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Study used census information for terror profile

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U.S. census information provided by millions of Americans was used in a government study to profile airline passengers as terrorist risks.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration also obtained for its study the private information of hundreds of thousands of passengers flying Northwest Airlines, an action NASA denied to The Washington Times in September.

The government documents describing the study and its contents were obtained by the Electronic Privacy Information Center under Freedom of Information Act requests and posted on its Web site.

The NASA study highlights concerns among civil-liberties advocates that the government is gathering private information and even using its own data -- contrary to repeated official assurances from the Census Bureau -- to develop a data-mining system to prescreen all airline passengers.

It also comes in the wake of reports that JetBlue Airways gave a military contractor computer data on 1 million of its customers.

Bill Scannell, president of the group DontSpyOnUs.com, called the inclusion of census information "absolutely appalling."

"Information given by American citizens for reasonable demographics information has been turned around and used to spy on people. This sounds like East Berlin, circa '74," said Mr. Scannell, a privacy advocate.

"There is a certain amount of fumbling around going on," said Barry Steinhardt, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's technology and liberty program. "NASA is supposed to be engaged in space exploration."

The NASA study used the airline records of 439,381 passengers and concluded that researchers were able to "mine data sets with millions of examples and many features" to detect threats.

Data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau came from respondents to the 1990 census and included "information on both households and individuals," the NASA study said.

The NASA experiment used 5 million census records from each of two data sets it created, "one that stores household records and another that stores person records."

The Census Bureau's Web site says it protects confidentiality "through disclosure-information techniques."

However, Mr. Steinhardt, who sits on the Census Advisory Committee, said releasing information on households and individuals is "a major breach of trust."

"The advisory board specifically asked this question, whether they were providing data to any other government agency, and the answer was 'no,'" Mr. Steinhardt said. "We will have to look carefully at what they provided NASA and why."

NASA abandoned the study and returned the information to Northwest on Sept. 23 after it was revealed that JetBlue Airways had disclosed its passenger information for a Pentagon study.

An e-mail message from a NASA official to the airline said funding for the program had been eliminated.

"My interpretation is that NASA management decided that they did not want to continue working with passenger data in order to avoid creating the appearance that we are violating people's privacy," said Mark Schwabacher of NASA's Computational Sciences Division and a co-author of the profiling study.

The Washington Times reported on Sept. 27 that NASA officials requested systemwide passenger data from July, August and September 2001.

NASA initially said no "specific request" was made of the airline, and an airline official said he did not know whether the information was turned over and referred questions back to NASA.

However, Thomas A. Edwards, chief of NASA's Aviation Systems Division, said Northwest and NASA officials, at a Dec. 10, 2001, meeting, "did discuss whether passenger information would be of use in doing research. We didn't get to the point of making a specific request. It was really just talking about airline security."

NASA's letter to Northwest indicated that the records request was made Dec. 20, 2001.

The Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-Screening (CAPPS II) system under development by the Homeland Security Department will use passenger records that include name, address, phone number and date of birth. The information will be used to confirm the passenger's

identity and will be compared with criminal and terrorist watch lists.

A color-coded threat assessment will be assigned to each passenger: green for standard security, yellow for additional screening and red to prevent the passenger from boarding a plane.

Security officials estimate the error rate at 4 percent to 8 percent, which Mr. Steinhardt said "means 4 [million] to 8 million Americans will mistakenly be labeled as terrorists."

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