



Landlord Tech in Covid-19 Times

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Covid-19 has expanded trends in surveillance technology deployed by landlords and property managers—resulting in racialized and gendered harms—and targeted people who are already surveilled by the carceral state.

Covid-19 has exacerbated existing forms of housing injustice, as the corollary economic recession, stay-at-home orders, and increased domestic work such as childcare have made it impossible for millions of tenants to pay rent. The Urban Institute¹ calculates that, as of January 2021, some 10 million US renter households (18% of all US renters) owe an average of \$5,586 in back rent, utilities, and related late fees, amounting to a cumulative owed burden of \$52.6 billion. Black and Latinx renters are overrepresented in these figures, as was also the case during the subprime mortgage crisis and its afterlives. These racialized disparities reflect a centuries-old history of entangled housing and racial injustice in the US going back to settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and ongoing failures of adequate land reparations.

Covid-19 also has expanded trends in surveillance technology, often justified in the name of contact tracing and disease detection, remote work and schooling systems, and building safety. In the realm of housing, landlords and property managers deploy these technologies to surveil tenants and the unhoused,² not only to detect disease, facilitate automatic entry and rental payment, and prevent package theft, but also to create data banks on those unable to pay rent.³ This has caused immense fear among those already struggling to make ends meet and survive harsh pandemic conditions. As was the case prior to Covid-19, people of color and particularly Black women are disproportionately targeted by many of these surveillance systems, especially those that rely upon biometric data collection, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic control. This is in part because so many of them have been designed with anti-Black and misogynistic biases⁴ built in and made to reproduce systemic injustice and discrimination.

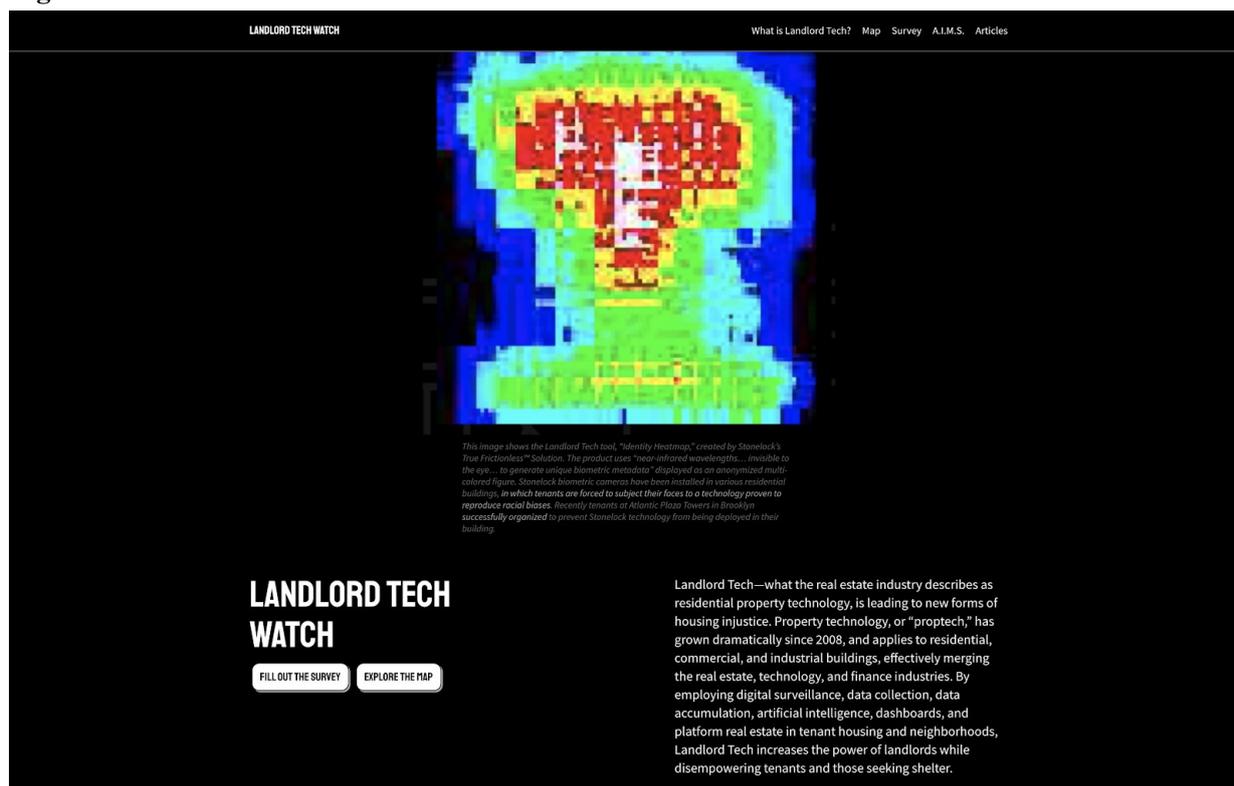
¹ See: www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103453/the-looming-eviction-cliff_1.pdf.

