

Drug Enforcement Administration tracks movements of millions of Americans

E.P. Bannon

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New information reveals that the US Drug Enforcement Administration has been tracking the movements of millions of Americans through a national license plate reader program. The American Civil Liberties Union made this information public January 26 after obtaining DEA documents through the Freedom of Information Act.

The DEA operates a National License Plate Recognition program, started in 2008, that connects its license plate readers with other law enforcement agencies. Under the guise of the “war on drugs,” the federal government is moving quickly to create a centralized database of all drivers’ movements throughout the country.

In an email exchange, a DEA official explains the license plate database is designed to aid searches and seizures by police. “We want to insure we can collect and manage all the data and [Information Technology] responsibilities that will come with the work to insure the program meets its goals,” the official states, “of which asset forfeiture is primary.”

“Asset forfeiture” is a form of search and seizure in which law enforcement officers can take money or other property by claiming it is associated with illegal activity without ever having to pursue criminal charges. Federal and state agents seize millions of dollars from civilians every year during routine traffic stops. In many instances, the money seized has been used to pay salaries, buy advanced equipment, or for personal benefit. In one particularly egregious case, an NYPD officer seized \$1,300 in cash from a Brooklyn construction worker following a stop-and-frisk and then maced him.

Last month, the Supreme Court broadened permissible searches and seizures to include actions taken by police officers when they make a false

interpretation of the law, in direct violation of the Fourth Amendment.

A report released by the ACLU in July 2013, called “You Are Being Tracked,” detailed a massive system of automatic license plate readers in use throughout the United States. Small, high-speed cameras mounted on police cars, road signs, bridges, and elsewhere, capture thousands of license plates per minute. Drivers’ information is kept for years or even indefinitely, with little to no protection for personal privacy rights.

The records that the DEA provided the ACLU were heavily redacted and incomplete. The agency decided to provide only documents that were undated or years old, so as not to give a clear picture of the extent of current operations.

An undated document shows the DEA has already deployed at least 100 license plate readers across the US, and that their database already held over 343 million records. A 2010 document demonstrates that the agency had already installed 41 plate reader monitoring stations in Texas, New Mexico and California alone.

The DEA is collaborating with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies throughout the country to provide further information to the database. Other agencies are thought to have partnered with the DEA, but these sharing agreements are still kept secret.

One of the agencies that share information with the DEA is the Customs and Border Patrol. An undated “Memorandum of Understanding” made between the two agencies explains that they will exchange license plate reader data “at regular intervals.” This same memorandum also includes equal sharing rights to the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security.

The memorandum authorizes all four agencies to

share data with other federal, state, and local law enforcement, prosecutors, and “intelligence, operations, and fusion centers.” Likewise, these other agencies can request information from the database after being vetted by the DEA.

The purpose of the information sharing agreement between the four agencies is “for analyzing terrorist and narcotics threat information,” according to the document. The DEA claims the National License Plate Recognition Initiative targets any roadway the agency believes is used for “contraband transport.” They do not, however, disclose any specific reasoning procedure. Theoretically every highway in the United States could be used for such purposes.

In effect, these agreements amount to full disclosure of any individual’s movements in any part of the country to every branch of the police and security apparatus. The CBP alone collects “nearly 100 percent of land border traffic,” according to the agency, amounting to over 793.5 million license plates between May 2009 and May 2013.

The DEA uses the collected information to data mine in order to “identify travel patterns” of specific individuals “of high interest” helping to track and even predict their movements. The report does not specify what constitutes a person of “high interest.” It goes on to describe how the system monitors drivers in real time, with the ability to notify law enforcement officers immediately when a certain plate is spotted.

A document has also emerged that shows the DEA had considered using automatic license-plate readers to monitor attendees of gun shows. The suggested tactic consisted of compiling a list of the license-plate numbers of all vehicles present. According to the agency, the idea was scrapped in 2009. Though the proposal was not put into use, the ACLU noted, “This would not be the first time that the government has used automatic license plate readers to target the constitutionally protected right to assemble.”

The American media has done its part in covering up the extent of surveillance. In 2012, the *Washington Post* published a report claiming that the Department of Homeland Security had cancelled its “national license-plate tracking plan,” when in fact it had only scrapped one Immigrations and Customs Enforcement solicitation for such a plan. At the time the newspaper published that article, the DEA had established a

similar program four years earlier.

These findings are the most recent in a series of revelations concerning the mass surveillance of the American population. The collection of metadata of millions of Internet users by the National Security Agency (NSA) is merely the tip of the iceberg. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) uses cell phone surveillance and data mining systems equipped with “StingRay” and “dirt box” devices that mimic cell phone towers in order to spy on vast sections of people.

These programs are all aimed toward creating a surveillance state where federal agencies can know major details of any individual’s private life, his or her personal correspondence, connections, and whereabouts.



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