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Revealed: FBI recording US cities from above using fleet of surveillance aircraft that can identify thousands of people based on their cellphones

- Review found that federal authorities used up to 90 Cessna planes to circle over cities such as Boston, Chicago and Houston for hours
- Planes, registered to front companies such as PXW Services
- Some aircraft include 'Stingray' device that can track people carrying cellphones even if the devices aren't turned on
- Spokesman says aircraft 'not equipped, designed or used for bulk collection activities or mass surveillance'
- Obama administration has encouraged prosecutors to drop cases rather than reveal the secretive technology

By [Associated Press](#) and [Dailymail.com Reporter](#)

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The FBI is operating a small air force with scores of low-flying planes across the country carrying video and, at times, cell phone 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.

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A review of planes traced back to the FBI found that dozens of aircraft had been circling above US cities with surveillance equipment (below plane). Above, a small plane flies near Manassas, Virginia



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The aircraft are registered to front companies and are used to track the targets of federal investigations. Above, flight tracking records for the N539MY plane show the aircraft making circles in Virginia

US law enforcement officials 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.

A report last year from the [Wall Street Journal](#) detailed a new US Marshals Service program that used so-called 'dirtboxes' that trick thousands of cell phones to send out identifying data to a fake cellphone tower so authorities can pinpoint a suspect to within ten feet.

The program drew comparisons to the National Security Agency's dragnet surveillance of cellphone records for

collecting the data of tens of thousands of Americans not suspected of a crime.

The technology also allows authorities to pull data from target phones such as pictures or texts.

It is not clear if any of the FBI flights were outfitted with dirtboxes.

Officials said that practice, which mimics cell towers and gets phones to reveal basic subscriber information, is rare.

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FBI operating fleet of planes with surveillance technology





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The planes are thought to use surveillance equipment, such as the large ball above created by WESCAM, attached to the left side of the planes as they make counter-clockwise circles around areas

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 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.

A spokesman for the FBI told the [Washington Post](#) that his agency had not used to cellphone technology, which he called 'cell-site simulators', during the protests.

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 the District of Columbia, most with Cessna 182T Skylane aircraft.

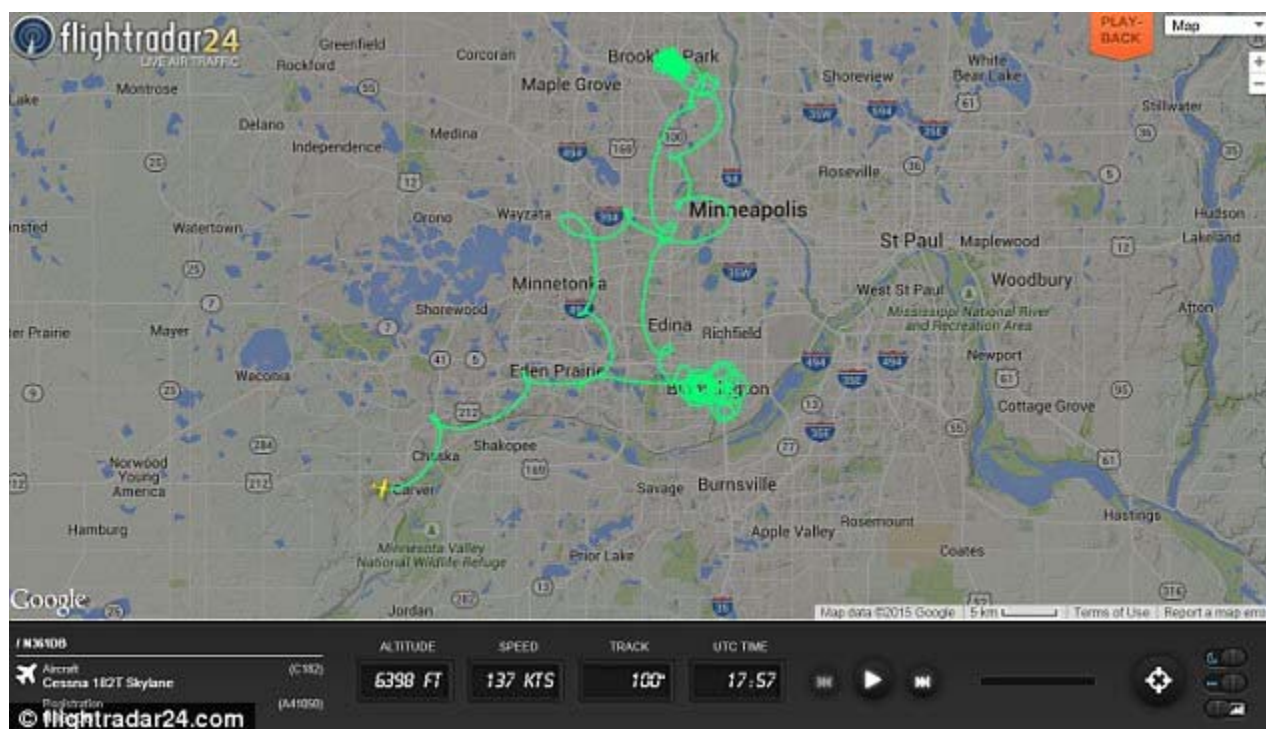
These included parts of Houston, Phoenix, Seattle, Chicago, Boston, Minneapolis and Southern California.

