



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 15, 2014

## USPS Bemoans Massive Data Breach But Continues Surveillance Program

A spokesman for the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) revealed recently that more than 800,000 employees of the government-owned postal monopoly had “names, dates of birth, Social Security numbers, addresses, beginning and end dates of employment, [and] emergency contact information” exposed in a massive online data breach.

The [USPS statement](#) claims that customer data was also subject to the disclosure. In response, the agency is offering free credit monitoring to any customer whose data may have been illegally obtained in the incident.



Although there is no information on who may have perpetrated the breach, a story in the *Washington Post* reports that “some analysts say that targeting a federal agency such as the post office makes sense for China as an espionage tool.”

While such data breaches are lamentable, it is a bit ironic that an agency that has been carrying out an extensive secret surveillance operation for years would be so vigorous in its vendetta against the alleged hackers who exposed sensitive data of employees and customers.

An article published on October 28 in the *New York Times* reports on the USPS’s unconstitutional monitoring of the mail. The *Times* writes:

In a rare public accounting of its mass surveillance program, the United States Postal Service reported that it approved nearly 50,000 requests last year from law enforcement agencies and its own internal inspection unit to secretly monitor the mail of Americans for use in criminal and national security investigations.

The number of requests, contained in a 2014 audit of the surveillance program by the Postal Service’s inspector general, shows that the surveillance program is more extensive than previously disclosed and that oversight protecting Americans from potential abuses is lax.

The *Times* previously reported on the scope of this snail mail surveillance in an article published in July 2013.

The piece tells the story of Buffalo, New York, resident Leslie James Pickering. Pickering reports that in September 2012 he noticed “something odd in his mail:” a “handwritten card, apparently delivered by mistake, with instructions for postal workers to pay special attention to the letters and packages sent to his home,” the *Times* story claims.

The card — a picture of which appears in the *Times* story — appears to read: “Show all mail to supv” — supervisor — “for copying prior to going out on the street.” Pickering’s name was written on the card, as well as the word “Confidential,” written in green ink. Apparently, Pickering was the unwitting target of a “longtime surveillance system” the *Times* calls “mail covers.”



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The *Times* story published October 28, 2014 reports that the mail covers program:

is more than a century old, but is still considered a powerful investigative tool. At the request of state or federal law enforcement agencies or the Postal Inspection Service, postal workers record names, return addresses and any other information from the outside of letters and packages before they are delivered to a person's home.

Law enforcement officials say this deceptively old-fashioned method of collecting data provides a wealth of information about the businesses and associates of their targets, and can lead to bank and property records and even accomplices.

The mail covers operation isn't the whole story, however.

While snail mail surveillance has been a tool of law enforcement for over a century, the program that targeted Pickering is called Mail Isolation Control and Tracking. As part of this surveillance tactic, the "Postal Service computers photograph the exterior of every piece of paper mail that is processed in the United States — about 160 billion pieces last year. It is not known how long the government saves the images."

When combined, the NSA and the U.S. Postal Service can keep every form of communication — electronic and conventional — under constant surveillance, without probable cause. This last fact is a direct violation of the Fourth Amendment. The Fourth Amendment mandates that:

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

The *New York Times* describes how the mail monitoring program works:

At the request of law enforcement officials, postal workers record information from the outside of letters and parcels before they are delivered. (Actually opening the mail requires a warrant.) The information is sent to whatever law enforcement agency asked for it. Tens of thousands of pieces of mail each year undergo this scrutiny.

The Mail Isolation Control and Tracking program was created after the anthrax attacks in late 2001 that killed five people, including two postal workers. Highly secret, it seeped into public view last month when the F.B.I. cited it in its investigation of ricin-laced letters sent to President Obama and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. It enables the Postal Service to retroactively track mail correspondence at the request of law enforcement. No one disputes that it is sweeping.

The October 28 story reveals the existence of a third USPS surveillance program:

The Postal Service also uses a program called Mail Imaging, in which its computers photograph the exterior of every piece of paper mail sent in the United States. The program's primary purpose is to process the mail, but in some cases it is also used as a surveillance system that allows law enforcement agencies to request stored images of mail sent to and received by people they are investigating.

Again, while the exposure by hackers of the personal data of nearly a million USPS employees and customers is deplorable and should be investigated and the perpetrators prosecuted, perhaps the breach will give pause to the USPS in the carrying out of its own unconstitutional snooping program.



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Taken together, the number of surveillance tactics in use by the federal government places every American under the threat of constant surveillance. The courts, Congress, and the president have formed an unholy alliance bent on obliterating the Constitution and establishing a country where every citizen is a suspect and is perpetually under the never-blinking eye of the government.

The establishment will likely continue construction of the surveillance until the entire country is being watched around the clock and every monitored activity is recorded and made retrievable by agents who will have a dossier on every American.

The fight can yet be won, though. Americans can attack the sprawling surveillance state on several fronts. First, we must elect men and women to federal office who will honor their oaths of office to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution. Then, once in office, each of them must be held immediately accountable for each and every violation of that oath.

Next, we must fill our state legislatures with men and women who will refuse to enforce any act of the federal government that exceeds the boundaries of its constitutionally granted powers. These lawmakers must force the federal beast back inside its constitutional cage and never accept even a degree of deviation from the blueprint drawn in Philadelphia in 1787.

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