

TITLE 18 - CRIMES AND CRIMINAL PROCEDURE

PART I - CRIMES

CHAPTER 119 - WIRE AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS INTERCEPTION AND INTERCEPTION OF ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

§ 2511. Interception and disclosure of wire, oral, or electronic communications prohibited

- (1) Except as otherwise specifically provided in this chapter any person who—
- (a) intentionally intercepts, endeavors to intercept, or procures any other person to intercept or endeavor to intercept, any wire, oral, or electronic communication;
 - (b) intentionally uses, endeavors to use, or procures any other person to use or endeavor to use any electronic, mechanical, or other device to intercept any oral communication when—
 - (i) such device is affixed to, or otherwise transmits a signal through, a wire, cable, or other like connection used in wire communication; or
 - (ii) such device transmits communications by radio, or interferes with the transmission of such communication; or
 - (iii) such person knows, or has reason to know, that such device or any component thereof has been sent through the mail or transported in interstate or foreign commerce; or
 - (iv) such use or endeavor to use (A) takes place on the premises of any business or other commercial establishment the operations of which affect interstate or foreign commerce; or (B) obtains or is for the purpose of obtaining information relating to the operations of any business or other commercial establishment the operations of which affect interstate or foreign commerce; or
 - (v) such person acts in the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, or any territory or possession of the United States;
 - (c) intentionally discloses, or endeavors to disclose, to any other person the contents of any wire, oral, or electronic communication, knowing or having reason to know that the information was obtained through the interception of a wire, oral, or electronic communication in violation of this subsection;
 - (d) intentionally uses, or endeavors to use, the contents of any wire, oral, or electronic communication, knowing or having reason to know that the information was obtained through the interception of a wire, oral, or electronic communication in violation of this subsection; or
 - (e) (i) intentionally discloses, or endeavors to disclose, to any other person the contents of any wire, oral, or electronic communication, intercepted by means authorized by sections 2511 (2)(a)(ii), 2511 (2)(b)–(c), 2511(2)(e), 2516, and 2518 of this chapter,
 - (ii) knowing or having reason to know that the information was obtained through the interception of such a communication in connection with a criminal investigation,
 - (iii) having obtained or received the information in connection with a criminal investigation, and
 - (iv) with intent to improperly obstruct, impede, or interfere with a duly authorized criminal investigation,

shall be punished as provided in subsection (4) or shall be subject to suit as provided in subsection (5).

- (2) (a) (i) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for an operator of a switchboard, or an officer, employee, or agent of a provider of wire or electronic communication service, whose facilities are used in the transmission of a wire or electronic communication, to intercept, disclose, or use that communication in the normal course of his employment while engaged in any activity which is a necessary incident to the rendition of his service or to the protection of the rights or property of the provider of that service, except that a provider of wire communication service

to the public shall not utilize service observing or random monitoring except for mechanical or service quality control checks.

(ii) Notwithstanding any other law, providers of wire or electronic communication service, their officers, employees, and agents, landlords, custodians, or other persons, are authorized to provide information, facilities, or technical assistance to persons authorized by law to intercept wire, oral, or electronic communications or to conduct electronic surveillance, as defined in section 101 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, if such provider, its officers, employees, or agents, landlord, custodian, or other specified person, has been provided with—

(A) a court order directing such assistance or a court order pursuant to section 704 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 signed by the authorizing judge, or

(B) a certification in writing by a person specified in section 2518 (7) of this title or the Attorney General of the United States that no warrant or court order is required by law, that all statutory requirements have been met, and that the specified assistance is required,

setting forth the period of time during which the provision of the information, facilities, or technical assistance is authorized and specifying the information, facilities, or technical assistance required. No provider of wire or electronic communication service, officer, employee, or agent thereof, or landlord, custodian, or other specified person shall disclose the existence of any interception or surveillance or the device used to accomplish the interception or surveillance with respect to which the person has been furnished a court order or certification under this chapter, except as may otherwise be required by legal process and then only after prior notification to the Attorney General or to the principal prosecuting attorney of a State or any political subdivision of a State, as may be appropriate. Any such disclosure, shall render such person liable for the civil damages provided for in section 2520. No cause of action shall lie in any court against any provider of wire or electronic communication service, its officers, employees, or agents, landlord, custodian, or other specified person for providing information, facilities, or assistance in accordance with the terms of a court order, statutory authorization, or certification under this chapter.

