Are We Becoming A Society Of Snoops?

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As concerns fade about a Y2K breakdown of government computers, Americans should be increasingly worried about how computer efficiency gives the federal government extraordinary powers to monitor the daily activities of law-abiding Americans. Unknown to most people, government databases are storing all kinds of personal information about every American.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has mandated that all wireless providers by 2001 be able to pinpoint the location of wireless phone calls. Cell phones are going to be homing devices for the government to track our whereabouts.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) tried to impose a regulation called Know Your Customer. It was a plan to require banks to make a computer profile of all their customers' deposits and withdrawals and report "inconsistent" transactions to a federal database in Detroit called the Suspicious Activity Reporting System.

After the comment period produced more than 250,000 negative and only 3,000 positive comments, the FDIC backed down and on March 23 abandoned its plan temporarily.

However, during congressional consideration of the big "financial modernization" bill this summer, we discovered that many banks are already making customer profiles and selling them to telemarketers. The banking lobby successfully blocked an amendment that would have required banks to get the prior consent of customers before selling private financial information.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has proposed a regulation that would effectively give the government unlimited access to everyone's personal travel records. The FAA gave $3.1 million to Northwest Airlines to create software for a database of personal travel records, plus $7.8 million to other airlines to assist in deploying it.

The 1996 Welfare Reform Act requires all employers to send the name, address and Social Security number of every new worker, and every employee who is promoted, to a new government database called the Directory of New Hires. This is a massive database tracking nearly every worker in America.

In 1999 Congress authorized the linkage of this database with the Department of Education. Meanwhile, public schools are requiring children to fill out nosy questionnaires revealing all sorts of non- academic information about attitudes, behavior, health and family privacy, which is then entered on databases.

The 1996 Kennedy-Kassebaum Act authorized the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to assign a "unique health care identifier" to every American so the government can enter and track individual medical records on a government database. Public reaction was so adverse that Congress put a moratorium on implementation.

The 1993 Comprehensive Childhood Immunization Act gave the Department of Health and Human Services $400 million to induce states to create databases of all children's vaccinations. By giving "rewards" to the state of $50, $75 or $100 per fully vaccinated child, states are financially motivated to make vaccines compulsory and to produce the proof by storing the information on a state database.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is trying to link these state databases into a federal database containing every child's medical records. This will become a gatekeeper to deny admission to daycare, kindergarten, school or college, or even access to medical care for any child who has not had all government-mandated shots.

It will be easy to add all medical records to this database, which would then become the key to the government's ability to dictate the giving and rationing of health care. This would accomplish Bill Clinton's original 1994 goal when he displayed his Health Security Card to a national television audience.

Another plan to collect private information on a government database involves sending "home visitors" into the homes of all first- time parents in the project called Healthy Families America. Information is entered on a nationwide computerized tracking system called the Program Information Management System that can eventually be combined with preschool and public school tracking systems.

The 1996 Immigration Act mandated that state driver's licenses contain Social Security numbers as the unique numeric identifier so the federal government could use driver's licenses (a state matter) as a federal I.D. card. After public protest, this was repealed in 1999.

HHS is recruiting senior citizens to spy on their own physicians by offering a reward of up to $1000 if they call the toll-free "Fraud Hotline" and file a report that leads to a monetary "recovery" from their doctor. The harassment potential is enormous when 39 million seniors start trying to collect a bonus if the doctor's office enters the wrong code number on a Medicare form.

This government monitoring is allegedly for the purpose of locating terrorists, money launderers, drug kingpins, Medicare and welfare cheats, student loan delinquents, and deadbeat dads. But law enforcement must not be allowed to turn us into a society of snoops.

We should prohibit the federal government from building, or assisting the states or private corporations to build, databases of personal information on American citizens that is none of the government's business. Only totalitarian regimes monitor the private actions of law-abiding citizens.