

When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, enemies of New Deal "socialism" delighted in conjuring up the specter of enslaved Americans obliged to wear their Social Security numbers on dogtags around their neck. Fears of such perversion of a law enacted to protect people against the economic hazards of old age and unemployment were laid to rest long ago.

Now these fears are being revived in only slightly less obnoxious form by members of Congress hysterical over chiseling on the public relief rolls. The Senate Finance Committee, whose conservative majority considers the axe the only constructive instrument of welfare reform, started the new retreat from rationality by proposing that every American child be issued a Social Security card on entering the first grade. Representative Martha W. Griffiths of Michigan, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, is afraid too many chiselers will sneak into the nursery if the nation waits that long. She wants to go the Senators one better by having Social Security registration accompany every birth certificate.

Even though both she and the Finance Committee have stopped short of decreeing that the number be tattooed on each child's wrist, this is a type of cradle-to-grave surveillance the country can well do without.