

Little-Known Itself, It Knows Much About Many

By JANET BATAILE

WASHINGTON — The Law Enforcement Intelligence Unit is a fraternity of intelligence officers from 225 state and local police departments that gathers and exchanges information. It is a sizable organization, founded more than two decades ago. Part of its financing came from the Federal Government, and it now operates with state and local funds. Nevertheless, the unit is rarely mentioned in the press and is unknown to most citizens.

Last week the agency came to public attention in a report from the American Friends Service Committee, an arm of the Quakers, which asserted that political spying by state and local police poses "a grave threat to constitutional rights." The report, the result of a three-year study, charged that the Law Enforcement Intelligence Unit was a principal offender among numerous Government-aided, private and quasi-private groups operating nationwide computer networks.

The Quaker investigators said the unit does not confine itself to the purpose for which it was chartered, monitoring organized crime figures, but also collects information — and misinformation — on law-abiding citizens, a contention the unit denies. The report says that the computer system permits irrelevant data to be spread from one police agency to another, and that private organizations and companies gain access through a buddy network of security personnel. Such activity not only violates First Amendment freedoms, the report says, but harms ethnic minorities and the poor.

Similar allegations have been made by Morton H. Halperin, now director of the Center for National Security Studies, a nonprofit group sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union. "Information the unit collects is given to state agencies, the F.B.I. and businesses, and people are being denied jobs because they are branded as troublemakers," he told a recent Michigan conference convened to exchange information about the police group.

The group took shape in California in 1956 as the brainchild of Capt. James Hamilton, then commander of the Los Angeles Police Department's Criminal Intelligence Division. The buddy system that today appears so sinister to critics is cast in a different light by supporters. They say the formation of the unit was an honest endeavor by honest cops to fight corruption in their departments by establishing a network of mutual trust between officers who were not on the take. At the same time, say these advo-

Intelligence Unit Keeps a Watchful Eye



Eugene Mihaesco

cates, the establishment of the group was the first effort to set up a communication system through which police forces around the country could keep tabs on a criminal element that was becoming increasingly sophisticated, mobile and elusive.

The Quakers are not the only group to make a formal investigation of the intelligence unit. Two months ago the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners asserted that the agency "has operated on a very broad definition of organized crime" and "appears lacking in regulatory controls." The study said that existing procedures "seem to permit a low-ranking party in one agency-member to contact another low-ranking party in another agency-member and arrange for highly sensitive intelligence activities or information, without anyone else in either agency being aware of the contact." All this, the study said, "lends credence to concerns about potential abuse."

Although the unit's members are public officials, the organization is registered as a private, tax-exempt charitable entity. As such, it is not subject to public disclosure laws. Its only oversight authority comes from its own executive board or the California Department of Justice, which serves as its central coordinating agency and whose Organized Crime and Criminal Intelligence Branch provides administrative and financial support.

The agency's dual system of record keeping is another focus of criticism and is an issue reportedly addressed in a just-completed but not-yet-published Congressional audit of the organization by the General Accounting Office.

The unit's computer system, the Interstate Organized Crime Index, was developed with nearly \$1.5 million in Federal grants from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The unit must therefore abide by Federal laws requiring that only public information be kept in its computer. But a manual file of 4,000 index cards, not subject to those requirements, is also maintained.

Charles Casey, assistant director of the California Organized Crime and Criminal Intelligence Branch and a project director for the unit's computer, defends the manual system as "just as clean as the automated system." He adds, "You can't fight crime without intelligence."

Another defender is Bob Blakey, general counsel to the Congressional committee that investigated the Kennedy and King assassinations. "I don't think you could make a good case that L.E.I.U. went wrong," he said "It was simply responding to national Government demands, and we're talking about good government — Johnson, not Nixon. The Katzenbach and Kerner Commissions were a major impetus for the establishment of police intelligence units to respond to riots and subversives. What was the alternative, a blind and ignorant police force? The abuses were real, but they're largely a thing of the past."

The organization does not deny that it once maintained files on political dissidents. But it says that political surveillance has ended and that files on political figures were destroyed several years ago.

The agency also denies that information it collects is disseminated to nonmembers. Nevertheless, its national chairman, Maj. Steven Bertucelli, commander of the Dade County, Fla., Organized Crime Bureau, adds: "That is not to say there is no rapport with colleagues in the private sector. They talk about their problems."

The Campaign for Political Rights, the activist organization that sponsored the Ann Arbor meeting last September, is unmoved by arguments supporting the intelligence group. The Campaign, a coalition once called the Campaign to Stop Government Spying, hopes to persuade state legislatures to prohibit membership of state and local police agencies in the Law Enforcement Intelligence Unit. Such legislation has been introduced in Michigan. "The information in L.E.I.U. files," said Morton Halperin, "is being used to deny rights,"