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AdChoices 

FBI Confirms Wide-Scale Use Of Surveillance Flights Over U.S. Cities

AP | By JACK GILLUM, EILEEN SULLIVAN and ERIC TUCKER

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- The FBI is operating a small air force with scores of low-flying planes across the U.S. carrying video and, at times, cellphone surveillance technology -- all hidden behind fictitious companies that are fronts for the government, The Associated Press has learned.

The planes' surveillance equipment is generally used without a judge's approval, and the FBI said the flights are used for specific, ongoing investigations. In a recent 30-day period, the agency flew above more than 30 cities in 11 states across the country, an AP review found.

Aerial surveillance represents a changing frontier for law enforcement, providing what the government maintains is an important tool in criminal, terrorism or intelligence probes. But the program raises questions about whether there should be updated policies protecting civil liberties as new technologies pose intrusive opportunities for government spying.

The FBI confirmed for the first time the wide-scale use of the aircraft, which the AP traced to at least 13 fake companies, such as FVX Research, KQM Aviation, NBR Aviation and PXW Services. Even basic aspects of the program are withheld from the public in censored versions of official reports from the Justice Department's inspector general.

"The FBI's aviation program is not secret," spokesman Christopher Allen said in a statement. "Specific aircraft and their capabilities are protected for operational security purposes." Allen added that the FBI's planes "are not equipped, designed or used for bulk collection activities or mass surveillance."

But the planes can capture video of unrelated criminal activity on the ground that could be handed over for prosecutions.

Some of the aircraft can also be equipped with technology that can identify thousands of people below through the cellphones they carry, even if they're not making a call or in public. Officials said that practice, which mimics cell towers into coughing up basic subscriber information, is rare.

Details confirmed by the FBI track closely with published reports since at least 2003 that a government surveillance program might be behind suspicious-looking planes slowly circling neighborhoods. The AP traced at least 50 aircraft back to the FBI, and identified more than 100 flights since late April orbiting both major cities and rural areas.

One of the planes, photographed in flight last week by the AP in northern Virginia, bristled with unusual antennas under its fuselage and a camera on its left side. A federal budget document from 2010 mentioned at least 115 planes, including 90 Cessna aircraft, in the FBI's surveillance fleet.

The FBI said it also occasionally helps local police with aerial support, such as during the recent disturbance in Baltimore that followed the death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray, who sustained grievous injuries while in police custody. Those types of requests are reviewed by senior FBI officials.

The surveillance flights comply with agency rules, an FBI spokesman said. Those rules, which are heavily redacted in publicly available documents, limit the types of equipment the agency can use, as well as the justifications and duration of the surveillance.

Details about the flights come as the Justice Department seeks to navigate privacy concerns arising from aerial surveillance by unmanned aircrafts, or drones. President Barack Obama has said he welcomes a debate on government surveillance, and has called for more transparency about spying in the wake of disclosures about classified programs.

"These are not your grandparents' surveillance aircraft," said Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst with the American Civil Liberties Union, calling the flights significant "if the federal government is maintaining a fleet of aircraft whose purpose is to circle over American cities, especially with the technology we know can be attached to those aircraft."

During the past few weeks, the AP tracked planes from the FBI's fleet on more than 100 flights over at least 11 states plus Washington, D.C., most with Cessna 182T Skylane aircraft. These included parts of Houston, Phoenix, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis and Southern California.

Evolving technology can record higher-quality video from long distances, even at night, and can capture certain identifying information from cellphones using a device known as a "cell-site simulator" -- or Stingray, to use one of the product's brand names. These can trick pinpointed cellphones into revealing identification numbers of subscribers, including those not suspected of a crime.

Officials say cellphone surveillance is rare, although the AP found in recent weeks FBI flights orbiting large, enclosed buildings for extended periods where aerial photography would be less effective than electronic signals collection. Those included above Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota.