(iii) If a certification under subparagraph (ii)(B) for assistance to obtain foreign intelligence information is based on statutory authority, the certification shall identify the specific statutory provision and shall certify that the statutory requirements have been met.

(b) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for an officer, employee, or agent of the Federal Communications Commission, in the normal course of his employment and in discharge of the monitoring responsibilities exercised by the Commission in the enforcement of chapter 5 of title 47 of the United States Code, to intercept a wire or electronic communication, or oral communication transmitted by radio, or to disclose or use the information thereby obtained.

(c) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for a person acting under color of law to intercept a wire, oral, or electronic communication, where such person is a party to the communication or one of the parties to the communication has given prior consent to such interception.

(d) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for a person not acting under color of law to intercept a wire, oral, or electronic communication where such person is a party to the communication or where one of the parties to the communication has given prior consent to such interception unless such communication is intercepted for the purpose of committing any criminal or tortious act in violation of the Constitution or laws of the United States or of any State.

(e) Notwithstanding any other provision of this title or section 705 or 706 of the Communications Act of 1934, it shall not be unlawful for an officer, employee, or agent of the United States in the normal course of his official duty to conduct electronic surveillance, as defined in section 101 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, as authorized by that Act.

(f) Nothing contained in this chapter or chapter 121 or 206 of this title, or section 705 of the Communications Act of 1934, shall be deemed to affect the acquisition by the United States Government of foreign intelligence information from international or foreign communications,

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or foreign intelligence activities conducted in accordance with otherwise applicable Federal law involving a foreign electronic communications system, utilizing a means other than electronic surveillance as defined in section 101 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, and procedures in this chapter or chapter 121 and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 shall be the exclusive means by which electronic surveillance, as defined in section 101 of such Act, and the interception of domestic wire, oral, and electronic communications may be conducted.

- (g) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter or chapter 121 of this title for any person—
- (i) to intercept or access an electronic communication made through an electronic communication system that is configured so that such electronic communication is readily accessible to the general public;
 - (ii) to intercept any radio communication which is transmitted—
 - (I) by any station for the use of the general public, or that relates to ships, aircraft, vehicles, or persons in distress;
 - (II) by any governmental, law enforcement, civil defense, private land mobile, or public safety communications system, including police and fire, readily accessible to the general public;
 - (III) by a station operating on an authorized frequency within the bands allocated to the amateur, citizens band, or general mobile radio services; or
 - (IV) by any marine or aeronautical communications system;
 - (iii) to engage in any conduct which—
 - (I) is prohibited by section 633 of the Communications Act of 1934; or
 - (II) is excepted from the application of section 705(a) of the Communications Act of 1934 by section 705(b) of that Act;
 - (iv) to intercept any wire or electronic communication the transmission of which is causing harmful interference to any lawfully operating station or consumer electronic equipment, to the extent necessary to identify the source of such interference; or
 - (v) for other users of the same frequency to intercept any radio communication made through a system that utilizes frequencies monitored by individuals engaged in the provision or the use of such system, if such communication is not scrambled or encrypted.
- (h) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter—
- (i) to use a pen register or a trap and trace device (as those terms are defined for the purposes of chapter 206 (relating to pen registers and trap and trace devices) of this title); or
 - (ii) for a provider of electronic communication service to record the fact that a wire or electronic communication was initiated or completed in order to protect such provider, another provider furnishing service toward the completion of the wire or electronic communication, or a user of that service, from fraudulent, unlawful or abusive use of such service.
- (i) It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for a person acting under color of law to intercept the wire or electronic communications of a computer trespasser transmitted to, through, or from the protected computer, if—
- (I) the owner or operator of the protected computer authorizes the interception of the computer trespasser's communications on the protected computer;
 - (II) the person acting under color of law is lawfully engaged in an investigation;
 - (III) the person acting under color of law has reasonable grounds to believe that the contents of the computer trespasser's communications will be relevant to the investigation; and
 - (IV) such interception does not acquire communications other than those transmitted to or from the computer trespasser.
- (3) (a) Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this subsection, a person or entity providing an electronic communication service to the public shall not intentionally divulge the contents of any

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communication (other than one to such person or entity, or an agent thereof) while in transmission on that service to any person or entity other than an addressee or intended recipient of such communication or an agent of such addressee or intended recipient.

