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BY IRA R. ALLEN

WASHINGTON (UPI) -- SOME FEDERAL POLICE AGENCIES SAY UP TO HALF OF THE REQUESTS THEY GET UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, DESIGNED TO OPEN UP THE GOVERNMENT'S FILES, ARE FROM CRIMINALS TRYING TO PERFECT THEIR CRAFT.

THE COMMENTS ARE CONTAINED IN A GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE REPORT, REQUESTED BY THE SENATE JUDICIARY CRIMINAL LAWS SUBCOMMITTEE, ON HOW THE 1966 LAW AND ITS 1975 REVISIONS AFFECT OPERATIONS OF THE FBI, SECRET SERVICE, DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION AND THE BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND FIREARMS.

THE SENATE PANEL HELD HEARINGS THIS YEAR INVESTIGATING WHETHER OPENING FEDERAL FILES IS A THREAT TO LAW ENFORCEMENT. RETIRING JUDICIARY CHAIRMAN JAMES EASTLAND ASKED THE GAO TO UNDERTAKE A SURVEY OF THE AGENCIES AND REPORT WHAT THEY FELT, WITHOUT DRAWING ITS OWN CONCLUSIONS.

THE REPORT, RELEASED WEDNESDAY, SAID THE AGENCIES UNANIMOUSLY FEEL THE INFORMATION LAW AND THE 1975 PRIVACY ACT "ARE ERODING THEIR INVESTIGATIVE CAPABILITIES, ESPECIALLY IN THE AREA OF INTELLIGENCE GATHERING," THE GAO SAID.

THE AGENCIES SAID THE LAWS ARE A FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN, CUT DOWN THE AMOUNT AND QUALITY OF DATA FROM INFORMANTS WHO FEAR THEIR NAMES WILL BE LEARNED, REDUCE INFORMATION THAT USED TO BE GAINED FROM BANKS, SCHOOLS AND TELEPHONE COMPANIES AND CURTAIL THE AMOUNT OF HELP THEY GET FROM LOCAL POLICE.

THE FBI SAID THE LAWS' WORST EFFECT HAS BEEN CLAMMING UP INTELLIGENCE AND ORGANIZED CRIME INFORMANTS.

SUMMARIZING THE AGENCIES' COMMENTS, THE GAO SAID:

"THEY BELIEVE THAT WHILE THESE ACTS ARE OF LIMITED VALUE TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC, THEY ARE BENEFICIAL TO CRIMINALS. ACCORDING TO DEA OFFICIALS, ABOUT 40 PERCENT OF ITS REQUESTERS ARE PRISONERS ASKING NOT ONLY FOR THEIR OWN FILES BUT ALSO FOR SENSITIVE INFORMATION, SUCH AS THE AGENTS' MANUAL OF INSTRUCTIONS AND LABORATORY MATERIALS DESCRIBING THE MANUFACTURE OF DANGEROUS DRUGS.

"AN ATF OFFICIAL SAID ABOUT 50 PERCENT OF ITS REQUESTS COME FROM PRIOR OFFENDERS WHO USE THE (INFORMATION AND PRIVACY LAWS) IN AN ATTEMPT TO FIND OUT HOW INVESTIGATIONS ARE CONDUCTED AND THUS AVOID CAPTURE IN FUTURE CRIMES."

THE GAO AVOIDED A CONCLUSION ON WHETHER THE BENEFITS OF SUCH LAWS OUTWEIGH POSSIBLE DAMAGE TO THE POLICE AGENCIES, SAYING THAT WAS UP TO CONGRESS TO DECIDE. A SUBCOMMITTEE AIDE SAID THE PANEL WILL HAVE ITS OWN REPORT NEXT MONTH AND WILL GO BEYOND THE GAO FINDINGS TO MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT TIGHTENING THE LAWS.

BUT THE GAO INCLUDED A LETTER FROM ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL KEVIN ROONEY WHO SAID THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT FEELS "THERE IS NOW SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE TO JUSTIFY A CONGRESSIONAL RE-EXAMINATION OF THIS BALANCE" BETWEEN GOVERNMENT OPENNESS AND PROTECTING POLICE FILES.

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