After The Washington Post revealed flights by two planes circling over Baltimore in early May, the AP began analyzing detailed flight data and aircraft-ownership registrations that shared similar addresses and flight patterns. That review found some FBI missions circled above at least 40,000 residents during a single flight over Anaheim, California, in late May, according to Census data and records provided by the website FlightRadar24.com.

Most flight patterns occurred in counter-clockwise orbits up to several miles wide and roughly one mile above the ground at slow speeds. A 2003 newsletter from the company FLIR Systems Inc., which makes camera technology such as seen on the planes, described flying slowly in left-handed patterns.

"Aircraft surveillance has become an indispensable intelligence collection and investigative technique which serves as a force multiplier to the ground teams," the FBI said in 2009 when it asked Congress for \$5.1 million for the program.

FBI in the sky

These flights are among dozens of recent surveillance flights run by the FBI equipped with video-recording technology. They're used primarily to target FBI suspects, but also can be used, like in Baltimore, to support local police operations.



SAN DIEGO

April 29, 2015
Plane: Cessna 182T Skylane
Owner: NBR Aviation
Average altitude: 4,546 feet
Average speed: 57 knots
(66 mph)



BALTIMORE

April 30, 2015 (during Freddie Gray unrest)
Plane: Cessna 182T Skylane
Owner: NG Research
Average altitude: 3,621 feet
Average speed: 63 knots
(72 mph)



WASHINGTON D.C.

May 20, 2015
Plane: Cessna 182T Skylane
Owner: NG Research
Average altitude: 7,418 feet
Average speed: 73 knots
(84 mph)

SOURCE: FlightRadar24.com

AP
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Recently, independent journalists and websites have cited companies traced to a bank of Virginia post office boxes, including one shared with the Justice Department. The AP analyzed similar data since early May, while also drawing upon aircraft registration documents, business records and interviews with U.S. officials to understand the scope of the operations.

The FBI asked the AP not to disclose the names of the fake companies it uncovered, saying that would saddle taxpayers with the expense of creating new cover companies to shield the government's involvement, and could endanger the planes and integrity of the surveillance missions. The AP declined the FBI's request because the companies' names -- as well as common addresses linked to the Justice Department -- are listed on public documents and in government databases.

At least 13 front companies that AP identified being actively used by the FBI are registered to post office boxes in Bristow, Virginia, which is near a regional airport used for private and charter flights. Only one of them appears in state business records.

Included on most aircraft registrations is a mysterious name, Robert Lindley. He is listed as chief executive and has at least three distinct signatures among the companies. Two documents include a signature for Robert Taylor, which is strikingly similar to one of Lindley's three handwriting patterns.

The FBI would not say whether Lindley is a U.S. government employee. The AP unsuccessfully tried to reach Lindley at phone numbers registered to people of the same name in the Washington area since Monday.

Law enforcement officials said Justice Department lawyers approved the decision to create fictitious companies to protect the flights' operational security and the Federal Aviation Administration was aware of the practice. One of the Lindley-headed companies shares a post office box openly used by the Justice Department.

Such elusive practices have endured for decades. A 1990 report by the then-General Accounting Office noted that, in July 1988, the FBI had moved its "headquarters-operated" aircraft into a company that wasn't publicly linked to the bureau.

The FBI does not generally obtain warrants to record video from its planes of people moving outside in the open, but it also said that under a new policy it has recently begun obtaining court orders to use cell-site simulators. The Obama administration had until recently been directing local authorities through secret agreements not to reveal their own use of the devices, even encouraging prosecutors to drop cases rather than disclose the technology's use in open court.

A Justice Department memo last month also expressly barred its component law enforcement agencies from using unmanned drones "solely for the purpose of monitoring activities protected by the First Amendment" and said they are to be used only in connection with authorized investigations and activities. A department spokeswoman said the policy applied only to unmanned aircraft systems rather than piloted airplanes. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and assembly.