² See: <https://bostonreview.net/class-inequality-science-nature/erin-mcelroy-meredith-bluewhittaker-genevieve-fried-covid-19-crisis>.

³ See: <https://reclaimthenet.org/naborly-rent-coronavirus-april>.

⁴ See, for example: <http://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a.html>.

Figure 1. Screenshot from the *Landlord Tech Watch* website



Source: *Landlord Tech Watch* (<https://antievictionmappingproject.github.io/landlordtech>).

To further research this intersection of racist surveillance and housing injustice, both before and during Covid-19, the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, in collaboration with [people. power. media],⁵ the AI Now Institute,⁶ and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Alliance, have produced a website, survey, and map: Landlord Tech Watch.⁷ On the site, we define what we have come to describe as landlord technologies, or the systems, platforms, hardware, software, algorithms, and data collection that landlords and property managers use to automate landlordism. This includes, for instance, tenant screening services that provide reports about prospective tenants to landlords so that landlords can determine if the tenant is “good enough” to move in. It also includes eviction and debt recovery apps, property management apps and platforms, neighborhood surveillance apps, biometric entry systems, and more. While the real-estate industry describes this field as that of property technology, or *proptech*, we realized through a series of meetings with tenants that most renters have never heard of the industry name. We therefore began a series of conversations to determine a better description of proptech from a tenant perspective. As a result of this, we landed on *landlord tech*, and also a new taxonomy with which to understand landlord tech’s various categories and associated harms. The site also includes a toolkit on how to fight landlord tech in one’s building, based upon the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Alliance’s successful fight against the installation of facial recognition in Atlantic Plaza Towers in Brooklyn.⁸

We included the survey and map on our Landlord Tech Watch website in order to learn about other struggles around landlord tech deployment across the US. Because landlord tech is created by private companies and deployed by private landlords, there is no disclosure requirement. The tech industry in fact thrives off nondisclosure agreements.⁹ Although landlord tech is also deployed in

⁵ Website: www.peoplepowermedia.org.

⁶ Website: <https://ainowinstitute.org>.

⁷ Website: <https://antievictionmappingproject.github.io/landlordtech>.

⁸ See: <https://medium.com/@AINowInstitute/atlantic-plaza-towers-tenants-won-a-halt-to-facial-recognition-in-their-building-now-theyre-274289a6d8eb>.

