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Americans uneasy about surveillance but often use snooping tools, Post poll finds

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Julie Beliveau's 16-year-old daughter, a new driver, was heading from her home in Ashburn toward a job interview the other night when she found herself in Leesburg — the wrong direction entirely. Upset and fearing that she'd blow the interview, she called her mother, who instantly launched her tracking program.

"I just opened my phone, and I could see where she was," Beliveau said. Mother guided daughter to the interview, where she got the job. Score one for surveillance.

Yet Beliveau says she would never use the program just casually to check her daughter's whereabouts. "That's going over the line," she said.

Amid this year's revelations about the federal government's vast apparatus for tracking the movements and communications of people worldwide, Americans are uneasy with the extent of surveillance yet often use snooping tools in their own lives, a Washington Post poll has found.

The sweet spot between liberty and security has been hard to pinpoint ever since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. Remarkable advances in information technology have enabled counterterrorism tactics far more sweeping and intrusive — and powerful — than the United States had ever deployed. At the same time, the relationship between consumers and businesses was elementally altered as mobile phones, GPS, Google and Facebook gave corporations a new capacity to track their customers' behavior.

This year, in the months since former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden leaked secret documents detailing U.S. surveillance programs, it has become clear that there are not yet widely accepted norms about who may watch whom and when and where tracking is justified. The Post's poll found that Americans' attitudes about surveillance are anything but consistent, whether the sample is the entire nation or a single, conflicted person.

Nearly seven in 10 Americans are concerned about how much personal information government agencies and private companies collect, the poll found. But among parents 40 or older — the group most likely to have teenagers — 70 percent said they monitor the Web sites their children visit. Many also review their kids' texts, e-mails and social-media use. A small number of Americans also report tracking the movements of their spouses or using video feeds to monitor elderly parents.

Northern Virginia tech entrepreneur Zachary Thompson, 30, is typical in disliking government surveillance but embracing similar tools in his own life. Thompson, who owns an Internet service provider, YellowFiber Networks, has had to respond to federal court orders to hand over user data. "It sucks, to be blunt, because there's nothing you can do," he said.

But when it comes to his daughter — not yet 2 years old — he already plans to track her in a way that parents a generation ago could hardly have imagined. He and others said a parent's relationship with a child is fundamentally different from a government's with its citizens.

"I fully anticipate when she comes of age putting up a fire wall and monitoring everything she does," he said. "That's a parent's responsibility."

In Ashburn, the sprawling Northern Virginia suburb where development was supercharged by Loudoun County's 1990s tech boom, massive data centers — the guts of the Internet — have replaced farms along rolling, formerly rural roads. People in Ashburn have lived and worked with the Internet since it first became widely used, yet even here, in townhouse communities and estate home developments built hard by the data centers, residents wrestle with how to distinguish between useful surveillance and unacceptable intrusions — by the NSA, by private companies and by family members.

Attitudes toward surveillance often vary depending on who is doing it and how clear the purpose is. Beliveau, for example, does not mind the tracking the government does to sniff out potential terrorists, because she believes innocent people have nothing to fear.

She is not particularly bothered by the intimate knowledge Wegmans collects about her grocery shopping, because she gains from the exchange — the store offers her discounts. But she finds the storehouse of information that Facebook and Google collect about users to be creepy and intrusive, because she does not see any benefit from giving them her data.

Nothing to hide

Go ahead, listen to my calls, track my movements, said Terry Brickerd, mother of college and high school students and vice president of the Broad Run High parents association: "I don't care. I don't have anything to hide. Because they're not listening to us individually — they look for patterns. So what's the big deal? I mean, without that, how many terror attacks would we have?"

Brickerd does not mind when companies track her purchases and online searches, either. "I'm glad American Express tracks me, because twice they've called me when something unusual happened, and that protected me," she said.

The Post poll found Americans almost equally bothered by government surveillance as they are by corporate snooping, with 69 percent concerned about tracking by Internet search and social-media companies and 66 percent worried about what the government does. Overall, more-educated and affluent Americans were less likely to be concerned about surveillance. Political conservatives tended to be more concerned about government surveillance.

The survey did not find significant differences in attitudes toward government surveillance across age groups. Forty-five percent of Americans younger than 30, more than any other age group, said they were "very concerned" about how sites such as Facebook and Twitter use their information.

"What privacy? On the Internet, there is almost no privacy," said Austin McCuiston, 19, a food runner at Ford's Fish Shack in Ashburn, near the epicenter of Loudoun's 4.5 million square feet of data centers. He is very cautious about what he posts on Facebook or other Internet services. "People can take that stuff and really dig into your life."

Bob Moses, 50, an information technology worker for the AFL-CIO, said he would like more anonymity when he shops online, but he understands that Google and others offer their services without charge and need a way to make money.

"For that, I give up some of my rights," Moses said. "It's a trade-off I accept, at least right now." He's similarly sanguine about the government's tracking. "It's not the details that the NSA is harvesting, but it's the relationships," he said. "If you've got something to hide, then you ought to be worried about it."

Moses appreciates technology's capacity to keep his family safe. When his children were younger, he demanded to be their friends on Facebook so he could monitor their activity. He recently helped a colleague buy a "granny cam" for the home of her elderly mother, who struggles with dementia. And he used an AT&T service called "FamilyMap" to track the movements of his children, ages 17 and 22 — stopping with his older child only when she moved out of the house.

"It's peace of mind," Moses said. "It's the 21st-century family."

Most Americans seem to have made their peace with video surveillance cameras, which are now widely used by governments and businesses, especially in densely populated areas. In The Post's poll, more than four out of five Americans were comfortable with the number of cameras in use or even would favor having more installed. Only 14 percent would like to see fewer cameras.