Associated Press writers Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; Joan Lowy and Ted Bridis in Washington; Randall Chase in Wilmington, Delaware; and news researchers Monika Mathur in Washington and Rhonda Shafner in New York contributed to this report.

View documents: <http://apne.ws/1HEyPot>

MORE: [Fbi Surveillance Flights](#) [Fbi Surveillance Aircraft](#) [FVX Research](#) [KQM Aviation](#) [NBR Aviation](#) [PXW Services](#) [Fbi Secret Air Force](#) [FBI Video](#)

Conversations

169 Comments

Sort by



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Kevin Begley · UC Davis

This has been happening since the early 90s.
Not only FBI. In fact, the truth is, the agency is hardly specific.

Night after night after night, they ALL go up, chasing an endless perversion.
Always in prop-planes (avoiding the noise of jet engines).
Guess who pays for the pilot, the pilot's license, the plane, the gas, the in-flight meals... well, you pay, of course. And a more profound WASTE of resources is nearly unimaginable!!

They mostly get their jollies listening to teenage girls.
That is right from the horse's mouth... this is exactly who happens to be on the phone when they ... See More

Like · Reply · 38 · Jun 2, 2015 4:13am · Edited



Towana McLaughlin · Works at Unemployed

I'm against it. But why doesn't the FBI utilize drone aircrafts?

Like · Reply · 1 · Jun 2, 2015 4:50am



Steven King · Executive at [Http://stevenking.jeunesseglobal.com/](http://stevenking.jeunesseglobal.com/)

Towana McLaughlin at this time the drones can only do video while the plane have lots of high tech (including cell phone tapping)

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 5:59am



Ryan Ellis · Cooper City, Florida

Steven King The FBI/police cannot legally use drones for regular surveillance in all States. For instance, in Florida where I live, it's illegal for the police to use drones for general surveillance.

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 9:24am

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Levi Spires · Cazenovia, New York

This is why we should limit the federal government.

Decentralized police can keep you safe. And they can't afford mass surveillance.

Like · Reply · 24 · Jun 2, 2015 7:06am



Aloha Current

Local police departments can't afford Cessnas with all the latest techno-gadgets, but can easily afford drones. In fact they are currently being used and often paid for by federal grant funds.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jun 2, 2015 9:50am



Terry Fishlock · Chief Executive Officer at Retired

Levi.

But they can be given military equipment to harass and control the populace.

Like · Reply · 10 · Jun 2, 2015 10:10am



Richard H. Davis · Albuquerque, New Mexico

The Federal government IS limited under the Constitution - the courts have decided that security is more important than the Constitution...

Like · Reply · 12 · Jun 2, 2015 10:14am

[Show 8 more replies in this thread](#)



Steven Howe

You know, the ongoing irritation is the authorities acting like criminals. Did they think they'd never get caught, so could keep their use of drone planes secret? Coming out like this just puts another shiner on the Federal Government. Stop it. Texans are positively paranoid about this sort of thing.

Federal Government Announce bravely your new abilities, go to congress and ask for guidance on the use. Make it public. Sorry, it might not make your job 'easier', but really, at this point in time I don't want to ever talk to, see or hear of the ever increasing 'SS' in the United States. Hey, I'm a liberal. They are even offending me. I don't want to live in a police state!

Like · Reply · 16 · Jun 2, 2015 4:25am · Edited



Bill Duckworth

For every Plane there are 1000 drones, snoops on the ground, ears on the digital communication.

Like · Reply · 4 · Jun 2, 2015 8:28am



John Patrick Navarro · New Orleans, Louisiana

You know what always bugs me is when Obama says he's for reforming surveillance laws and he wants an open debate about the government's data collection practices. He says that like he isn't directly in charge of the FBI, NSA, and every other intelligence agency. Obama has already shown he is willing to utilize executive orders even in areas that are constitutionally questionable, why doesn't he pick up his pen and phone and order his government to stop spying on Americans? Oh that's right, it's doublespeak stupid.