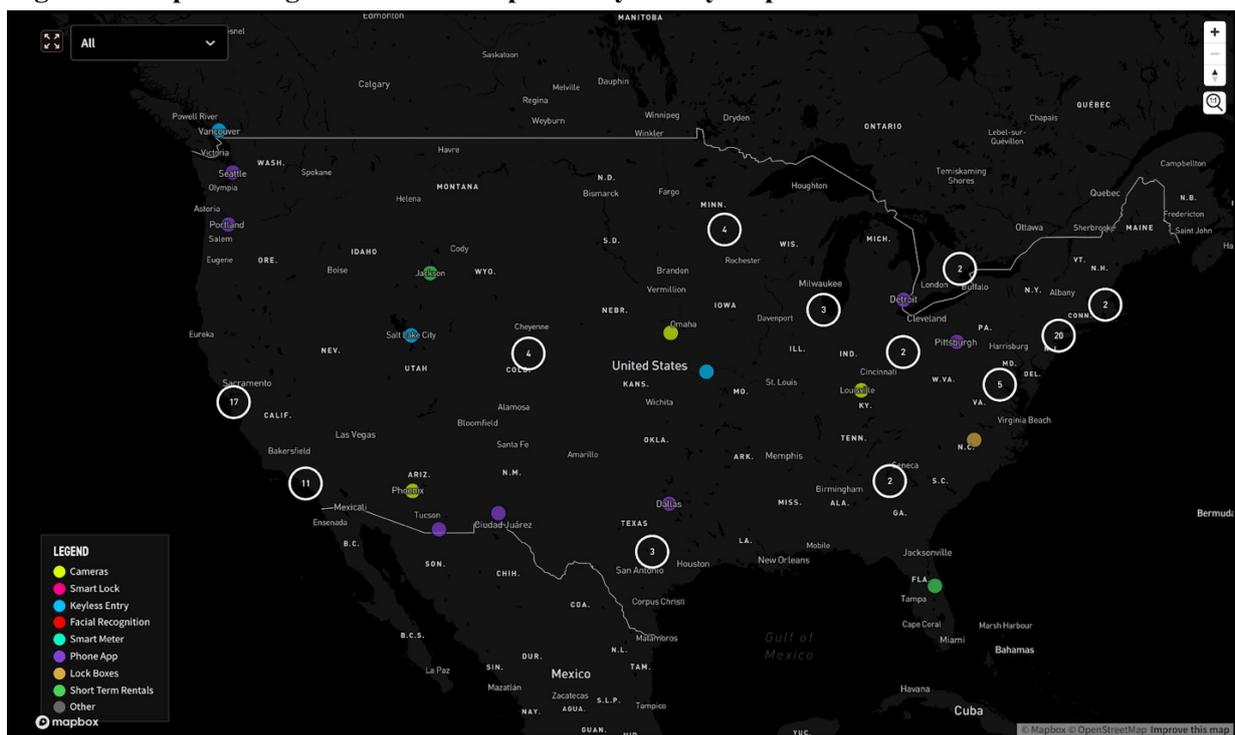
⁹ See: www.businessinsider.com/nda-transparency-project-how-to-send-your-agreement-2021-3-15-2021.

public housing,¹⁰ which is responsible for answering Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, surveillance-related records still can be rejected for release owing to exemptions related to national security and/or law enforcement. Because of this, there is no central database or public information repository about landlord tech’s geography, scale, or scope. Our survey and map aim to provide a sample of different genres of landlord tech, though we are aware that the data we have collected is limited to those who learn about our site and have the ability to complete the survey.

We developed our site before Covid-19 struck, aware that landlord tech surveillance systems were already known to automate evictions and amplify gentrification.¹¹ Yet we saw even more systems implemented and advertised throughout the pandemic, inspiring us to map and analyze landlord tech harms and geographies in Covid-19 times. In this essay, we describe some of our survey data findings to help illuminate how the expansion and deployment of landlord tech has impacted tenants in the pandemic.

As of early February 2021, a total of 98 tenants throughout the US responded to our Landlord Tech Watch survey, which we circulated through social media, news articles, virtual tenant-association meetings, and housing-justice email lists beginning in the fall of 2020. We asked about the types of technologies being installed, how respondents learned about installation, how they feel about landlord tech in their homes and buildings, and more. We discovered that 24 respondents had noticed technological changes in their buildings related to the pandemic. We draw upon some of this below to help illustrate pandemic-induced landlord-tech expansion. The survey is still live,¹² so we are continuing to learn from incoming responses.

Figure 2. Map showing landlord tech reported by survey respondents



Source: *Landlord Tech Watch* (<https://antievictionmappingproject.github.io/landlordtech>).

One of the notable changes we observed during Covid-19 was landlords seeking to decrease human labor at housing sites. By “Covid-washing,” landlords legitimized increased deployment of surveillance and automation technology to capture intimate tenant data. As one respondent noted, “one of the cameras watches my front door and can see in my windows. I feel hugely violated.”

¹⁰ See, for example: www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4008.

¹¹ See, for example: <https://urbanomnibus.net/2019/11/disruption-at-the-doorstep>.

¹² The survey can be accessed at the following URL: <https://antievictionmappingproject.github.io/landlordtech>.