(b) A person or entity providing electronic communication service to the public may divulge the contents of any such communication—

(i) as otherwise authorized in section 2511 (2)(a) or 2517 of this title;

(ii) with the lawful consent of the originator or any addressee or intended recipient of such communication;

(iii) to a person employed or authorized, or whose facilities are used, to forward such communication to its destination; or

(iv) which were inadvertently obtained by the service provider and which appear to pertain to the commission of a crime, if such divulgence is made to a law enforcement agency.

(4) **(a)** Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this subsection or in subsection (5), whoever violates subsection (1) of this section shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than five years, or both.

(b) Conduct otherwise an offense under this subsection that consists of or relates to the interception of a satellite transmission that is not encrypted or scrambled and that is transmitted—

(i) to a broadcasting station for purposes of retransmission to the general public; or

(ii) as an audio subcarrier intended for redistribution to facilities open to the public, but not including data transmissions or telephone calls,

is not an offense under this subsection unless the conduct is for the purposes of direct or indirect commercial advantage or private financial gain.

(5) **(a)** **(i)** If the communication is—

(A) a private satellite video communication that is not scrambled or encrypted and the conduct in violation of this chapter is the private viewing of that communication and is not for a tortious or illegal purpose or for purposes of direct or indirect commercial advantage or private commercial gain; or

(B) a radio communication that is transmitted on frequencies allocated under subpart D of part 74 of the rules of the Federal Communications Commission that is not scrambled or encrypted and the conduct in violation of this chapter is not for a tortious or illegal purpose or for purposes of direct or indirect commercial advantage or private commercial gain,

then the person who engages in such conduct shall be subject to suit by the Federal Government in a court of competent jurisdiction.

(ii) In an action under this subsection—

(A) if the violation of this chapter is a first offense for the person under paragraph (a) of subsection (4) and such person has not been found liable in a civil action under section 2520 of this title, the Federal Government shall be entitled to appropriate injunctive relief; and

(B) if the violation of this chapter is a second or subsequent offense under paragraph (a) of subsection (4) or such person has been found liable in any prior civil action under section 2520, the person shall be subject to a mandatory \$500 civil fine.

(b) The court may use any means within its authority to enforce an injunction issued under paragraph (ii)(A), and shall impose a civil fine of not less than \$500 for each violation of such an injunction.

(Added Pub. L. 90–351, title III, § 802, June 19, 1968, 82 Stat. 213; amended Pub. L. 91–358, title II, § 211(a), July 29, 1970, 84 Stat. 654; Pub. L. 95–511, title II, § 201(a)–(c), Oct. 25, 1978, 92 Stat. 1796,

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1797; Pub. L. 98–549, § 6(b)(2), Oct. 30, 1984, 98 Stat. 2804; Pub. L. 99–508, title I, §§ 101(b), (c)(1), (5), (6), (d), (f)[(1)], 102, Oct. 21, 1986, 100 Stat. 1849, 1851–1853; Pub. L. 103–322, title XXXII, § 320901, title XXXIII, § 330016(1)(G), Sept. 13, 1994, 108 Stat. 2123, 2147; Pub. L. 103–414, title II, §§ 202(b), 204, 205, Oct. 25, 1994, 108 Stat. 4290, 4291; Pub. L. 104–294, title VI, § 604(b)(42), Oct. 11, 1996, 110 Stat. 3509; Pub. L. 107–56, title II, §§ 204, 217 (2), Oct. 26, 2001, 115 Stat. 281, 291; Pub. L. 107–296, title II, § 225(h)(2), (j)(1), Nov. 25, 2002, 116 Stat. 2158; Pub. L. 110–261, title I, §§ 101(c)(1), 102 (c)(1), title IV, § 403(b)(2)(C), July 10, 2008, 122 Stat. 2459, 2474.)

Amendment of Paragraph (2)(a)(ii)(A)

Pub. L. 110–261, title IV, § 403(b)(2), July 10, 2008, 122 Stat. 2474, provided that, except as provided in section 404 of Pub. L. 110–261, set out as a note under section 1801 of Title 50, War and National Defense, effective Dec. 31, 2012, paragraph (2)(a)(ii)(A) of this section is amended by striking “or a court order pursuant to section 704 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978”.

References in Text

The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, referred to in par. (2)(e), (f), is Pub. L. 95–511, Oct. 25, 1978, 92 Stat. 1783, which is classified principally to chapter 36 (§ 1801 et seq.) of Title 50, War and National Defense. Sections 101 and 704 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, referred to in par. (2)(a)(ii), (e), and (f), are classified to sections 1801 and 1881c of Title 50, respectively. For complete classification of this Act to the Code, see Short Title note set out under section 1801 of Title 50 and Tables.

