



What's the hang-up with collecting phone data?

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Congress is trying to decide whether to change the way spy agencies collect bulk phone data on Americans. Earlier this week, the House decided to end government collection of our phone records.

We wondered, what if you did a cost-benefit analysis of all that metadata? Is it worth all the trouble? We're talking about huge amounts of data here.

The National Security Agency stores phone company billing information for calls made and received in the U.S. — which numbers called other numbers and when. So what does that cost? Well, let's just say in this case, talk is not cheap.

[John Mueller](#), a political scientist at Ohio State and the libertarian Cato Institute, says it's in excess of \$100 million a year.

Mueller got that number by estimating what the phone companies spend to gather and store their billing records, and adding in some extra for the cost of NSA analysis.

That's really hard to measure, though, because it's classified.

"You get sort of a range," Mueller says. "It's not trillions of dollars, by any means, and so you have fairly substantial money being spent on it."

OK, now the benefit part of our cost-benefit analysis. A presidential commission has looked into that.

"There's no benefit," says [Richard Clarke](#), who worked as a counter-terrorism adviser in the White House and was on the commission. He says all the phone record metadata wasn't instrumental in preventing any terrorist attacks.

Clarke says the NSA has done its own cost-benefit analysis of its bulk collection of U.S. phone records.

“Some people at NSA told us that if Snowden hadn’t leaked this thing, they probably would have terminated it anyway,” he says, referring to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

So the commission said, "The phone companies already keep these records. Why should the NSA store them, too? Let’s keep them at the phone company. The NSA can get them with a court order."

“We found that it was useful to have the ability to find out who has contacted whom," says [Peter Swire](#), another member of the commission. He teaches privacy and cybersecurity at Georgia Tech. "We believed the better way to do it was not a huge government warehouse.”

Swire says phone records may not be instrumental in preventing terrorist attacks, but they can help, so they should be available to the NSA. Just not at the NSA’s fingertips.