

Airlines Are Selling Your Data to ICE

BY

KATYA SCHWENK

An aviation industry clearinghouse is collecting data on air travelers from billions of flights — and selling it to Trump’s immigration enforcers.

A massive aviation industry clearinghouse that processes data for twelve billion passenger flights per year is selling that information to the Trump administration amid the White House’s new immigration crackdown, according to documents reviewed by the *Lever*.

The data — including “full flight itineraries, passenger name records, and financial details, which are otherwise difficult or impossible to obtain” for past and future flights — is fed into a secretive government intelligence operation called the Travel Intelligence Program and provided to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal agencies, records reveal.

Details of this program were outlined in procurement documents released Wednesday by ICE, which is a division of the Department of Homeland Security.

Privacy and travel industry experts interviewed by the *Lever* said that law enforcement’s access to such a vast database — with little information on what privacy or other restrictions are in place — raises serious civil liberties concerns.

“This is probably the single most significant aggregated repository of data about American air travelers,” said Edward Hasbrouck, an expert in travel data privacy. “That the government has gotten access to it is a very big deal.”

When a passenger buys a flight through a travel agency — including via common online booking sites like Booking.com or Expedia — the transaction is fed through the Airlines Reporting Corporation (ARC), which acts as an intermediary between travel agencies and airlines.

So, although most airline passengers have never heard of the ARC, there's a good chance that their data has, at some point, passed through the company. Its dataset includes information on 54 percent of all flights taken globally, according to the company's website.

In a statement to the *Lever*, a spokesperson for the company said that the Travel Intelligence Program “was established after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to provide certain data to law enforcement . . . for the purpose of national security matters” and criminal investigations.

The spokesperson declined to answer questions about whether clients outside the US government have access to the data.

The company is jointly owned by nine major airlines, most of which are US-based: Delta, Southwest, United, American Airlines, Alaska Airlines, JetBlue, Air Canada, Lufthansa, and Air France. But more than two hundred airlines settle tickets through the ARC, giving the company unparalleled, comprehensive access to passenger data.

The company claims to manage the database in partnership with the International Air Transport Association, the primary lobbying group for airlines.

Consumer advocates have already been concerned about the monopoly that the ARC has established over airline passenger data. Because no other comparable financial clearinghouse exists in aviation, there's no alternative for travel agencies or consumers to use instead.

“[The company] has long had a virtual monopoly on processing airline bookings,” explained Bill McGee, a senior fellow for aviation and travel at the American Economic Liberties Project, a consumer protection watchdog organization. Through this, McGee explained, the ARC “collects massive amounts of personal data on consumers, including information on finances, travel itineraries, shopping patterns.”

“To hear that ARC is now selling such personal information to the government is rather chilling,” McGee said.

The *Lever* contacted each of the nine airlines that are shareholders of the ARC for this story. United Airlines declined to comment, referring questions instead to the Department of Homeland Security;

the others did not reply.

“Over One Billion Records”

The Airlines Reporting Corporation has for many years provided commercial access to high-level data, offering travel trend reports and transaction data for a price. But several experts interviewed by the *Lever* said they were completely unaware that the company was providing its data to the government.

“I have never seen government access to ARC — or even ARC itself — mentioned in an airline privacy policy or a travel agency policy,” Hasbrouck said. “Never.”

Jay Stanley, a senior policy analyst focusing on privacy at the American Civil Liberties Union, said that the program appears to have “flown by and below the radar.”

“Why is [ARC] turning into a side business of selling data about people’s travels to the Trump administration?” Stanley asked, saying that the documents raised “a lot of serious questions.”

Federal law enforcement has other ways to access flight data. Already, US Customs and Border Protection demands that airlines hand over passenger records for every flight that passes through the United States, and there have been reports in the past of federal law enforcement, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessing passenger data through travel agencies’ reservation systems and other intermediaries.

But the new documents indicate that the ARC provides data that federal law enforcement cannot obtain elsewhere.

In the documents — published to provide notice that ICE is entering into a no-bid contract with the company — officials write that the ARC database “is the only company in the U.S. that provides this level of real-time travel data access to law enforcement.”

The ARC provides this data to ICE and Department of Homeland Security analysts through the Travel Intelligence Program, which is described in the documents as proprietary software.

“The [Travel Intelligence Program] database holds over one billion records, spanning 39 months of past and future travel data — an unparalleled intelligence resource,” the documents say.

In this database, “analysts gain unrestricted access to all sold ticket databases, enabling targeted searches by name or credit card number,” the documents continue.

The data is useful in part because it is aggregated, Hasbrouck explained. While Customs and Border Protection receives data from individual air carriers, the data is not always in a consistent place or format.

“If you’ve got data that’s scattered all over the place in different formats, you’ve got to query each one separately,” Hasbrouck said. “That’s a lot harder. You can do more analysis if you’ve got aggregated data.”

It’s unclear how long the federal government has used the ARC repository. ICE inked a one-year contract for the data in 2023, according to the documents. But federal spending records indicate that the access goes back further. The Department of Homeland Security, in procurement records, references an “investigative database” hosted by the ARC as far back as 2018.

Furthermore, it’s not just ICE that has access to the data. The Department of Defense in 2017 signed a contract with the ARC for “airline ticketing and reporting data,” records show. And the Department of the Treasury signed a contract in 2020 for Travel Intelligence Program software, records show.

For the ARC, these federal contracts have been lucrative. According to government spending records, the company has received at least \$600,000 from federal contracts so far in 2025, and about \$700,000 last year.

The new contracts come amid a significant budget increase for ICE under the Trump administration.

ICE and the Department of Homeland Security did not reply to inquiries from the *Lever* on Thursday.

Hasbrouck said that law enforcement’s access to such data comes with “a lot of potential for abuse.” This may be particularly true amid the Trump administration’s ongoing immigration crackdown, as Immigration and Customs Enforcement targets green card holders over their political views and sends immigrants to El Salvador without a hearing.

“How will this information be used?” said McGee. “What safeguards on privacy and personal rights will be in place? There are far too many unanswered questions.”

This article was first published by the [Lever](#), an award-winning independent investigative newsroom.

CONTRIBUTORS

Katya Schwenk is a reporter with the *Lever* based in Phoenix, Arizona.

FILED UNDER

United States

Policing and Repression

big data / Airline Industry