

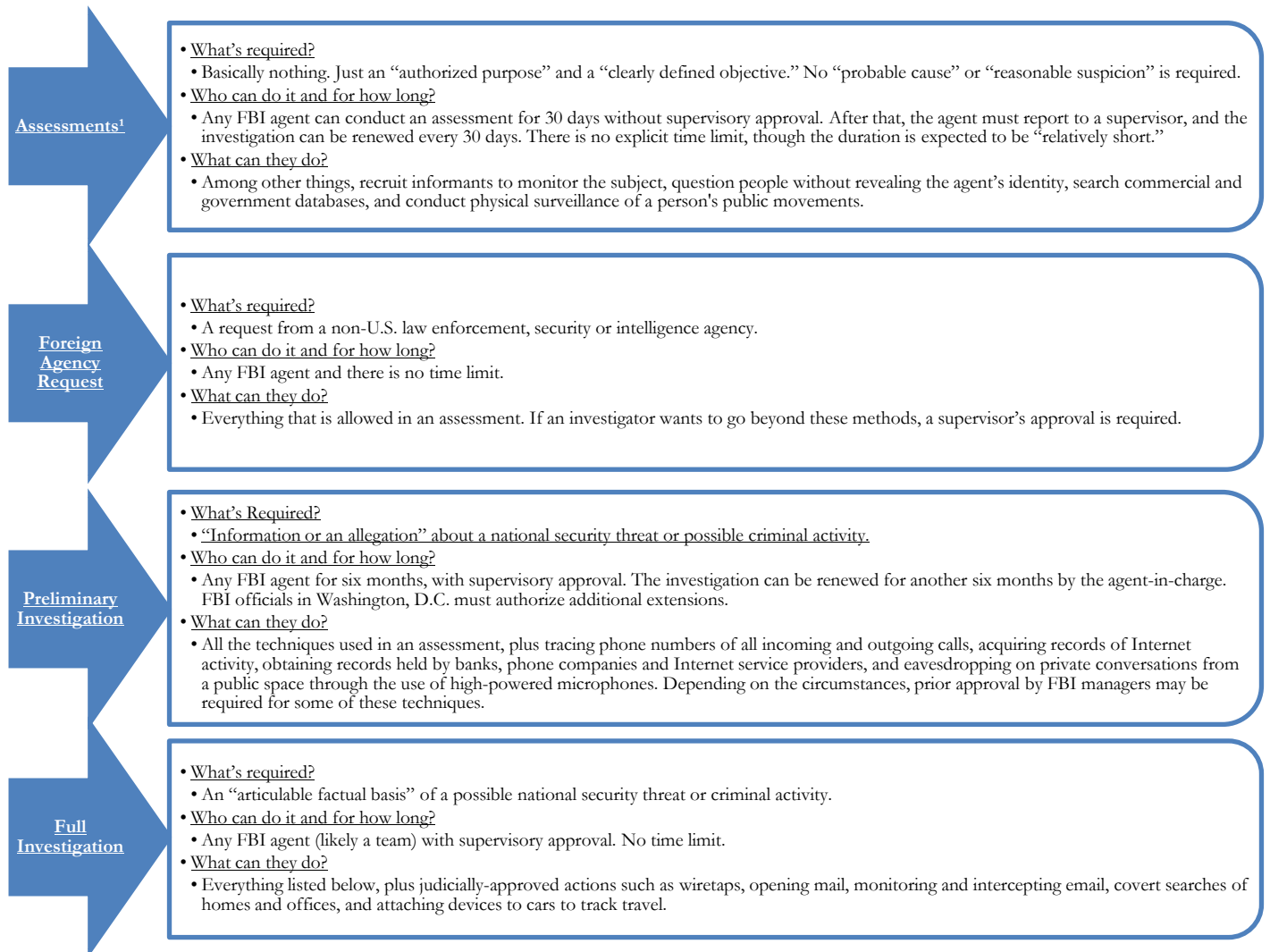
Just What Is an FBI Investigation?

In the aftermath of the bombing at the Boston marathon, there have been a host of reports about the FBI's investigation of the two suspects, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. When it was revealed the Bureau had interviewed Tamerlan Tsarnaev in 2011 after Russian intelligence had warned he might hold "extremist" views, questions arose anew about the Bureau's sleuthing ability.

The FBI conducts several different types of investigations, and each is governed by certain rules, as set out in guidelines issued by the U.S. Attorney General. These guidelines have been modified over the last decade to give the FBI broad latitude and authority in conducting investigations.

Even at the assessment stage, where the FBI can initiate an investigation without any indication of terrorist or criminal activity, it can gather a wide range of information. As evidence of a possible national security threat or crime accumulates, the FBI can use more and more intrusive investigative tools. The FBI does not have to start with an assessment and work its way up; if it has sufficient information, it can start at the top.

Below is an explanation of the categories and some of the features of FBI investigations.



¹ The FBI Guidelines permit five different types of assessments. The description here focuses on the first type, which is the one most relevant to investigations of individuals.