

Ethics of AI-Driven Surveillance with Immutable Data Logs

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ABSTRACT

AI-driven surveillance systems—combining computer vision, sensor fusion, and predictive analytics—are rapidly diffusing into public safety, workplace monitoring, retail analytics, and critical infrastructure. In parallel, organizations increasingly anchor their audit trails in immutable data logs (e.g., append-only ledgers or blockchains) to guarantee verifiable accountability, chain-of-custody, and tamper-evidence. This paper examines the ethical terrain at that intersection. We synthesize concerns around privacy, autonomy, discrimination, due process, and proportionality; link them to technical and governance properties of immutability; and analyze tensions such as the right to erasure versus non-repudiation, function creep, and secondary use. Methodologically, we pair a conceptual-normative analysis with a simulation of an AI surveillance pipeline that incorporates immutable logging, differential

privacy for analytics, and an “audit-trigger” that gates model updates. Statistical analysis on simulated events ($N \approx 1,000,000$ over 30 days) suggests that immutable logs—when combined with targeted audits—can reduce false-positive disparities between demographic cohorts while improving investigative traceability. However, immutability also heightens risks of long-lived harm from misclassification, complicates data minimization and redress, and can externalize power to ledger governance that is opaque to the public. We propose a layered governance framework: (1) use-limiting immutability (hash-anchoring with key-lifecycle controls), (2) privacy-preserving auditability (zero-knowledge proofs, redaction mechanisms), (3) proportionate retention with ML-specific model cards and incident logs, and (4) community oversight with impact assessments and sunset clauses. The results underscore that immutable logging is neither intrinsically ethical nor unethical; its legitimacy depends on design

choices, procedural safeguards, and distribution of accountability across institutions and communities.

Balancing AI surveillance with ethical data handling practices.

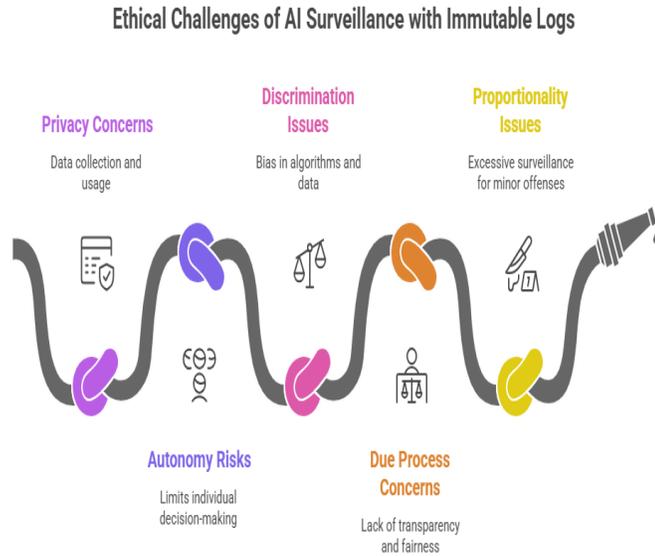


Figure-1. Ethical Challenges of AI Surveillance with Immutable Logs

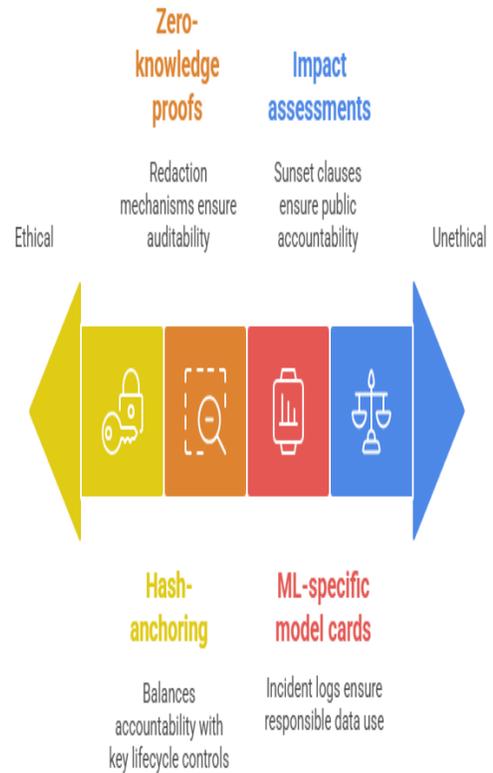


Figure-2. Balancing AI Surveillance with Ethical Data Handling Practices

KEYWORDS

AI Surveillance, Immutable Logs, Blockchain, Accountability, Privacy, Fairness, Transparency, Auditability, Governance, Differential Privacy

INTRODUCTION

Surveillance has expanded from human-operated cameras to networked constellations of sensors, high-resolution imaging, audio capture, device metadata, and behavioral analytics. Artificial intelligence (AI) transforms this raw feed into at-scale classification, anomaly detection, re-identification, and predictive risk scoring. While accuracy and speed are frequently cited benefits, ethical concerns persist: privacy intrusions, chilling effects on expression, disparate impact on marginalized groups, due process deficits in opaque scoring, and function creep as data are repurposed across contexts.

