

A Check on Who Has Your Number

Washington

The government has begun an investigation to determine if the growing use of Social Security numbers by private firms is an abuse of individual rights, it was disclosed yesterday.

Elliot Richardson, secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, said he was

"concerned that if the Social Security numbers were used too broadly such widespread use and dependence upon the number might lend itself to abuses of individual privacy."

He said he had ordered the Social Security Administration to review policies on the use of the numbers.

Senator Sam J. Ervin (Dem-N.C.), released a letter from Richardson and announced that hearings by his subcommittee on constitutional rights would begin February 24 on the overall problem of computers, data banks and federal surveillance activities and their potential threat to civil liberties.

When the Social Security program began in the 1930s, identification numbers were kept secret. But they are now widely used by credit rating agencies, retail stores, detective agencies, police departments and state and local governments to keep track of individuals without confusing them with their namesakes.

Ervin said the committee had received many complaints that the system was being abused. Since information stored in computers under a person's Social Security number is frequently exchanged between private firms, it is virtually impossible to purge erroneous material from every data bank.

He also said the computerization of law enforcement information, the widespread use of Social Security numbers for identification and the use of a federal data bank on drivers license holders represented a major potential danger to civil liberties.

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