Sections 633, 705, and 706 of the Communications Act of 1934, referred to in par. (2)(e), (f), (g)(iii), are classified to sections 553, 605, and 606 of Title 47, Telegraphs, Telephones, and Radiotelegraphs, respectively.

Amendments

2008—Par. (2)(a)(ii)(A). Pub. L. 110–261, § 101(c)(1), inserted “or a court order pursuant to section 704 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978” after “assistance”.

Par. (2)(a)(iii). Pub. L. 110–261, § 102(c)(1), added cl. (iii).

2002—Par. (2)(a)(ii). Pub. L. 107–296, § 225(h)(2), inserted “, statutory authorization,” after “terms of a court order” in concluding provisions.

Par. (4)(b), (c). Pub. L. 107–296, § 225(j)(1), redesignated subpar. (c) as (b) and struck out former subpar. (b) which read as follows: “If the offense is a first offense under paragraph (a) of this subsection and is not for a tortious or illegal purpose or for purposes of direct or indirect commercial advantage or private commercial gain, and the wire or electronic communication with respect to which the offense under paragraph (a) is a radio communication that is not scrambled, encrypted, or transmitted using modulation techniques the essential parameters of which have been withheld from the public with the intention of preserving the privacy of such communication, then—

“(i) if the communication is not the radio portion of a cellular telephone communication, a cordless telephone communication that is transmitted between the cordless telephone handset and the base unit, a public land mobile radio service communication or a paging service communication, and the conduct is not that described in subsection (5), the offender shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than one year, or both; and

“(ii) if the communication is the radio portion of a cellular telephone communication, a cordless telephone communication that is transmitted between the cordless telephone handset and the base unit, a public land mobile radio service communication or a paging service communication, the offender shall be fined under this title.”

2001—Par. (2)(f). Pub. L. 107–56, § 204, substituted “this chapter or chapter 121 or 206 of this title, or section 705 of the Communications Act of 1934” for “this chapter or chapter 121, or section 705 of the Communications Act of 1934” and “wire, oral, and electronic communications” for “wire and oral communications”.

Par. (2)(i). Pub. L. 107–56, § 217(2), added subpar. (i).

1996—Par. (1)(e)(i). Pub. L. 104–294 substituted “sections 2511 (2)(a)(ii), 2511 (2)(b)–(c), 2511(2)(e), 2516, and 2518 of this chapter” for “sections 2511 (2)(A)(ii), 2511 (b)–(c), 2511(e), 2516, and 2518 of this subchapter”.

1994—Par. (1)(e). Pub. L. 103–322, § 320901, added par. (1)(e).

Par. (2)(a)(i). Pub. L. 103–414, § 205, inserted “or electronic” after “transmission of a wire”.

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Par. (4)(b). Pub. L. 103–414, § 204, in introductory provisions substituted “, encrypted, or transmitted using modulation techniques the essential parameters of which have been withheld from the public with the intention of preserving the privacy of such communication, then” for “or encrypted, then”.

Par. (4)(b)(i). Pub. L. 103–414, § 202(b)(1), inserted “a cordless telephone communication that is transmitted between the cordless telephone handset and the base unit,” after “cellular telephone communication,”.

Par. (4)(b)(ii). Pub. L. 103–414, § 202(b)(2), inserted “a cordless telephone communication that is transmitted between the cordless telephone handset and the base unit,” after “cellular telephone communication,”.

Pub. L. 103–322, § 330016(1)(G), substituted “fined under this title” for “fined not more than \$500”.

1986—Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(c)(1)(A), substituted “wire, oral, or electronic” for “wire or oral” in section catchline.

Par. (1). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(c)(1)(A), (d)(1), (f)(1), substituted “intentionally” for “willfully” in subpars. (a) to (d) and “wire, oral, or electronic” for “wire or oral” wherever appearing in subpars. (a), (c), and (d), and in concluding provisions substituted “shall be punished as provided in subsection (4) or shall be subject to suit as provided in subsection (5)” for “shall be fined not more than \$10,000 or imprisoned not more than five years, or both”.

Par. (2)(a)(i). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(c)(5), substituted “a provider of wire or electronic communication service” for “any communication common carrier” and “of the provider of that service, except that a provider of wire communication service to the public” for “of the carrier of such communication: Provided, That said communication common carriers”.

