

Don't Expect Congress to Protect Your Privacy;

Data Base Illusions

The New York Times

August 19, 1994, Friday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 1994 The New York Times Company

Distribution: Editorial Desk

Section: Section A; ; Section A; Page 26; Column 6; Editorial Desk ; Column 6; ; Letter

Length: 342 words

Body

To the Editor:

The Government proposes to establish yet another Federal **data base**, to monitor work eligibility by combining Immigration and Naturalization Service **data** with Social Security numbers and thus reduce competition by illegal immigrants in the job market.

Increasingly, the Government is responding to social problems by creating a computerized **data base**, rather than by addressing the underlying conditions. Over the last few years, similar suggestions have been made to stem the purchase of illegal weapons, to slow the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus and, most recently, to control repeat crimes by convicted child sexual abusers.

These proposals rarely work. They are **based** on idealized visions of computerized **data bases** as invincible and immediately accessible, yet capable of maintaining confidentiality. In practice, large personal **data** systems are prone to error. The immigration agency acknowledges that its **data base** is full of errors. Furthermore, any system open enough to allow the immediate access needed for efficient, timely pre-employment checks cannot also guarantee any appreciable degree of confidentiality to its **data**.

The Government has argued repeatedly over the last 100 years that illegal immigration can be stemmed through centralized registries that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate immigrants. It has made much the same argument, with the same lack of effect, that crime can be controlled through a centralized registry of fingerprints. But inventive, desperate people can always devise schemes to circumvent record-keeping systems, and even routine use of these **data bases** is much less effective than their more publicized successes would suggest.

What is needed are renewed efforts to address the conditions that drive people to undertake the risks of illegal immigration, not another intrusive, costly, inefficient Federal **data base**.

PAMELA SANKAR

Philadelphia, Aug. 12, 1994

The writer is a senior fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute, University of Pennsylvania.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); SOCIAL SECURITY (78%); LABOR SECTOR PERFORMANCE (78%); CRIMINAL OFFENSES (77%); WRITERS (73%); ILLEGAL WEAPONS (72%); AIDS & HIV (71%); VIRUSES (70%); SEX OFFENSES (70%)

Company: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Organization: IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (84%)

Industry: WRITERS (73%)

Geographic: PHILADELPHIA, PA, USA (68%); PENNSYLVANIA, USA (79%)

Load-Date: August 19, 1994