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Out of Control Policy Blog

How Long Before Someone Dies Because of an Unsecured Wireless Router?



Steven Titch

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According to an AP story out of Buffalo, N.Y., federal agents armed with assault weapons stormed a residence in the early morning hours last month looking for child porn on a home PC. The homeowner, whom the article did not identify, was roughed up and forced to the floor at gunpoint while agents accused him of being a creep and pervert.

Three hours later, after seizing the man's PC along with his own and his wife's iPhones and iPads, officials discovered no child porn and conceded that the raid had been a mistake.

It turned out that the resident had an unsecured wireless network, and that a neighbor—the actual culprit arrested a week later—had been using it to avoid detection. The AP does not say whether the Fed apologized for the raid, but the law enforcement community did its best to deflect blame. An official said that the homeowner would have avoided the confrontation if he had secured his home wireless network.

But even the AP article points out that the Feds could have easily determined that the network was unsecured before breaking down the door. And given that somewhat intelligent pedophiles know they can cover their tracks by finding and using someone else's Internet connection—the AP article lists several examples where it's been done—agents and their supervisors could have exercised some common sense before conducting a heavily-armed raid.

Here at Reason and formerly the Cato Institute, Randy Balko has been doing some terrific work detailing the cost police paramilitary tactics have had in terms of human life. A regular component of the drug war, these raids, often conducted for their theatrical value, too often end up targeting the wrong house or the wrong people with lethal results for innocent parties. To extend these militarized break-ins in a search for child porn, where the only evidence is an IP address, in a country where, as of 2007, an estimated 80 percent of home wireless networks were unsecured, is downright irresponsible. Police should not be using them; judges should not be approving them.

Besides, the whole (dubious) justification for a surprise, armed-to-the-teeth police raid is that the suspects themselves may be armed, and to prevent a drug stash from being quickly disposed of down a convenient toilet. Whatever you may say about their characters, collectors and distributors of child porn are not likely to be armed or violent, and a laptop or hard drive can't be erased within seconds. Even if an attempt to delete a disk is made, the data is likely to be recoverable.

Yes, it is wise to secure your home wireless network, but failure to do so is not a crime and certainly not an excuse for police to use when they wrongly terrorize you in your own home. The AP article doesn't say if the homeowner is pursuing any action against the federal government for the botched raid, but he should. Some expensive judgments today might, in the future, prevent a SWAT team from killing someone while attempting to seize a laptop, only to learn that the real culprit was a creep down the street who rigged a repeater with a potato chip can.

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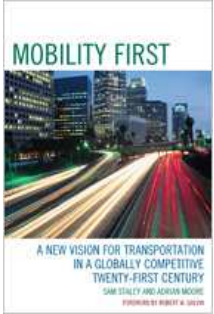
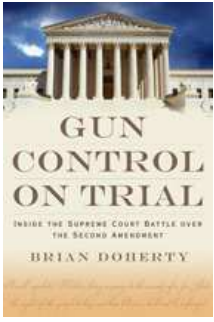
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