Indeed, property managers and landlords quickly sought to solve issues related to reduced physical contact through increased deployment of online property management systems. Several respondents noted that many leasing processes moved to digital management systems. Moreover, many respondents witnessed deployments of potentially intrusive management apps including rent payment, property maintenance, automatic utility meters, and Wi-Fi access through virtual property management apps. While virtual property-management systems such as Yardi's RentCafe and Appfolio were already popular pre-Covid, having blossomed in the aftermaths of 2008 and the rise of corporate landlordism,¹³ they have become newly incentivized with the pandemic. One tenant reported having to now use a centralized "tenant portal" and a "separate portal/app to set up 'smart internet,' which requires the media access control (MAC) address of each device connected, tracks all internet usage, and is slow and nearly unusable at times."

These property management systems often control door access through smart locks¹⁴ managed via Wi-Fi, forcing tenants to give up their physical keys. Landlords often deploy smart locks without tenant consent and without clear ways to opt out. One respondent noted that, even though they wanted to opt out from a new smart-lock system, the landlord ignored them. As they recounted, "I was emailed and told that when I renewed my lease I 'forgot' to sign a document giving consent to install an electronic lock on the door of my unit. I called them to tell them that I declined to sign the document and they said that electronic locks were going to be installed on all units regardless of my consent." In such contexts, the process of obtaining consent has been so bureaucratic and dismissive of tenants' privacy concerns that few have been able to opt out.

Trends such as increased smart-lock deployment illustrate how tenants have lost face-to-face interactions with their landlords, property managers, and human doormen. Now, many tenants interact with online virtual property managers, "digital doormen," and what Desiree Fields describes as "automated landlords."¹⁵ These digital landlord platforms offer almost no space for negotiation. As one respondent shared, "Before, I had a good relationship with my landlord—a real human I could talk to and call about repair issues. Now, the new company only talks to us through third-party software that sends emails [...] and anonymous text messages." Tenants cannot reach the automated landlord by phone or means other than auto-generated anonymized text messages. Tenants often bear the burden of using automated systems. As one tenant shared, "The third-party property management website they use charges an automatic 3% extra if you pay by credit card, and 1.5% extra if you pay directly from a bank account." They were often "required to use [the payment system] for all rent payments."

While virtual landlord systems had their problems prior to Covid-19, new issues have grown during the pandemic. For instance, rent payment systems automatically penalize tenants unable to pay rent. One respondent shared that automated software penalizes residents "unable to pay their rent for legitimate reasons (unemployment/underemployment). The software misuses tenants' bank balances to auto-process payments and block any chargebacks on rent paid via credit card." Tenants who face financial hardship have thereby lost control of their financial accounts because of such automated systems. Whenever tenants want to communicate directly with landlords and negotiate situations such as late fees or financial hardships, landlords effectively hide behind the automated systems. There are now even third-party systems platforms such as Civvl¹⁶ that have emerged during the pandemic, through which landlords hire precarious gig workers to hand out eviction

¹³ See: www.saje.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final_A-Just-Recovery-Series_Beyond_Wall_Street.pdf.

¹⁴ See, for example: www.e-flux.com/architecture/housing/333698/how-to-pick-a-smart-lock.

¹⁵ See: Fields, Desiree. 2019. "Automated landlord: Digital technologies and post-crisis financial accumulation", *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, first published online on May 1, DOI: 10.1177/0308518X19846514. Available online at the following URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0308518X19846514>.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/eviction-startup-civvl-gig-workers-landlords-covid-2020-9#:~:text=by%20Business%20Insider-,A%20new%20startup%20is%20recruiting%20gig%20workers%20to%20help%20landlords,during%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic.&text=Civvl%20notes%20that%20landlords%20are,DUE%20TO%20COVID-19>.

notices and clean up apartments post-eviction. Meanwhile, tenant screening platforms such as Naborly¹⁷ shifted their model to specifically collect data on tenants unable to pay their rent to effectively help landlords blacklist tenants¹⁸ already struggling in Covid-19 times from securing shelter in the future. With increased renter debt and new rental assistance programs¹⁹ mediated by landlords to request all sorts of data from tenants, there is concern that the tenant screening industry²⁰ will expand in post-Covid times (despite ongoing successful lawsuits against them forcing them to face “national reckoning”²¹).

