s), using facial recognition algorithms that rely on unique physical markers on people's faces to find the closest mathematical matches.

Manufacturers and advocates for facial recognition technologies often present these systems as a "silver bullet" for law enforcement, but they are often error-prone and present serious challenges to privacy and due process.

Key Problems

- Privacy. Face surveillance is becoming an all-encompassing tool for government to track where we are, what we are doing, and who we are with, regardless of whether we're suspected of a crime or not. Cameras are proliferating. Face recognition technology is rapidly improving. Today, most drivers' DMV photos are shared with law enforcement agencies.
- Protest. Face surveillance will chill and deter people from protesting in public places.
- Error. Many face recognition systems have unacceptably high error rates. This means innocent people will be subjected to erroneous police scrutiny.
- Discrimination. The "false positive" error rates are significantly higher for people of color and women. This means that face recognition has an unfair discriminatory impact.
- Proliferation. A rapidly growing number of government agencies use face surveillance. The FBI's Next Generation Identification database has 30 million face recognition records, and its Facial Analysis, Comparison and Evaluation Services can access 400 million more. CBP and ICE are deploying face surveillance systems. Amazon is selling police an inexpensive face surveillance system called Rekognition.

For more information on facial recognition, please contact India McKinney, at india@eff.org.