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Official Report: NSA Spied on 89,138 'Targets' Last Year

By Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai
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The overseer of U.S. intelligence agencies released its first transparency report on Friday, detailing the scope of NSA surveillance last year.

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence revealed that the NSA spied on 89,138 "targets" under its PRISM program — and that the spy agency needed just one order from the federal surveillance court to obtain permission for its spying, according to the report, which was posted on the intelligence community's Tumblr.

The report, however, noted that a "target" might refer to an individual, a group, a foreign power or "an organization composed of multiple individuals." In other words, the figure might not indicate the actual number of people targeted by the NSA, according to privacy experts and civil liberties advocates.

Julian Sanchez, a researcher at the Cato Institute who focuses on technology and civil liberties, said the number "hugely undercounts people intercepted."



Julian Sanchez
@normative



Each individual human target will correspond with dozens or hundreds or others. And many "targets" likely to be groups or corporations.

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2 RETWEETS 2 FAVORITES



The report also disclosed information about the controversial NSA telephone metadata collection program, revealing that the NSA targeted 248 "known or presumed U.S. persons" in 2013.

Privacy experts said that low number obscures the broad sweep of data collection.

"They're collecting everybody's records to get information about only 248 people," Amie Stepanovich, the Senior Policy Counsel at the civil rights organization Access, told *Mashable*.

A panel of experts appointed by President Barack Obama and the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board, an independent government privacy watchdog, have both deemed the metadata program illegal and ineffective with a "minimal" value for terrorism investigations.

The report also included information on the secretive data requests from U.S. government agencies — particularly the FBI — known as National Security Letters (NSL).

Last year, the government sent 19,212 data requests. But it is unclear how many people were actually targeted, since the FBI is not required to track the number of individuals or organizations targeted, according to the report.

The transparency report comes more than a year after President Obama ordered the declassification of as much information as possible about the surveillance programs. The extent of NSA surveillance was first revealed when information from hundreds of thousands of secret documents leaked by Edward Snowden was published.