

F.B.I. DATA BANK HELD WASTEFUL

Many Cities Ask Sharing of
Facility by the Police

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 26—The Federal Bureau of Investigation's new nationwide criminal history data bank, in operation less than a month, has become the center of a new controversy over the use of computers by the police.

Unlike the concerns that were expressed when the F.B.I. was given authority over the new network of state criminal record data banks, the new controversy does not center upon issues of individual privacy and confidentiality of police records.

Instead, complaints are flooding into the Justice Department from cities and small states that the system is unnecessarily wasteful.

They blame the F.B.I.'s requirement that any computer system handling criminal records be dedicated entirely to police work and be under the management and control of law enforcement officials.

The result, they say, is that many police computers will not be used to capacity, yet they cannot be employed to handle welfare, health, voter registration, and other noncriminal information.

Officials of the F.B.I. system assert that police control of criminal records is necessary to prevent the misuse of the information. They say the creation of state and local computerized data banks, crammed with information on local citizens' criminal records and other data and under the control of political officials, poses a greater threat to privacy than a system entirely within the control of the police.

They add that if the nation's police are to benefit from computer technology they must become trained in its use, rather than turning it over to professional computer technicians.

Congressional Debate Expected

The issue is likely to be fought out in Congress next year. The present system, with its requirement that computer systems be used solely for law-enforcement purposes, was established without Congressional approval, with the understanding that Congress would legislate on the subject in 1972.

The Nixon Administration has introduced bills in both houses that would perpetuate the present system. Last month, the National League of Cities served notice that it would fight for a law to free police computers for other uses as well.

In a resolution approved on Nov. 30, the league said:

"The exclusive dedication of computer and information processing technology to a single function, such as urban planning, health, or law enforcement, is not in the best interest of cities or their citizens."

The resolution added that Federal grant programs that require "dedication of a computer or its related systems" for a single purpose are "contrary to the best interests of city government."

This is a reference to the Justice Department's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, which is making grants to cities and states to allow them to put their criminal records on computers. However, when they do so and join the F.B.I.'s computerized criminal history system, they must agree to dedicate their computers solely to criminal justice purposes.

Leonard's Position

In resisting this requirement, the cities and small states have picked up an important ally in Jerris Leonard, the administrator of L.E.A.A.

In an interview today Mr. Leonard said, "We are receiving hundreds of complaints from people in small states and local government about this."

He said he agreed that "if we can't allow joint use of these systems, then I don't think L.E.A.A. ought to help states and local governments obtain computers." Mr. Leonard added that he would urge the Administration to amend its bill to permit joint use of systems.

He said security was the reason for the present police-control requirement, but he said this could be accomplished by programming computers so that only criminal justice agencies could obtain information that they had placed on the machines.

He termed it "hogwash" that the police must control computers in order to develop expertise in their use, and added that under President Nixon's policy of leaving decision-making in state hands, each governor should decide how his state's computers would be used.

The initial complaints against the present system came from the National Association for State Information Systems, an organization of computer specialists who work for state governments.

This has prompted supporters of the F.B.I. program to charge that the controversy is the outgrowth of an effort by computer technicians to establish themselves as state computer "czars," with control over state data banks containing a broad range of vital information about the people.

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