

Computerized Data Peril Cited

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A federal advisory committee said yesterday that potential abuse of centralized, computerized information on millions of Americans raises immediate fears of a "Big Brother" society.

It recommended stiff new laws before things get worse.

At the same time, the report singled out former Attorney General John N. Mitchell for fostering a climate it said led to increased citizen surveillance.

Under Mitchell, a centralized information network was established at the Justice Department which, the report says, "can be used in conjunction with the vast government and private computer dossiers being compiled by credit bureaus, insurance companies, welfare agencies, mental health units and others. Cumulatively, these files threaten an information tyranny."

The 24-member committee, named by former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Elliot L. Richardson, recommended federal legislation to guarantee individuals the right to:

Know that no secret data system exists.

- Find out what information is being maintained about them in computer systems.

- Know how information about them is being used.

- Contest the accuracy, pertinence and timeliness of any information about them.

Violations could bring severe criminal penalties accompanied by the right to sue for damages.

The committee also urged curbs on what it called a "dangerous drift" toward use



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Attorney General Richardson, left, and HEW Secretary Weinberger review report on computerized information.

of social security numbers as standard, universal identifiers.

Legislation was recommended to limit disclosure of these numbers to persons or organizations given specific authority by statute and to guarantee the right to redress if an individual's refusal to disclose it results in denial of benefits.

Declaring numbers to have

a potential for inaccuracy, the committee noted that nearly 6,000 Americans at one time thought 078-05-1120 was their Social Security number because it was used on sample cards found in wallets sold in 1938.

After receiving the report from the panel's chairman, Willis H. Ware, a computer scientist with the Rand Corp.,

HEW Secretary Casper W. Weinberger said he basically endorsed the report and hoped to have legislation ready for Congress by Oct. 1.

Richardson, now Attorney General, endorsed the report but said the government should have more leeway in handling files involving national security matters.

Panel member Jane L. Hardaway, commissioner of Tennessee's Department of Personnel, said she was shocked at the American Banking Society's relaxed attitude toward the release of information gathered by banks.

Another panel member, Florence R. Gaynor of Newark, N.J., said she "found systems, time after time, that were only as secure as those people who ran them." As executive director of Newark's Martland Hospital, she said she was particularly concerned about specific personal material collected under the guise of being medical information.

Panel members noted the section of the report about Mitchell was collected before public hearings started on the Watergate incident. The section says Mitchell "greatly expanded federal surveillance of citizens thought to be threats to internal security, justifying his action on the theory that the executive has inherent and discretionary power to protect itself."