Par. (2)(a)(ii). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(b)(1), (c)(1)(A), (6), substituted “providers of wire or electronic communication service” for “communication common carriers”, “wire, oral, or electronic” for “wire or oral”, “if such provider” for “if the common carrier”, “provider of wire or electronic communication service” for “communication common carrier” wherever appearing, “such disclosure” for “violation of this subparagraph by a communication common carrier or an officer, employee, or agent thereof”, “render such person liable” for “render the carrier liable”, and “a court order or certification under this chapter” for “an order or certification under this subparagraph” in two places.

Par. (2)(b). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(c)(1)(B), inserted “or electronic” after “wire”.

Par. (2)(c). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(c)(1)(A), substituted “wire, oral, or electronic” for “wire or oral”.

Par. (2)(d). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(b)(2), (c)(1)(A), substituted “wire, oral, or electronic” for “wire or oral” and struck out “or for the purpose of committing any other injurious act” after “of any State”.

Par. (2)(f). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(b)(3), inserted “or chapter 121” in two places and substituted “foreign communications, or foreign intelligence activities conducted in accordance with otherwise applicable Federal law involving a foreign electronic communications system, utilizing a means” for “foreign communications by a means”.

Par. (2)(g), (h). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(b)(4), added subpars. (g) and (h).

Par. (3). Pub. L. 99–508, § 102, added par. (3).

Pars. (4), (5). Pub. L. 99–508, § 101(d)(2), added pars. (4) and (5).

1984—Par. (2)(e). Pub. L. 98–549, § 6(b)(2)(A), substituted “section 705 or 706” for “section 605 or 606”.

Par. (2)(f). Pub. L. 98–549, § 6(b)(2)(B), substituted “section 705” for “section 605”.

1978—Par. (2)(a)(ii). Pub. L. 95–511, § 201(a), substituted provisions authorizing communication common carriers etc., to provide information to designated persons, prohibiting disclosure of intercepted information, and rendering violators civilly liable for provision exempting communication common carriers from criminality for giving information to designated officers.

Par. (2)(e), (f). Pub. L. 95–511, § 201(b), added par. (2)(e) and (f).

Par. (3). Pub. L. 95–511, § 201(c), struck out par. (3) which provided that nothing in this chapter or section 605 of title 47 limited the President’s constitutional power to gather necessary intelligence to protect the national security and stated the conditions necessary for the reception into evidence and disclosure of communications intercepted by the President.

1970—Par. (2)(a). Pub. L. 91–358 designated existing provisions as cl. (i) and added cl. (ii).

Effective Date of 2008 Amendment

Amendments by sections 101(c)(1) and 102(c)(1) of Pub. L. 110–261 effective July 10, 2008, except as otherwise provided in section 404 of Pub. L. 110–261, set out as a Transition Procedures note under section 1801 of Title 50, War and National Defense, see section 402 of Pub. L. 110–261, set out as a note under section 1801 of Title 50.

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Pub. L. 110–261, title IV, § 403(b)(2), July 10, 2008, 122 Stat. 2474, provided that except as provided in section 404 of Pub. L. 110–261, set out as a Transition Procedures note under section 1801 of Title 50, War and National Defense, the amendments made by section 403 (b)(2) are effective Dec. 31, 2012.

Effective Date of 2002 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 107–296 effective 60 days after Nov. 25, 2002, see section 4 of Pub. L. 107–296, set out as an Effective Date note under section 101 of Title 6, Domestic Security.

Effective Date of 1996 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 104–294 effective Sept. 13, 1994, see section 604(d) of Pub. L. 104–294, set out as a note under section 13 of this title.

Effective Date of 1986 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 99–508 effective 90 days after Oct. 21, 1986, and, in case of conduct pursuant to court order or extension, applicable only with respect to court orders and extensions made after such date, with special rule for State authorizations of interceptions, see section 111 of Pub. L. 99–508, set out as a note under section 2510 of this title.

Effective Date of 1984 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 98–549 effective 60 days after Oct. 30, 1984, see section 9(a) of Pub. L. 98–549, set out as an Effective Date note under section 521 of Title 47, Telegraphs, Telephones, and Radiotelegraphs.

Effective Date of 1978 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 95–511 effective Oct. 25, 1978, except as specifically provided, see section 401 of Pub. L. 95–511, formerly set out as an Effective Date note under section 1801 of Title 50, War and National Defense.

Effective Date of 1970 Amendment

Amendment by Pub. L. 91–358 effective on first day of seventh calendar month which begins after July 29, 1970, see section 901(a) of Pub. L. 91–358.