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Feds Spy on Poor Kids (2)

IN ITS program of psychologically evaluating poor children, which can be used to label children for life as putative criminals, deviants, or emotional problems, the Health, Education and Welfare Department asks some pretty snotty questions of the mothers who volunteer for these "free medical tests."

The program is called EPSDT, for Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment. Questions put to the mothers of below poverty level 11-year-olds and teenagers by EPSDT are drawn up by the American Academy of Pediatrics. They include:



Do you think this person is generally pleasant and easy to live with? Has this person been arrested or had other difficulties with the police? Does this person regularly use tobacco, alcohol or drugs? Has this person had sexual intercourse?

Any mother who answered Yes to any of these questions, even if Yes were the correct answer, would have to be weak in the head, actively hostile to her child or have a faith in HEW's curative capacities that is touching, in the extreme.

Yet this is the kind of stuff which constitutes the "input" that goes into the old computer, and is likely to be consulted whenever Junior gets in trouble, seeks a job, or even, after 1984, when he gets married or tries to buy some medicine.

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QUESTIONS asked of mothers of poor infants by HEW are equally infamous, and equally in violation of what used to be called ordinary canons of decency. *How did you feel when you were pregnant . . .? How did your husband feel? Do you want to have more children? If not, why not? Is this child smarter than your other children? Not as smart?*

The HEW tests both physical and mental health. Surely, no great harm can result from the physical tests, which follow the usual norms set up by the medical profession for regular physicals.

The HEW deputy in charge of the program, James Kolb, admits that the agency has no guidelines for the mental health part of the program, despite the fact it has been in operation nearly four years.

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THIS MEANS that the individual states have pretty much their own way in devising their own rules. What is judged goofy by Mississippi doctors is likely to differ greatly from a judgment of the same children by, say, California or New Jersey doctors.

Worse yet, the state might leave the sensitive guidelines problem untouched. They might leave the standards to the shrinks and Freudians and quacks and eclectics and good guys giving their judgments on the future performance of poor children. Dean Swift would have the time of his life with this number.

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IN CALIFORNIA the state legislature early this year passed a law making physical and mental screening obligatory for all children who entered the first grade in September. Almost 1.5 million children are due for EPSDT training here. The state has allotted only \$3.30 per child to pay for the behavioral screening.

If parents can afford it, they may go to their own doctor. Poor kids are forced by law to enter school with whatever set of psychiatric labels result from this \$3.30 test.

Robert Gnaizda, deputy secretary of California's Health and Welfare agency, says that he considers mental screening of poor kids an invasion of their privacy. He also denies that his department is sanctioning the screening by continuing it. Can you beat that?