New iterations of landlord tech have not only taken advantage of the pandemic to Covid-wash new tech deployment; they have also used the uprising for Black lives as an opportunity to deploy new surveillance systems. One respondent shared an intimidating story about a relationship between Google Nest and DISH TV, for instance. “Because DISH TV scared my elderly landlord into thinking dangerous ‘looters’ will be destroying the property,” they detailed, this tenant has a facial-recognition equipped Nest camera with audio detection capacity posted outside their bedroom window, likely able to hear their bedroom conversations. Google Nest formed a relationship with Dish TV in 2019, whereby Nest doorbell footage integrated with DISH televisions,²² building upon a Google Assistant integration from a year earlier. Google Nest has become part of a growing network of private video doorbell and neighborhood surveillance systems²³ used to collect and integrate data on what transpires in and around millions of US homes and neighborhoods. More perniciously, Amazon Ring²⁴ maintains over 2,000 contracts with US police departments,²⁵ and supplied over 20,000 law-enforcement data requests in 2020 alone.²⁶ There have been ample incidents of law enforcement using private cameras to respond to Black Lives Matter protesters.²⁷

Some might wonder why landlord surveillance systems are bad for tenants. On one hand, more cameras and other surveillance systems in rental housing could, as landlord tech advertising promises, ensure seamless package delivery and virus protection. Yet, as our survey results reveal, new technological deployments often result in numerous racialized and gendered harms. Moreover, as landlord-driven surveillance systems accumulate increasingly detailed data on individual tenants, their harm towards people already targeted by the carceral state is extreme.

This reproduction of carcerality is in part due to how contemporary data-driven technologies²⁸ classify characteristics of certain groups of people by aggregating the data of individuals, often by buying and integrating data from third-party data brokers. These collect and assemble massive amounts of personal data, which get aggregated and sold for companies that create data models used to identify other individuals who have similar characteristics. This bears the potentiality of reproducing racist structures and geographies. Because of this, when the predominantly Black residents at the Atlantic Plaza Towers housing complex in Brownsville, Brooklyn, were notified that their key fobs would be replaced with facial recognition technology, tenants were worried about their biometric data being shared with the NYPD,²⁹ given the entrenched history of anti-Black

¹⁷ See: <https://naborly.com/naborly-report>.

¹⁸ See, for example: <https://reclaimthenet.org/naborly-rent-coronavirus-april>.

¹⁹ For example: <http://sfadc.org/covid-19-rental-assistance>.

²⁰ See: www.documentcloud.org/documents/20510708-20210301-letter-to-cfpb-on-oversight-of-tenant-screening-technology-companies.

²¹ See: www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/tenant-screening-software-faces-national-reckoning-n1260975.

²² See: <https://about.dish.com/2019-12-20-DISH-introduces-Google-Nest-Hello-to-the-Hopper-platform>.

²³ See: www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/02/18/ring-nest-surveillance-doorbell-camera (paywall).

²⁴ See: www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/06/amazon-ring-must-end-its-dangerous-partnerships-police.

²⁵ See: www.theverge.com/2021/1/31/22258856/amazon-ring-partners-police-fire-security-privacy-cameras.

²⁶ See: www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/02/ring-camera-fears (paywall).

²⁷ See: www.eff.org/press/releases/activists-sue-san-francisco-wide-ranging-surveillance-black-led-protests-against.

²⁸ See, for example: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3727562.

²⁹ See, for example: <https://urbanomnibus.net/2019/11/disruption-at-the-doorstep>.

policing in the gentrifying city. In view of such concerns, not to mention the ongoing anti-Black surveillance data relationships between platforms such as Amazon Ring and law enforcement, these fears were not a hypothetical assumption but rather an existential threat.

Therefore, we must ask who benefits from landlord tech deployment, and what undisclosed harms are associated with them. That is why we must *watch* and study how technologies often advertised as “neutral” are built with implicit bias baked in to augment existing modes of oppression. We must also consider the broader societal impacts of landlord surveillance technologies as they reproduce racial capitalism and the private property regimes it upholds. While important policy work is being done to curb landlord tech abuse, we also want to consider abolitionist approaches³⁰ to carceral infrastructures and private property, pushing for an abolition of landlord tech more broadly. To this end, we need to do the work to bring anti-surveillance and housing-justice organizing together, helping thwart the deployment of racist systems before they incite new materializations of eviction, dispossession, and carcerality.

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³⁰ See, for example: <http://biblioasis.com/shop/new-release/on-property>.