



Report: FBI has access to hundreds of millions of photos for facial recognition

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The FBI has access to hundreds of millions of identification photographs that can be used by facial recognition software. This revelation was criticized in a report that suggests the FBI needs to do more to ensure privacy and accuracy of individuals who have committed no crimes, but whose faces still exist in a government database.

If you drive a car or travel abroad, you've taken a photograph for identification purposes. But in many cases, that photo isn't solely used for your driver's license or your passport.

The FBI can access these photos for face recognition purposes, and there's a good chance that if you're in its database -- you're not aware of it.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently published a report on the FBI's face recognition capabilities. It found the Bureau could access hundreds of millions more photos than the public ever knew.

"They're supposed to do what's called a 'privacy impact assessment.' [They're] not just supposed to roll out major new systems that allow them to search information on Americans without allowing some kind of public comment," said Julian Sanchez, privacy expert at the Cato Institute.

The FBI admitted having a face recognition base of 30 million mugshot photos, but the GAO said they also had access to the State Department's Visa and passport and driver's license databases in several states.

Instead of 30 million photos, these additional databases gave the FBI access to nearly 412 million images.

"Whatever method they choose to use and can use always has to be approved by a court and should also be affirmed by the American people through Congress," Sen. James Lankford (R-Oklahoma) said.

The FBI responded to criticism through a Justice Department statement.

"These photos, as with any other investigative lead or evidence, cannot be collected in violation of an individual's constitutional rights," read the April 25 statement.

But experts said most of the images available to the FBI are of people who never broke the law.

The FBI now has access to driver's licenses, mugshots and correction photos in four states and driver's license photos in 12 more states. Nineteen additional states plus D.C. are considering allowing the FBI access to driver's license photos for face recognition purposes.

Many question if the FBI is trading the right to privacy for more security, or if this is just blatant recklessness in data collection.

"As a rule, you should try not to attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence," said Sanchez.