

Paper

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By Inman Mays

There's no paper shortage at the White House. Or at the Treasury Department. Or at the FBI. Or at the Small Business Administration. There seems to be no paper shortage at any of the government agencies in Washington and across the country because they use tons of paper to record literally billions of pieces of information on ordinary Americans.

The uses and abuses of all this information on private citizens—adults and children alike—is examined in another investigative report of the ABC News Close-Up series, entitled, "The Paper Prison: Your Government Records," which airs tonight on WMAL-TV Channel 7, from 10 to 11 pm.

This documentary gives us a frightening picture of various local, state and federal government agencies which seem to take a great deal of pride in putting on paper much highly personal information of private citizens.

The program also reveals some of the results of a study on 900 government data banks, gathered by a Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights, headed by Sen. Sam Ervin (D-N.C.).

Items:

- The White House has seven computer data banks and one keeps information on 15,204 people President Nixon calls by their first names.

- The Selective Service has files on 14,860,000 people even though the U.S. now has an all-volunteer Army.

- The Small Business Administration has statements of the personal history of 500,000 people.

- The IRS has 220,000 intelligence files.

Also schools often maintain confidential files on children, sometimes with inaccurate and potentially damaging information. Reporter Frank Reynolds interviews a Wheaton couple who were astonished to learn that a neighborhood high school kept extensive files on themselves and

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their children—files which described the personality traits and personal habits of both children and parents.

The CIA and the FBI often have easier access to these files than parents themselves.

The ABC special also brings to light the fact that many police departments keep records on "pre-delinquents"—children who have no police records at all. This program is financed throughout the country with millions in grants from the federal government's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

ABC also looked into the reasons why discharge certificates for millions of veterans once carried secret codes—"SPINS" or "Separation Program Information Numbers," which described the veteran's attitudes while in the service.

For example, a code number might mean "poor worker" or "shirks duty" or "apathetic attitude." Many large corporations relied on these "SPINS" when hiring and a negative number could hurt a veteran throughout his life.

The Defense Department has since discontinued the practice under public pressure when the numbering came to light.

But the biggest single center of information about U.S. citizens is at the FBI's National Crime Information Center here. There are more than three million files at the center, only about 500,000 are records of criminal arrests.

Reynolds talked with an assistant to Rep. Barry Goldwater Jr. (R-Calif.), who was given a special tour of the FBI center. In an attempt to demonstrate the efficiency of the FBI's data

banks, the "tour guide" took the assistant's driver's license number and fed it into one of the computers. It promptly came up with his life history.

There's also an interview with Attorney General William Saxbe who tells how his name got on a police blotter in Ohio my mistake, when he was attorney general of the state. A person arrested for being drunk and disorderly identified himself as "William Saxbe." He was booked under that name by police, even though he had other identification in his pockets. Saxbe says, "I had a dickens of a time getting my name off that police blotter."

The program reaches some conclusions, based largely on the soon-to-be-released report of Ervin's subcommittee. Among them:

- Congress should consider legislation which

would severely curtail and limit storing personal information on private citizens.

- There should be no recorded information on children and adults who have no criminal records.

In sum, "Paper Prison" says records should exist only to protect Americans, not harm them.