Evolving technology can record higher-quality video from long distances, even at night, and can capture certain identifying information from cellphones using the cell-site simulators — 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.



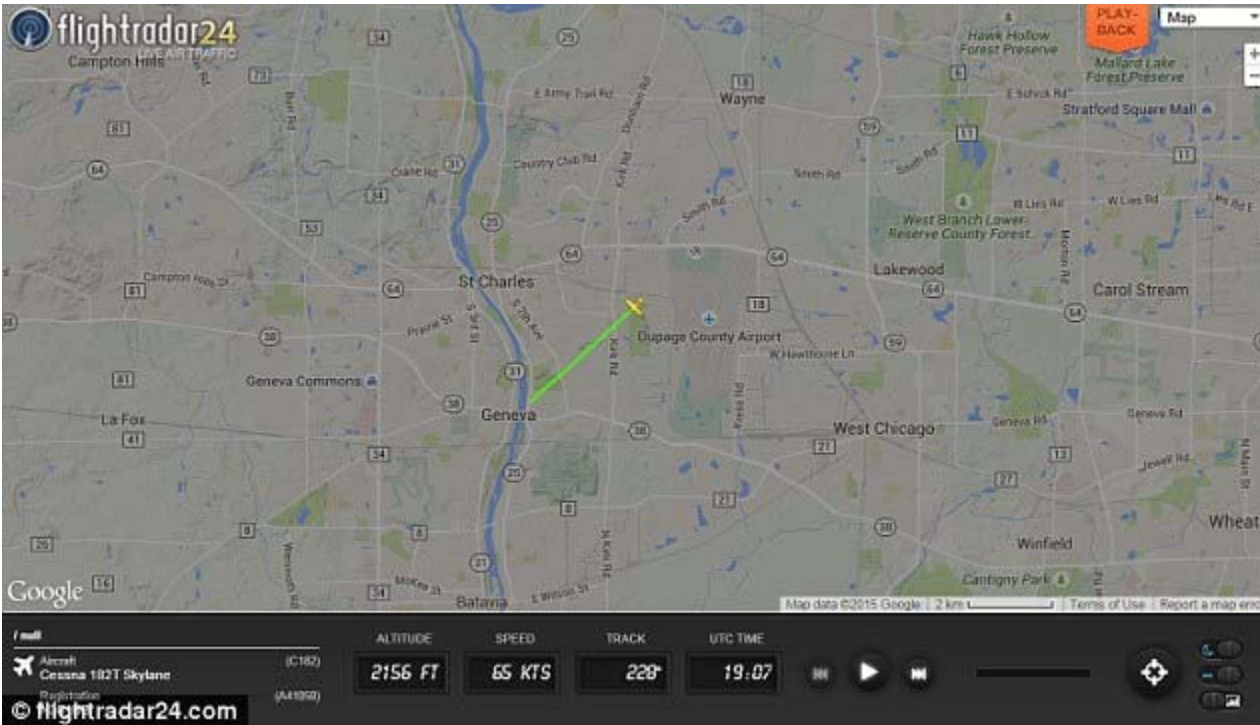
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Though officials said that cellphone surveillance is rare, flights in recent weeks orbited around large, enclosed buildings such as the Mall of America (center) in Minnesota