Like · Reply · 20 · Jun 2, 2015 8:38am



Charles Rowland

John Patrick Navarro · Facebook

 **John Patrick Navarro** · ...Exactly !

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jun 2, 2015 9:26am

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Tim Tribolt · Denver, Colorado

More of government turning into Big Brother and turning into a police state. They listen to your phone calls and read your emails, they watch you where ever you go with license plate scanners, and traffic cameras, if you carry cash they take it with civil forfeiture, if you withdraw cash from your bank they charge you like Spitzer and Hastert, and if you get stopped by a cop having a bad day and you put your hands near your waist band, you're dead.

Hey Tea Partiers, you're worried about Big Government getting into your lives, you're worried about Jade Helm? You missed what's happening right in front of your face.

Like · Reply ·  11 · Jun 2, 2015 7:45am



Scott Powell · Brooklyn, New York

Yes, these things were all what we despised about the Nazis and the KGB. Not doing these things were what defined us as a free people, worth of respect and admiration around the world. Now we have totalitarians in our ranks who have made all of these tactics, and an institutional contempt for our Constitution in the government, a reality all around us in the United States of America in 2015. They keep piling on new affronts to liberty by the day, too. It's coming so heavy, so fast, that it's certain everything will explode.

Like · Reply ·  13 · Jun 2, 2015 9:49am



Darren King

Scott Powell when did america not do these things? You say it's happening today like this is something new...where in American history can you point to where the government was trustworthy and an honest broker with the people?

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jun 2, 2015 12:48pm



Brian Amberg

Darren King Before we had a CIA and an FBI we were not being snooped on daily.

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 3:46pm

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Fadel Fulkerson · Works at New York Law School

Please--some crazy drone flying libertarian almost brought down a small passenger jet. We really do need some rules in society. Quit worrying about the Government using a drone to spy on you and start worrying about your neighbors. With freedom comes responsibility

Like · Reply ·  7 · Jun 2, 2015 7:07am



Lars Taylor · UC Berkeley

If the government thinks the biggest threat to itself is the people then perhaps we should start feeling the same way about the government. And the government OFFICIALLY does consider the US population to big the biggest national security threat until at least 2025.

Like · Reply ·  10 · Jun 2, 2015 10:09am



Richard H. Davis · Albuquerque, New Mexico

If the government can spy on you whenever it wants, where is your freedom???

Like · Reply ·  5 · Jun 2, 2015 10:16am



Erik Lien · Ham Lake, Minnesota

If anyone knows my post history, I fall definitely on the left side of the spectrum, but still we have a Constitution that is supposed to have meaning.

"Amendment IV

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

The government has whittled away at this for years under the blanket umbrella of "safety." Your worry about your neighbors philosophy falls well in line with this plan. Vigilance is one issue, giving the government the power to pick and choose what aspect of the Constitution it follows and what it ignores, is another matter.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jun 2, 2015 10:55am

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Jamie Ervay · Singer-songwriter at Jamie Ervay

Why are there some people that seem to be okay with this? People completely content with having liberties violated. Just look, they're even pretending to be different companies to mask themselves? If civilians did something like that, we'd get charged with all sorts of crimes. Outside of their jobs, these people are no different than everyone else. Who is going to start watching the watchers? In no way should anybody be okay with tactics like this. There is generation after generation of people that oppose these ideas. These organizations gain more and more power as the previous generations gi... See More

Like · Reply ·  12 · Jun 2, 2015 9:52am



Jamie Ervay · Singer-songwriter at Jamie Ervay

Tim Bruce Can't change the past but you can change the future.

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 11:21am



William Pennat · Fitchburg, Massachusetts

The surveillance part itself doesn't bother me so much as the damn noise of those things flying back and forth back and forth at low altitudes. I always suspected that's what they might be and I now I know for sure....

