Study: Americans taking steps to hide online activities from U.S. government

By Ashley Carman

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In the wake of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden's document leaks, American adults have altered the ways in which they use technology, as well as their perspectives on U.S. intelligence operations, including the National Security Agency's (NSA) work.

Eighty-seven percent of Americans have heard at least something about government surveillance programs, and not surprisingly, 34 percent have taken "at least one step to hide or shield their information from the government," according to a new study from Pew Research Center.

For instance, 17 percent changed their privacy setting on social media; 15 percent use social medial less often; and 13 percent have avoided using certain terms in online communications.

More often than not, the adults taking evasive action have heard "a lot" about the surveillance programs and were likely to be under the age of 50.

The study was conducted among a sample of 475 adults, age 18 or older. Of those sampled, 245 were between the ages of 18 and 49, and 230 were over 50.

Although less than a quarter of Americans are making changes in their online behavior, Patrick Eddington, policy analyst, civil liberties and homeland security at the Cato Institute, said the was significant.

"There's literally a huge number of people who have taken a least some steps to shield themselves from the government," he said. "What's significant and troubling in the report is that a lot of people don't feel they know enough about privacy tools to make an informed judgment of what will work."

More than half of respondents believed it would be "somewhat" or "very" difficult to find tools and strategies that would help them be more private online or when using their cell phones. Thirty-nine percent did not know what anonymity software, such as Tor, was, for example, and 31 percent did not know about email encryption programs.

"This is an indication that public education needs to take place," Eddington said. "There are excellent privacy tools out there that are getting easier to use with each passing month."

Taking the survey one step further, respondents included their thoughts on the government's programs. Fifty-two percent described themselves as "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about government surveillance of Americans' data and electronic communications.