

Move over, Big Brother. Little Brother is squeezing in.

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Robert Gortarez is no private eye.

But with an \$80 piece of software intended to track what his son was doing on the Internet, the 36-year-old Phoenix real estate investor uncovered some information about what his wife - now his ex-wife - was doing online as well.

Gortarez isn't the only one. Husbands and wives, moms and dads, even neighbors and friends increasingly are succumbing to the temptation to snoop, thanks to a growing array of inexpensive, easily accessible high-tech sleuthing tools once available only to professional investigators.

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From software that secretly monitors computer activity to tiny hidden surveillance cameras and global positioning system devices, spy tools that can track a person's location now can be purchased in retail stores and on the Internet.

And a growing amount of free personal information is so easy to find online that many Internet regulars don't think of it as spying. Plug a name into Google and you have an instant background check of your best friend, your brother-in-law or that guy or gal you met last night at a bar.

"You can bug people the way spy agencies used to do 20 years ago - really cheap now," says Howard Rheingold, author of "Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution." "The Orwellian vision was about state-sponsored surveillance. Now it's not just the state, it's your nosy neighbor, your ex-spouse and people who want to spam you."

It's unclear how many Americans actually are using these new tools to check up on one another, especially since most people don't exactly broadcast it. But experts say citizen sleuthing is on the rise.

"My guess is it's very popular, just given how many people call me," says Deborah Pierce of Privacy Activism, a nonprofit advocacy organization based in San Francisco. Pierce is speaking this week at the 15th annual Computers, Freedom & Privacy Conference in Seattle.

Pierce says the fact that legal cases are starting to hit the courts "tells me it's prevalent."

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