

# CIA helped spy on US cell phone data

**Zaida Green**  
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The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) worked with the US Justice Department to develop a program to spy on US cell phone conversations and data, the *Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this month.

The CIA gave the US Marshals Service, part of the Justice Department, more than \$1 million in spying equipment and “developed technology to locate specific cell phones in the US through an airborne device that mimics a cell phone tower,” according to the report. This is a violation of federal law, which separates foreign and domestic intelligence and prohibits the CIA from possessing any internal security functions.

The cell phone surveillance devices, known as “IMSI-catchers”, “dirtboxes”, or “stingrays” after a line of such devices manufactured by the Harris Corporation, masquerade as cell phone towers to collect data from nearby cell phones and monitor all cell phone traffic in an area. This allows authorities to deny cell phone service, generate comprehensive lists of names and addresses of users, map cell phone usage, and eavesdrop on the phone conversations and multimedia messages of a specific target.

IMSI-catchers operating onboard small aircraft can trawl the data of tens of thousands of cell phones in a single flight and pinpoint the location of a target within 10 feet or within a specific room in a building. The US Marshals Service operates such equipped airplanes as part of a spy program that has been fully functional since 2007. Operating from at least five metropolitan area airports, the flying range of the Marshal Service’s airplanes covers most of the US population.

So intimate was the collaboration between the two agencies that law enforcement officials described it as a “marriage.”

The CIA and the Marshals Service began co-developing the technology in 2004, first cracking the security protocols of telecommunications service

providers, then constructing and field testing the devices.

Over the years, the CIA sent multiple units, each with a price tag of hundreds of thousands of dollars, to the Marshals Service for free. More than \$100 million went into the research and development of the devices. The CIA provided most of the resources during early development.

A week after the publication of the *Wall Street Journal*’s report, leading members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the Department of Justice, sent the department a letter requesting the most basic information about its policies regarding the use of IMSI-catchers. The first question submitted by the senators asked whether laws permitting domestic use of the technology actually existed.

This is the second such letter written to the department by Senators Patrick Leahy and Charles Grassley. The first letter, sent last December, contained over a dozen questions regarding the extent of cell phone surveillance conducted by US government agencies and what, if any, legal processes and regulations governed these activities.

IMSI-catchers are widely used among other federal agencies and local police agencies. The American Civil Liberties Union has identified 12 federal agencies and 48 local and state police agencies across 20 states that have purchased IMSI-catchers.

The Department of Homeland Security has awarded millions of dollars in grants to local police departments to purchase the devices, supposedly in order to thwart terrorism. The Marshals Service also lends IMSI-catchers to local police departments.

Police agencies have been found using IMSI-catchers outside of terrorism related investigations, without warrant or oversight. KXTV, a local TV station based in Sacramento, California, obtained documents

showing that Northern California police were using IMSI-catchers in routine cases. In 2014, a Florida state appeals judge found that police in Tallahassee, Florida, had used IMSI-catchers without a warrant over 200 times. WBBM, a local radio station in Chicago, reported that local police had used an IMSI-catcher to monitor protests against the police murder of Eric Garner in New York.

Manufacturers of IMSI-catchers and the government have attempted to conceal the use and capabilities of the technology from the public. Police departments must sign strict nondisclosure agreements before they are permitted to purchase StingRays. A manual detailing the Harris Corporation's StingRay and KingFish devices, obtained by *TheBlot Magazine* via a Freedom of Information Act request, with most of the content redacted. The Department of Justice has justified its silence on the existence of the devices by claiming that definitive statements would allow criminals to better evade law enforcement.

These revelations express the reality that the military-intelligence apparatus has granted itself the irrevocable and unquestionable right to spy on, torture and execute anyone.



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