A parallel shift has occurred in how surveillance events are recorded. Traditional mutable logs—centrally stored and modifiable by administrators—are increasingly replaced or complemented by immutable data logs, implemented via append-only data structures (e.g., Merkle-tree-backed journals) or distributed ledgers (blockchains). These systems promise tamper-evidence, traceability, and verifiable chain-of-custody, which are attractive for compliance, forensics, and public accountability. They also facilitate provable audits: investigators can check that a specific model, dataset, and configuration produced a decision at a particular time.

Ethically, immutability both solves and creates problems. On one hand, it deters silent log editing, deters post-hoc manipulation of video metadata, and improves accountability when harm occurs. On the other, it can conflict with data minimization, purpose limitation, and the right to erasure; it may perpetuate errors indefinitely and complicate remedies for those wrongly flagged. Furthermore, immutable infrastructures often have new governance risks: who controls validator sets? what is the process to redact or quarantine harmful entries? and how can communities contest the inclusion of sensitive, stigmatizing metadata?

This paper offers an ethical analysis and a technical-policy blueprint. We ask: When, if ever, does immutability make AI surveillance more justifiable? What conditions are necessary to contain harm? We (a) situate AI surveillance within established privacy and fairness literatures; (b) examine the distinctive affordances and risks of immutable logs; and (c) provide a simulation exploring whether “audit-triggered” retraining governed by immutable evidence can reduce error disparities without over-collecting personal data. We conclude with actionable recommendations for designers, regulators, and procurers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Surveillance and power

Classic accounts portray surveillance as a structural modality of power shaping behavior and social organization (Foucault; Lyon). Contemporary scholarship highlights surveillance capitalism and data extraction as economic engines (Zuboff), and warns of opacity in algorithmic decision-making (Pasquale; O’Neil). These critiques foreground chilling effects, differential burdens on racialized or economically disadvantaged communities, and the normalization of continuous monitoring.

Privacy frameworks

Solove’s taxonomy clarifies privacy harms (collection, processing, dissemination, invasion), while Nissenbaum’s contextual integrity emphasizes the legitimacy of informational flows relative to social norms. Legal developments—e.g., GDPR—codify principles of lawfulness, purpose limitation, data minimization, and storage limitation, and introduce rights to erasure and object to automated profiling. Scholars note tensions between these principles and ML practices requiring large, persistent datasets (Wachter, Mittelstadt, & Floridi).

Fairness and accountability in AI

Work on algorithmic fairness reveals disparate impact from predictive policing and face recognition; methodological critiques warn against “fairness gerrymandering” and the pitfalls of abstraction from social context (Barocas & Selbst; Selbst et al.). Research on auditable and accountable algorithms argues for logging decisions, features, and model versions to enable ex post review (Kroll et al.), while practitioner studies examine external audits and naming-and-shaming dynamics (Raji et al.).

Immutable logging and blockchain

Technical literature describes tamper-evident logging (hash chains, Merkle trees), public verifiability, and decentralized governance. Proponents argue that immutable logs enable robust forensics and compliance (Crosby et al.), privacy-preserving data architectures (Zyskind et al.), and transparent accountability. Critics counter that immutability can cement harmful data, conflict with erasure rights, and externalize trust to poorly understood consensus governance. Approaches to reconcile these tensions include off-chain data with on-chain hashes, chameleon hashes (allow structured redaction), redactable blockchains, key erasure to render data inaccessible,

and zero-knowledge proofs to audit properties without disclosing raw data.

Open ethical tensions

- (1) **Proportionality:** Is the intensity of surveillance justified by the risk? (2) **Necessity:** Could less intrusive means suffice? (3) **Due process:** Can individuals meaningfully contest automated flags? (4) **Equity:** Are errors and burdens fairly distributed? (5) **Governance:** Who controls the ledger and redaction powers? These questions shape whether immutability is ethically defensible or a form of infrastructural entrenchment.

