FBI operates spy planes over dozens of US cities

A reporter
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The Associated Press reported Tuesday that the FBI has a fleet of surveillance aircraft flying over US cities, conducting video and cellphone surveillance from the skies. According to the AP, the operation amounts to “a small air force with scores of low-flying planes,” using at least 13 front companies to conceal the federal police agency’s role, and involving at least 50 aircraft.

In a recent 30-day period, according to the report, the FBI planes overflew more than 30 cities in 11 states. Among the urban areas targeted were Washington DC, Houston, Phoenix, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis and southern California. The AP has identified more than 100 flights since late April, mainly over major metropolitan areas, but including some rural districts as well.

The surveillance operation is conducted without warrants or other judicial review, on the say-so of FBI officials and frequently at the request of local police. It was reported last month that FBI planes flew over Baltimore during the unrest that followed the police murder of Freddie Gray, conducting both video and cellphone surveillance during protest demonstrations.

A Justice Department memo last month banned agencies from using unmanned drones “solely for the purpose of monitoring activities protected by the First Amendment.” A department spokeswoman told AP that the policy applied only to unmanned aircraft systems rather than piloted airplanes. In other words, the piloted aircraft used in the FBI’s aerial surveillance program are free to spy on protest marches and other constitutionally protected forms of free speech and assembly.

The AP report shows the use of the cellphone monitoring equipment known under one of its maker’s brand names, Stingray, which simulates a cellphone tower and collects data from thousands of cellphone users at a time. According to the report, “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. Areas targeted include Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota.”

Both the CIA and FBI have been actively involved in developing and promoting the use of such technology by local police. At the same time, the Obama administration has ordered local officials not to disclose their use of Stingray-type devices, even in conducting prosecutions where the evidence would be relevant and would have to be disclosed to defense attorneys.

The front companies established by the FBI were registered to post office boxes in Bristow, Virginia, a regional airport on the outskirts of the Washington metropolitan area. AP identified four of the companies as FVX Research, KQM Aviation, NBR Aviation and PXW Services, adding, “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.”

A single individual, named by the AP as Robert Lindley, was listed as chief executive of many of the front companies. The FBI refused to say whether he is a government employee, or even a real person.

The author also recommends:

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