

A Bit of 1984 In California

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

To the city of Huntington Beach, Calif., may go the distinction of being the first American community to have every one of its citizens, man, woman and child, guilty or innocent, accused or unaccused, on its police department computer. This data bank won't be restricted to criminal activity but will include everything that every branch of local government knows about people living at a given address—including medical information, abandoned cars, water bills, credit history and even the name of the family dog.

While this informational system is now being put into effect, there is one obstacle preventing the system's perfection: how to get the dope on people living in rental units in this city of about 140,000 people. To take care of that, an effort is underway to pass a law requiring landlords to file such information about their tenants with the police.

As you might suppose, this grand endeavor is being paid for with federal money through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The Feds send the money to the California Council on Criminal Justice, a state agency, which apportions it out to county and local law enforcement units, so you can't complain that there's no local control.

There may not have been too much citizen awareness, however, until the story was dug up by Pat Michaels, a reporter for the Capitol News Service, a Sacramento-based organization servicing 371 dailies and weeklies around the state. Michaels has also found much disconcerting material about federally paid-for police-youth programs, but at this stage it seems that mainly right wingers are upset about it.

A spokesman for the California Council on Criminal Justice somewhat sadly conceded that Michaels' report on Huntington Beach is correct, but disputed the accusation that his agency is paying for a number of programs which put "pre-delinquent" school children and adolescents in the law enforcement computer record system.

Whether or not the kids are going into the national crime data bank, the applications for these federal grants aren't terribly reassuring. San Diego County, for example, is receiving money for a project that goes by the horrific name of "Simplified Analytical Methods of Behavioral Systemization" and any kid over the

age of 7, accused of committing a crime or not, is eligible to be snapped up in it.

A teacher who's having trouble with a sassy-faced youngster can put a kid in the program. Violations of curfew, drinking, playing hooky or being "beyond the control of their parents or incorrigible to authority" is enough to sweep a kid in. And not only does he go in, but so do his parents.

The parents must choose between court action on their kids or submitting themselves to a group headshrink program that modestly describes itself as teaching the parents the "ability to handle their own affairs." At these sessions, conducted by experts of debatable expertise, the parents are routinely taught truths that have eluded the philosophers of the past two millennia, namely they are told about "the etiology of behavior, both normal and abnormal, . . . a basis for evaluation of their children's needs and . . . the ground work for alternate techniques of behavior modification."

To top it off, the civil servants doing these miraculous things are humble enough to conclude that "this project may raise a new generation of parents, informed, knowledgeable and competent."

Whether the sins of the sons should be visited on their fathers in this way is questionable when crimes have been committed, but some of these kids may be nothing more than obnoxious classroom cut-ups. According to Michaels, who's been interviewing probation officers involved in these programs, that's all it takes to get your behavior modified.

Almost as galling is the arrogance. Where does the city of Santa Paula, Calif., get off claiming to have "a community-based behavior program for pre-delinquents?" There is no science of behavior modification, no predictive method for determining who may be a "pre-delinquent," although a very good way of making somebody a delinquent is to call him a pre-delinquent. We do tend to live up to the social roles ascribed to us.

Yet you have some sympathy for these officials. If you're a cop and you're summoned to an address, it would be helpful to know who and what is behind that door. If you're a youth officer, inundated by complaints of misbehavior and criminal activity by juveniles, it would be a great assistance to know who will commit a crime some day and modify him before he does it.

In times past the Promethean assumptions on which such programs as these are built, have been associated with that mixture of social science and social beneficence we call liberalism. But all of this is happening under a conservative administration in Washington and the most famous right-wing governor in the country.

Why? Maybe the controls family and community once exercised on youth have weakened to such an extent that the government must intervene in our most intimate private life; maybe we are asking for a level of public lawfulness that is incompatible with personal liberty. But for the time being it might be best to be content to catch people and force them and their families to undergo the punishment of behavior modification after they've done something, not before.