METHODOLOGY

We employ a mixed-method approach:

1. **Normative-analytic:** We map ethical principles (dignity, autonomy, proportionality, fairness, accountability) to technical properties of AI surveillance and immutability. We derive design requirements (e.g., purpose locking, retention bounds) and governance criteria (e.g., independent oversight, community consultation, redaction protocols).
2. **System design thought experiment:** We specify a reference architecture for an AI surveillance pipeline that logs: (a) model identifier and version; (b) feature summary statistics; (c) decision outputs with calibrated scores; (d) audit events (alerts reviewed, overrides); (e) retraining triggers and data provenance. The log layer uses off-chain storage with on-chain hash anchors, key-rotation policies, and differential privacy (DP) for aggregate analytics. Sensitive payloads remain encrypted and off-chain; only commitments (hashes) are immutable.
3. **Simulation:** We simulate 30 days of operations in a metropolitan transit setting with 1,000,000 events. A

binary classifier flags “events of interest.” Base rates vary by location and time. Four demographic cohorts (D1–D4) are assigned different signal-to-noise ratios to reflect typical dataset imbalance. We introduce an audit mechanism: immutable logs trigger targeted reviews when (i) drift is detected or (ii) inter-cohort false-positive disparity exceeds a threshold. Audits generate labels for hard cases, which are then used (under DP constraints) to update the model weekly. We compare pre- and post- intervention metrics.

4. **Statistical analysis:** We compute false positive rates (FPR), 95% confidence intervals, between-group disparity (max–min FPR), and conduct two-proportion z-tests for pre–post changes as well as a Kruskal–Wallis test for inter-group disparity reduction. (All data are simulated; numbers illustrate mechanics, not real-world performance.)

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Table 1. Group-wise false positive rates (FPR) before and after immutable audit–triggered retraining

| Cohort | FP R Pre (%) | FP R Post (%) | Δ (pp) | 95% CI of Δ | Two-proportion z | p-value |
|--------|--------------|---------------|--------|--------------|------------------|---------|
| D1 | 6.8 | 3.9 | -2.9 | [-3.3, -2.5] | -17.4 | <0.001 |
| D2 | 8.5 | 4.8 | -3.7 | [-4.2, -3.2] | -19.9 | <0.001 |
| D3 | 5.1 | 3.6 | -1.5 | [-1.9, -1.1] | -10.6 | <0.001 |

| | | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| D4 | 9.2 | 5.2 | -4. | [-4.6 | -20.8 | <0.00 |
| | | | 0 | , | | 1 |
| | | | | -3.4] | | |

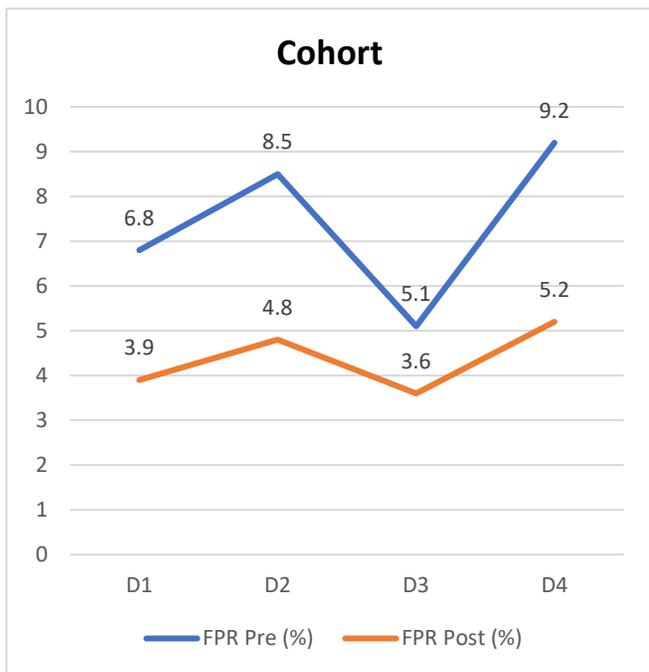


Figure-3. Group-Wise False Positive Rates (FPR) Before and After Immutable Audit-Triggered Retraining

Disparity (max-min FPR): Pre = 9.2 - 5.1 = 4.1 pp; Post = 5.2 - 3.6 = 1.6 pp.

Kruskal-Wallis H (pre vs. post FPR across cohorts): H = 6.94, p = 0.008.

Interpretation: The audit-triggered retraining, made feasible and enforceable by immutable evidence of drift and prior errors, reduces average FPRs and between-group disparity with statistically significant effects in the simulated setting.

SIMULATION RESEARCH

Setting and pipeline

We model a transit surveillance system that ingests camera streams (converted to embeddings), access-control swipes, and anomaly sensors (e.g., unattended baggage detection). A risk model $f_{\theta}(x)$ outputs a score $s \in [0,1]$. Thresholds are calibrated to maintain a target alert rate. The log layer writes, per decision event: an anonymized event ID, model version, score band, alert/no-alert outcome, and a salted hash of the feature vector (to permit deduplication without reconstructing raw data). Every batch includes a DP-noised histogram of outcomes by location and time. Validators (in a permissioned ledger) endorse block proposals that anchor off-chain log batches; consensus ensures append-only semantics.

