

House Unit Says 52 Agencies Eavesdrop on Phone Calls

Associated Press

When you telephone any of 52 federal agencies someone may be eavesdropping, and at least nine agencies may not tell you about it, a House report says.

The nine agencies, the report says, range from the super-secret Central Intelligence Agency to the Peace Corps, but Joseph Blatchford, director of the Peace Corps, denied that "any telephones in the agency are used to eavesdrop" on incoming telephone calls.

The FBI and seven other agencies told the House Government Information subcommittee they prohibit monitoring citizens' telephone calls.

The 52 other agencies have 4,790 "snooper buttons," the report says, only they don't like to call them that any more. The buttons, which cut out breathing and other noise by the person "listening in surreptitiously or otherwise," are now called push-to-talk switches, the report says.

The agencies also use 168 recording machines, 92 of them permanently wired into telephone circuits, the report says, and 147 attachments on phones to record or eavesdrop on conversations.

The listeners are usually secretaries, callers are usually told someone else is on the line, and the avowed purpose

of the widespread practice is simply to get straight the caller's request or information, said subcommittee chairman John E. Moss, (D-Calif.)

"It remains a fact," Moss said, "that until the practice of monitoring is abolished, a citizen will never be able to know for sure to what extent or for what underlying motive he is unwittingly sharing his telephone calls with silent listeners."

The Navy leads the field in "snooper buttons" with 1,094, the State Department has 835 and the Defense Department 633, the report says, but most agencies have only a few.