Centers Tap Into Personal Databases

State Groups Were Formed After 9/11

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Intelligence centers run by states across the country have access to personal information about millions of Americans, including unlisted cellphone numbers, insurance claims, driver's license photographs and credit reports, according to a document obtained by The Washington Post.

One center also has access to top-secret data systems at the CIA, the document shows, though it's not clear what information those systems contain.

Dozens of the organizations known as fusion centers were created after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to identify potential threats and improve the way information is shared. The centers use law enforcement analysts and sophisticated computer systems to compile, or fuse, disparate tips and clues and pass along the refined information to other agencies. They are expected to play important roles in national information-sharing networks that link local, state and federal authorities and enable them to automatically sift their storehouses of records for patterns and clues.

Though officials have publicly discussed the fusion centers' importance to national security, they have generally declined to elaborate on the centers' activities. But a document that lists resources used by the fusion centers shows how a dozen of the organizations in the northeastern United States rely far more on access to commercial and government databases than had previously been disclosed.

Those details have come to light at a time of debate about domestic intelligence efforts, including eavesdropping and data-aggregation programs at the National Security Agency, and whether the government has enough protections in place to prevent abuses.

The list of information resources was part of a survey conducted last year, officials familiar with the effort said. It shows that, like most police agencies, the fusion centers have subscriptions to private information-broker services that keep records about Americans' locations, financial holdings, associates, relatives, firearms licenses and the like.

Centers serving New York and other states also tap into a Federal Trade Commission database with information about hundreds of thousands of identity-theft reports, the document and police interviews show.

Pennsylvania buys credit reports and uses face-recognition software to examine driver's license photos, while analysts in Rhode Island have access to car-rental databases. In Maryland, authorities rely on a little-known data broker called Entersect, which claims it maintains 12 billion records about 98 percent of Americans.
In its online promotional material, Entersect calls itself "the silent partner to municipal, county, state, and federal justice agencies who access our databases every day to locate subjects, develop background information, secure information from a cellular or unlisted number, and much more."

Police officials said fusion center analysts are trained to use the information responsibly, legally and only on authorized criminal and counterterrorism cases. They stressed the importance of secret and public data in rooting out obscure threats.

"There is never ever enough information when it comes to terrorism" said Maj. Steven G. O'Donnell, deputy superintendent of the Rhode Island State Police. "That's what post-9/11 is about."

Government watchdogs, along with some police and intelligence officials, said they worry that the fusion centers do not have enough oversight and are not open enough with the public, in part because they operate under various state rules.

"Fusion centers have grown, really, off the radar screen of public accountability," said Jim Dempsey, vice president for public policy at the Center for Democracy and Technology, a nonpartisan watchdog group in the District. "Congress and the state legislatures need to get a handle over what is going on at all these fusion centers."

Fusion centers were formed in the wake of revelations that counterterrorism and law enforcement authorities missed or neglected evidence that the Sept. 11 attackers were in the United States while preparing to strike.

Because they are organized by the states, the centers have developed in different ways. Some are small operations focused on crime, while others are full-fledged criminal and counterterrorism operations. From 2004 to 2007, state and local governments received $254 million from the Department of Homeland Security in support of the centers, which are also supported by employees of the FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies. In some cases, they work with the U.S. Northern Command, the Pentagon operation involved in homeland security.

The centers have been criticized for being secretive, but authorities said that this is largely for security reasons. Activists want to know more about their activities, the kinds of information they collect and how the information is being used.

The Electronic Privacy Information Center filed a lawsuit in Virginia last month seeking the release of records about communication among state fusion center officials and the departments of Homeland Security and Justice. Marc Rotenberg, the privacy center's executive director, said his group was responding to a proposed state law that would sharply limit access to records about the fusion centers' activity.

Sue Reingold, deputy program manager in the Information Sharing Environment office, a federal operation with a mandate to improve information sharing, said state and local officials "must have access to a broad array of classified and unclassified information" to perform their mission. But Reingold said that an "important part of this is appropriate training and oversight that is well understood and transparent to the public."

"Fusion centers are vital to state and local efforts to fight crime, including terrorism," she said.

The list includes a wide variety of data resources along with software that finds patterns and displays links
among people.

Most of the centers have subscriptions to Accurint, ChoicePoint's Autotrack or LexisNexis. These information brokers are Web-based services that deliver instant access to billions of records on individuals' homes, cars, phone numbers and other information.

Some of the centers link to records of currency transactions and almost 5 million suspicious-activity reports filed by financial institutions with the Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network.

Massachusetts and other states rely on LocatePlus, an information broker that claims that it provides "the most comprehensive cell phone, unlisted and unpublished phone database in the industry." The state also taps a private system called ClaimSearch that includes a "nationwide database that provides information on insurance claims, including vehicles, casualty claims and property claims," the document said.

The center in Ohio has access, through authorized users, to an FBI "secret level repository," the document said.

Rhode Island reported that it has access, also through the FBI, to "Top Secret resources" such as "Proton, which allows queries of CIA databases," the document shows. Officials at the Rhode Island State Police, FBI and CIA declined to discuss the system and the kinds of information it contains.

In addition to databases run by Entersect, Maryland fusion center analysts have access to wage and property records, corporate charters, utility records and a host of government files, including criminal justice information and traffic tickets. Jason Luckenbaugh, the center's chief of staff, acknowledged concern about the government's ability to tap into new sources of information. But he said the databases enable analysts to fight crime and protect against terrorism, and help local authorities do the same. "We're not trying to threaten them in any way," he said.
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