

SNOOPING: A DOSSIER ON EVERYBODY

How Our Privacy Is Being Nibbled Away

By Jacquin Sanders

Throughout their lives, Americans are forced to give information about themselves — to their schools, draft boards, employers, creditors and most of all to their government.

All of this information is filed; none of it is forgotten. By now, if there is any American on whom no one has collected a dossier, he can only be an elderly nomad without employment, income, property or family. Everyone else is fair game for the investigator and fodder for the computers and data banks.

Non one really know how many dossiers there are on the average citizen — one to two dozen is an educated guess — nor how many data banks containing such dossiers exist. But most of the major Federal agencies collect information on individual Americans and so do state

and city bureaucracies, as well as many private investigators, businesses and organizations.

"I call it snooping as a way of life," says Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. of North Carolina, "and what it could lead to, if we don't take it in hand and put some rules to it, is a dossier dictatorship."

Ervin's Senate judiciary subcommittee is doing some snooping of its own — on the snoopers. His well-publicized hearings have stressed Army surveillance of civilians as well as the dangers wrought by the computerization of the country's vast information-gathering programs.

Citizens take the collection of some of this information for granted. Everyone knows and accepts, more or less with grace, that the Census Bureau, the Internal Revenue Service and the military must have certain facts in

order to function.

But considerably more information is contained in an individual's dossier, includ-

ing some which he may have forgotten he ever gave out. It might include the forms he filled out for a government

job or an FHA loan, the information he gave the police after his apartment was robbed, the income figures

he disclosed on a credit application, the state of his health after an insurance application.

His dossier might also contain things he would like to forget: the job interview he made such a mess of several years ago, the radical political activity he indulged in for a time during his youth, the credit troubles he had during a period of unemployment, the heart condition that briefly showed up on a company physical examination, the "I&Q" test that somehow he couldn't get "up" for.

Finally, his dossier might contain half-truths or downright lies — the slander by a long-forgotten neighbor or a business competitor or a political enemy. In most cases the dossier's subject has had no opportunity to refute such statements; usually he doesn't even know of their existence.

"The basic problem is that people always assume it is

some other guy whose phone is being tapped — or they think only the 'crazies' are in data banks," says Arthur R. Miller, the University of Michigan law professor whose new book, "The Assault of Privacy," is becom-

ing the bible of the antisnooping brigades.

"The individual is being informationally raped," Miller continues. "The government, credit bureaus, the police and others have their fangs in this guy. They each have their piece of information about him and he doesn't have access to the information."

Of course, there have always been investigations, and the government snoop is no recent apparition. What makes him so much more dangerous than in the past, however, is the computer revolution.

Where once information grew dusty in a thousand forgotten file cabinets, it can now be gathered, indexed and stored in the memory banks of the computers. It can also be produced in seconds — and it is available to a surprisingly large number of people.

Individual income tax returns, for example, are protected from "unauthorized" persons by \$1,000 fines and one-year jail sentences. The trouble is that practically nobody who counts is unauthorized.

All sorts of Federal personnel, including "agents" of the President, several Congressional committees and personnel of the Justice Department, have free access to IRS files. So do state governors and their "agents." So does anybody resourceful enough to make "arrangements" with authorized personnel or their agents or the right file clerk.

The file has files on more than 86 million individuals, only 19 million of whom have been arrested on criminal charges. These files are usually available to local police forces who, of course, have their own files which they frequently share with the Federal law-enforcement agencies.

But it is not only security agencies that collect such data. The General Services Administration maintains a "blacklist" of businessmen it considers poor risks. The Civil Service Commission not only keeps personal files on the 11 million people who have applied for Federal jobs in the past three decades, but also maintains a "security file" on no fewer than 2.5 million individuals.