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 1:42pm



Dwane Pospisil

Till they are listening to you and decide you like chocolate and then raise the price. LOL

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 2:04pm

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Barbara Ann Walker · Wilmington College

Nearly every rural county uses planes every year looking for Pot , lord this has been going on since the early 80's here in OH. I don't see the big deal actually. What do you think they are gonna see?

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jun 2, 2015 6:04am



James Acker · Oslo, Norway

Well...again, they are not just seeing, they have capability of identifying anyone from their cell phone, fake being a cell phone tower and possibly get other information, and I would think if that they can also listen in, capture SMS's, etc. (because if you fake being a tower you can get the data as well).

Like · Reply ·  8 · Jun 2, 2015 6:29am



Jose Ramos

If you drive across Florida on I-75 on a clear day...chances are very good that you are being tracked by a Floriduh Highway Patrol plane looking for traffic offenders...or so they say... Ive seen the airplane

and seen the speed traps on the ground.

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jun 2, 2015 7:10am



Ryan Ellis · Cooper City, Florida

Jose Ramos It's not that common. I've flown alligator alley MANY times and never once seen a highway patrol plane. They do, sometimes, use them but it's not that drastic. But what I do see is a lot of private planes flying the alley, relatively low, and people like you probably think it's the police.

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 7:36am

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Mitchell Martin

The Constitution is dead. They killed it. We no longer have any protections. They will do whatever they want.

Someone should overthrow them.....,

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jun 2, 2015 9:07am



Scott Powell · Brooklyn, New York

They will be overthrown. They have lost the strata of society who pay attention to government and how our society runs. Every American I know from both sides of the aisle in those strata uses the words 'revolution' and 'overthrow' in daily conversation these days. One more shock like the sub-prime mortgage crisis will do it.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jun 2, 2015 9:45am



PJ Smith

who should overthrow who?

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 9:45am



Rob Darling · Broker at Self-Employed

Tom Fisher That already happened... like frogs in a slow boiling pot... most people just don't know because the water has been comfortably warm for the most part...

Like · Reply ·  3 · Jun 2, 2015 12:14pm

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Edwin Combs

The fact that the government felt the need to hide their activity by using fake company fronts to hide this, said a lot that they knew they were crossing lines and breaking the law. This is different than states using planes to find pot plants. Here they are faking cell phone towers, and actually spying on people.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jun 2, 2015 7:00am



Kevin Begley · UC Davis

No. Whereas they are certainly infringing upon your Constitutional rights (to reasonable privacy), make no mistake, at no point is their spying considered illegal.

In fact, they do not even require a warrant to test electronic spy equipment by drone or prop-plane (so long as they do not specifically target an individual). And yet, everything that is obtained by testing has been deemed admissible in court.

Of course, lawyers would have no means to ascertain whether their client was specifically targeted, because they are granted no authority to subpoena the full extent of the data being colle... [See More](#)

Like · Reply ·  7 · Jun 2, 2015 9:59am · Edited



Jerry Engelbach · Pátzcuaro

Kevin Begley:

Technically, any action or law that infringes on one's constitutional rights is by definition illegal.

When courts uphold the legality of unconstitutional actions they are in the wrong.

Excellent line about Edward Snowden.

Like · Reply ·  5 · Jun 2, 2015 10:32am · Edited



Helga Cruz · Works at None of your b

you are right on target.I was waffeling on Snowden,but now I believe ,he did the right thing!

Like · Reply · Jun 2, 2015 12:29pm

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Tom Acord · Howard, Ohio

THEY ARE LOOKING FOR RIGHT WING AMMOSEXUALS''''''''

Like · Reply ·  11 · Jun 2, 2015 5:33am



Bill Duckworth ·

But they and theirs do not serve, just receive the profit of WAR

Like · Reply ·  1 · Jun 2, 2015 9:08am



Joe Mathis · Ferndale, Michigan

Ammosexuals, that is kinda funny. I imagined a guy with all kinds of ammo strapped across his chest, automatic weapons over his shoulders . A rambo thing.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Jun 2, 2015 11:38am

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