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A federal budget document from 2010 mentioned at least 115 planes, including 90 Cessna aircraft, in the FBI's surveillance fleet. Above, a flight outside of Chicago

One Minnesota resident who tracked the circular flight patterns of a recent flight told the [Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#) that beyond issues of civil liberties, he was concerned about the secrecy of the missions.

'Why don't we just say these are official things, rather than clouding them in three-letter contract companies?' he said.

'I would feel better if these guys just flew the colors. I think we would all be better off.'

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 \$5.1million for the program.

Recently, independent journalists and websites have cited companies traced to post office boxes in Virginia, 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 US 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.



© Bloomberg via Getty Images

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The planes' technology is able to record high-quality video from above and in rare instances was able to pick up cellphone data from thousands of Americans not suspected of any crimes

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 US 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 that 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.

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 [ibabway](#), orrick CA, United States, 3 minutes ago


ig live our national hero...Edward Snowden!!!

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 [ibabway](#), orrick CA, United States, 4 minutes ago


nyone remember when yobama was running for the 1st time and said we needed to reduce/curtail/stop dubya's over surveillance of law abiding americans? I do. just curious if you do too.

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 [ain14](#), Uhhmerica, United States, 11 minutes ago


understand why so many people get upset at government surveillance when they will all willingly give every piece of information required to create a gmail, purchase something online, or make a social media account. Not to mention the even more ridiculous fact that if something did go down these same people would be moaning and whining and complaining about where was the intelligence and the government could have and should have done more.

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 [sa](#), Windham, United States, 16 minutes ago

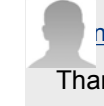
ne more time. If you want privacy, ditch your cell phone, dig a hole and crawl in it then cover it. Oh and don't tell anyone where you are going.

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 [pixie](#), Newcastle, United Kingdom, about an hour ago


ould have thought that they would be a bit more cunning with the chouce of names for the companies - should just nave spoken to the CIA before they picked the company names. The ones that the CIA had were much better: At a guess I'd say this is the most likely list; FVX RESEARCH KQM AVIATION LCB LEASING NATIONAL AIRCRAFT LEASING CORP NBR AVIATION NBY PRODUCTIONS NG RESEARCH NORTHWEST AIRCRAFT LEASING CORP OBR LEASING OTV LEASING PSL SURVEYS PXW SERVICES RKT PRODUCTIONS SOUTHWEST AIRCRAFT LEASING CORP WORLDWIDE AIRCRAFT LEASING CORP

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 [nt](#), Phoenix, 6 minutes ago

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 [8](#), Greenville, United States, about an hour ago

è're the threat?

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 [ne](#), California, United States, about an hour ago

Thank God there are 300M people with guns.

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[n92](#), boston, United States, about an hour ago

ctic was used after the Boston Bombings to keep track of the person who gave the gun to one of them. Not really new news ands it's effective..

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[mes](#), New York, United States, about an hour ago

; Paul was right.

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, Hsrridon, United States, about 2 hours ago

is Rand Paul when u need him? Unless he has a cape, I don't think there is much he can do.

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[sher112234](#), Charlotte, United States, about 2 hours ago

government fears the people, there is liberty. When the people fear the government, there is tyranny." - Thomas Jefferson, may he rest in piece.

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