

The FBI's Growing Surveillance Gap

It's not like they missed the red flags, it's just that it was one red flag in a great big pile of red flags. Garrett M. Graff writes in [reported](#) that the Bureau was watching 48 people intensely, a number that is towards the upper limit of the FBI's regular surveillance resources.

That means that even of the 1,000 American citizens and residents that the government believes are most at-risk of executing a terror attacks—the top .0003 percent most radical threats among the nation's 330,000,000 residents—only around 5 to 10 percent are under 24-hour watch. The other 90 to 95 percent might face varying levels of surveillance, including periodic physical checks, wiretaps or email monitoring, but it's far from a foolproof security blanket, as at least one case in the last year violently illustrated.

Monitoring just the FBI's so-called “terrorist watch list,” another list of known or suspected terrorist or their associates, or “No Fly List” outstrips the government's surveillance capabilities day-to-day. Somewhere around 300 to 500 U.S. permanent residents and citizens are on the [16,000 people](#) on the U.S. government's “No Fly List,” and while the vast majority are foreigners, even watching only the “fewer than 500 U.S. persons” on that list would far surpass the FBI's ability to surveil suspects for an extended period of time.

During a telephone conference call a year ago with local and state law enforcement leaders, FBI Director James Comey acknowledged that his resources were stretched thin and asked police chiefs around the country for [reported](#) “a ‘panic’ and ‘crisis’ inside the FBI because the agency and

the rest of the nation's homeland security infrastructure are not built to deal with the non-stop flow of homegrown extremists and possible threats that mark the current environment within the U.S."

It's a problem that's not unique to the United States: European police and intelligence have found themselves swamped by the sheer scale of ISIL's potential recruits. In the wake of the Paris attack and police raids across Brussels, one investigator [a lot of criticism](#) of us," the investigator said. "But we don't have big budgets. We are just a small service. We are overwhelmed." A U.S. observer, after meeting with Belgium police, [reported](#) last year, **"Surveillance files have been opened on more than 5,000 suspected Islamic extremists in France, but security services only have the manpower and resources to monitor a small fraction of these numbers."**

A year after Comey's conference call with U.S. police leaders, the situation remains dire. Even as the Orlando shooting underscores the danger of the would-be jihadist, the Bureau faces a daily resource crunch: Intensive, round-the-clock surveillance is simply too demanding to sustain on a given suspect for extended time periods. Thorough coverage of a single individual requires as many as 30 to 40 agents, technicians and analysts. "That's not just people—that's dollars, that's man hours, that's technology. You're potentially tracking their cars, their phones, their computers," explains one senior intelligence official. "It's not just the people following around town, there's a whole infrastructure behind them."

Compared to its sprawling national mission—which encompasses everything from investigating bank robberies and white collar crime to gang task forces, drug cases, organized crime, public corruption, and counterterrorism,

all spread across 56 field offices and 400 smaller resident agencies—the FBI is actually a relatively small agency. Its agent corps of around 13,000 is roughly equivalent to the size of the Chicago Police Department and about 40 percent of the size of the NYPD. Despite the billions poured into counterterrorism, the agent corps is only about 20 percent larger than it was before 9/11, and those ranks have been worn down: Washington’s budget squabbles and sequestration led in recent years to a [call transcript](#). “’Cause, ah, it’s the easiest target and, ah, the most common is the easiest for me.” Rahim had been under heavy surveillance for some time, but the call encouraged the Joint Terrorism Task Force to approach him for questioning—which is when he pulled the knife, leading to the fatal gunfire. “This was an investigation that was ongoing. It required 24-7 surveillance of the individual in question,” Boston Police Commissioner William Evans [at the time](#).

The need to marshal and deploy scarce resources in the face of a growing threat is also one key reason the FBI has dramatically increased its use of informant-aided terrorism stings over recent years. The *New York Times* [Dallas](#) and in Springfield, Illinois, had used separate undercover stings to arrest two men who intended to blow up major buildings. Agents waited until the would-be terrorists had parked the vehicles loaded with informant-provided inert explosives and walked away to escape the detonation, and then made the arrest. The cases were considered a watershed—so much so that the fake pickup truck bomb used by the FBI was put on display at the Hoover Building in Washington.

In the years since, scores of individuals have been escorted down the path to a planned attack by FBI undercover informants, and the practice has attracted [wrote](#) in *the New York Times*, “This is legal, but is it legitimate? Without the F.B.I., would the culprits commit

violence on their own? Is cultivating potential terrorists the best use of the manpower designed to find the real ones? Judging by their official answers, the F.B.I. and the Justice Department are sure of themselves—too sure, perhaps.”

Two years ago, former FBI Director Robert Mueller faced