



## **USPS Surveilled Right-Wing Groups and Gun Rights Activists**

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The United States Postal Service spied on protesters in right-wing and gun-rights groups, according to documents obtained by a member of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C.

The Washington Times reports that documents indicate that postal inspectors were tracking the actions of gun-rights activists gathering in Richmond, Virginia, as well as right-wing groups headed to the District of Columbia after President Joe Biden's election.

Heavily redacted records were obtained and reviewed by Cato Institute senior fellow Patrick Eddington, who indicated that the records detailed the inspectors spying beginning in September 2020 through April 2021.

The surveillance reportedly included covert social media surveillance via the Internet Covert Operations Program, or iCOP. The documents offer a unique look at the depth and breadth of the Postal Service's monitoring system, which Eddington said was able to access every house and place of business in the nation.

"The Postal Service cannot reliably deliver mail to my own home, yet they can find the money and people to effectively digitally spy at scale, including on Americans engaged in First Amendment-protected activities," Eddington said.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service tracked "peaceful armed protests" by Virginians participating in a Second Amendment rally for "Lobby Day" in Richmond on January 18, 2021, according to a situational awareness bulletin with redactions that was made public in response to Mr. Eddington's Freedom of Information Act request.

"The gathering lasted approximately two hours, with members identifying themselves as affiliates of the Proud Boys, Boogaloo Bois and Last Sons of Liberty," the postal inspectors' bulletin said. "Counter-protesters from the Black Lives Matter movement also attended. With heavy law enforcement presence the demonstrations stayed peaceful in nature."

In addition to right-wing groups, the postal service also reportedly surveilled people preparing to demonstrate against police in Louisville, Kentucky, following an investigation into the police shooting of Breonna Taylor in 2020.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service said that its inspectors are federal law enforcement officers tasked with defending Postal Service staff, facilities, and customers when questioned about its surveillance of Americans.

“The U.S. Postal Inspection Service occasionally reviews publicly available information in order to assess potential safety or security threats to Postal Service employees, facilities, operations and infrastructure,” the agency said in a statement.

It has become a matter of debate whether the postal inspectors’ surveillance may not have had legal authorization to act as they did.

“We determined that certain proactive searches iCOP conducted using an open-source intelligence tool from February to April 2021 exceeded the Postal Inspection Service’s law enforcement authority,” the Postal Service watchdog said in a March audit. “Furthermore, we could not corroborate whether other work analysts completed from October 2018 through June 2021 was legally authorized.”