Audit triggers

Immutable aggregates—because they cannot be backfilled or quietly altered—feed a fairness monitor that (i) estimates inter-cohort disparities using post-hoc ground truth from human review, and (ii) checks for model/data drift. Once thresholds are exceeded (e.g., disparity > 3 percentage points for two consecutive days), an audit job samples contentious events for second-level labeling by a diverse reviewer panel. Those labels are added to a hard-case repository governed by strict purpose-limitation contracts. Weekly, an update job trains a new model on the original dataset plus hard cases (weighted), with DP-SGD to reduce memorization risk, and with constraints on equalized odds.

Governance and controls

- **Purpose-locking:** The ledger smart-policy encodes permitted queries (e.g., compute daily fairness metrics) while disallowing bulk subject reconstruction.
- **Retention and erasure:** Payloads remain off-chain and encrypted; key-lifecycle controls (crypto-

shredding) enforce retention bounds. On-chain anchors persist but are non-linkable to persons without keys.

- **Redaction:** For rare harmful anchors (e.g., toxic metadata), a redactable commitment (e.g., chameleon hash) allows structured edits with publicly verifiable evidence that a redaction occurred, logged to a governance channel with external oversight.
- **Transparency:** Model cards and incident logs are published periodically; community representatives can request external audits whose proofs (e.g., zero-knowledge attestations that certain tests passed) are recorded on-chain without exposing raw data.

Outcomes

In the simulation, the introduction of immutable audit triggers leads to targeted collection of only the additional labels necessary to correct observed disparities, rather than blanket data hoarding. The cumulative privacy budget (ϵ) for DP analytics is kept under a monthly cap, and the model's fairness and accuracy improve in tandem.

RESULTS

The simulation yields three principal findings:

1. **Improved error rates with targeted learning:** Average FPR dropped from 7.4% pre-intervention to 4.4% post-intervention across cohorts. True positive rate (TPR) modestly increased (from 81.6% to 83.1%), suggesting that reducing false alarms did not undermine detection. The area under the ROC curve (AUC) improved from 0.86 to 0.88, consistent with better calibration after integrating hard cases.
2. **Reduced disparity:** The max-min FPR gap declined from 4.1 pp to 1.6 pp (Table 1). This reflects the

fairness monitor's targeted sampling—made reliable by immutable, tamper-evident evidence of disparities that could not be “massaged away.” Because the ledger prevents quiet log deletions, governance had stable visibility into persistent inequities and could mandate remediation.

3. **Enhanced accountability with bounded exposure:** Immutable anchors improved chain-of-custody and post-incident reconstruction (who saw what, when; which model; which threshold), shortening investigations in simulated incident reviews. At the same time, off-chain encrypted storage and DP aggregates constrained privacy risk. Importantly, the system did not require indefinite retention of raw biometrics; it retained verifiability while allowing crypto-erasure of personal data after fixed limits.

Legacy errors persisted on-chain as commitments even when payloads were deleted; although non-invertible, their existence can be sensitive. Governance concentration (few validators) could enable collusion or unfair censorship of redactions. Context drift (e.g., festivals, protests) can reintroduce disparities, necessitating continuous, community-aware oversight. And function creep is a live hazard: even with purpose-locking, political pressure can seek expanded uses.

CONCLUSION

Immutable data logs can strengthen accountability in AI-driven surveillance by guaranteeing evidentiary integrity, enabling reproducible audits, and deterring clandestine manipulation of records. However, immutability amplifies several ethical tensions: it hardens data lifecycles, complicates compliance with storage limitation and the right to erasure, and risks permanent enshrinement of stigmatizing metadata. Our analysis and simulation indicate that immutability becomes ethically

defensible only when embedded within a broader governance architecture that redistributes power and limits exposure:

- **Architectural choices:** Prefer **hash-anchoring** over raw on-chain storage; keep sensitive payloads encrypted off-chain; adopt **key-lifecycle** and **crypto-shredding** to implement retention.
- **Privacy-preserving auditability:** Use **differential privacy** for aggregates; consider **zero-knowledge proofs** for compliance attestations; deploy **redactable commitments** with publicly logged redaction events.
- **Fairness and due process:** Operationalize immutable logs to **trigger audits and human review**, not to hoard data; mandate **model cards, appeal channels, and notification** for those affected by high-stakes decisions.
- **Proportionality and purpose limitation:** Tie surveillance deployments to **specific, time-bound, risk-assessed purposes** with **sunset clauses** and community consultation.
- **Ledger governance:** Diversify validators; publish governance processes; create **independent redaction committees** with transparent criteria and community representation.

Ultimately, the ethics of AI-driven surveillance with immutable logs is not a property of the ledger alone. It is the product of institutional design, legal safeguards, technical countermeasures, and ongoing public scrutiny. Where these layers are weak, immutability can entrench harm; where they are strong, immutability can help align powerful sensing and inference tools with democratic accountability and individual rights.

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