But about half of Americans wanted limits on how long police may keep location data on citizens. Such data are collected by advanced video surveillance systems, license-plate readers and other technologies.

"Whatever you do on your phone, you shouldn't mind anybody seeing it," said Nia Farmer, 18, a student at Howard University whose family owns a place in Ashburn Village. She is fine with NSA efforts to locate terrorists, even if it means collecting information from her phone. "That's all there to protect us," she said.

Farmer is even fine with her mother's insistence on tracking her whereabouts until she turns 25. After all, her mother has been watching her movements remotely since she got her first phone at age 10. "Legally, I'm an adult," Farmer said, "but I keep it on for her because it's all about staying safe. Anyway, if I turn off the app, she gets right on the phone, so I might as well just keep it on."

In the few years since smartphones, social media and the plummeting cost of video technology made it cheap and easy for people to track each other, Americans have grown so comfortable with these technologies that large majorities say they take little or no precautions to protect their digital privacy. Nearly six in 10 Internet users do not use tools that can block Web sites from tracking their behavior, seven in 10 say they have not deleted online posts that might be embarrassing, and more than eight in 10 say they never encrypt their communications or use tools that allow people to browse anonymously.

Those who act to defend their data are more likely to be male, conservative and well educated.

John Burke, 70, is retired from a career in federal law enforcement and has been disappointed, even angered, by news reports about the NSA's approach to collecting data from U.S. citizens. Burke eschews Facebook and other social media, avoids giving out his Social Security number and tries to steer clear of businesses that sell customer information to other marketers, but he wonders if the effort is worthwhile. "I doubt my precautions are very effective," he said. "We really have no way of knowing what anyone does with our information, and especially what the government does."

Many Americans expressed similar concerns; the poll found that only 9 percent of Internet users are "very confident" that their efforts will protect their privacy. That lack of clarity drives some people to search for new ways to protect their information, while others shrug and conclude that they are powerless.

"What worries you is sometimes you don't know what the scope of it or the scale of it is," said Tarek El-Ghazawi, 55, a computer engineering professor and director of the High Performance Computing Lab at George Washington University's campus in Ashburn. "But you know you are giving up part of your life."

El-Ghazawi, a U.S. citizen who emigrated from Egypt three decades ago and has seen many other societies through his travel for work, said that, by comparison, he trusts that the press, Congress and the courts will help curb the NSA's excesses.

"These are things that are missing in many countries," he said. "I'm not saying that the government is perfect. I'm just saying that the government may be self-correcting over time."

But he does not see similar protections against overreach by private companies. "They are trying to make a quick profit," he said, "and there's not a standard in terms of ethics."

Every time she goes to a CVS, Peggy Brown gets evidence that the drugstore tracks her purchases. The personalized discount offer she is handed with her receipt "shows that they know what medications I've gotten," she said. "And that bothers me more than what the government's doing, because they're doing things to protect us."

But Brown, 59 and a recent retiree from a job in a medical office, figures there is little the average person can do to protect personal data. "Everything just gets more and more exposed," she said.

Some of those who decide not to monitor family members argue that using such technologies undermines trust, effectively declaring that ordinary human connections are insufficient.

Jessica Beliveau, a junior at Broad Run High School and Julie Beliveau's niece, said she appreciates her mother Lynne's decision not to track her whereabouts. "I feel there should be some things that parents don't necessarily know," Jessica said. "And anyway, in the past, before all this technology, most kids turned out just fine."

For families, a fine line?

But many parents say they would be shirking their responsibility if they did not take advantage of available technology to monitor their children's online behavior.

One mother in Ashburn who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid embarrassing her child, said she and her husband read through their middle-school-age daughter's Facebook chat transcripts and discovered that boys had been pressuring her to send revealing photos of herself. The parents intervened and prevented a sexting incident; now, a few years later, they have decided not to monitor their daughter's Facebook

account, to teach her the benefits of trust.

The struggle over just how much to watch varies from family to family, and no clear guidelines have emerged, according to school counselors. Some teens are now being monitored not only by parents but also by their schools, a few thousand of which have contracted with a California company, Geo Listening, to sift through students' social-media postings to look for potentially dangerous situations.

As attitudes shift, businesses keep coming up with new ways for consumers to keep tabs on relatives, friends and colleagues.

Although the Post poll found that only 6 percent of those surveyed use "granny cams" to monitor elderly relatives, market research indicates that the popularity of such products is likely to grow sharply. Life360, an app that allows families or friends to share their locations on their phones, has been downloaded more than 60 million times. "More children than adults say they feel safer" when their location is being monitored, said Amanda Zweerink, a Life360 vice president.

Julia Roberts, a 48-year-old writer who uses Life360 to check on her children, ages 12 and 14, and her husband, started using the program even before her kids ventured out on their own, to get them used to the idea that mother would always be watching.

"I pay for their phones, so it's part of the bargain," she said. Her daughter, who is 12, protests against the monitoring, but Roberts responds that even parents in past generations kept tabs on kids. "I always had to give my mother an itinerary of where I was going to be," she said.

Roberts said that if she is going to use technology to keep her family safe, it is reasonable for the government to do the same to protect the nation. "I don't care if somebody in the government listens to my phone calls," she said. "I don't mind being checked on. I don't mind being tracked. And our children will care even less, because they're growing up with all this, always connected. It's just who we are."

Peyton Craighill and Scott Clement contributed to this report. The poll was conducted Nov. 14 to 17 among a random national sample of 1,006 adults, including land-line and cellphone respondents. Overall results have a margin of sampling error of 3.5 percentage points.