FBI biometric database will diminish privacy

by The Detroit News

The FBI's new biometric identification system poses a threat to privacy and may not work all that well anyway.

The bureau is already collecting some data. And it's working on covertly collecting digital images of faces and irises from a distance. Employers can request that the FBI retain biometric data on workers who undergo background checks, according to the Washington Post. That means people with no criminal record can nonetheless acquire a detailed biometric FBI record.

On top of that, the bureau will notify a company if its workers ever break the law. Collecting biometric information on criminals can be justified as fighting crime. Routinely keeping data on non-offenders invades privacy. If records get corrupted, it's not like canceling a stolen credit card - an innocent person can't run out and get a new face, privacy advocates note.

Apparently the government forgets the criticism it took after - under Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy - the FBI wiretapped and kept records on Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders of the 1960s. After September 11, the Bush administration's thirst for information and secrecy grew out of proportion to the emergency. The FBI threw out broad dragnets for data - including assembling information on U.S. scuba divers (on the farfetched theory some divers might someday terrorize the country by using underwater explosives).

It's a problem because it is the nature of government to abuse power. Long before September 11, scientist Wen Ho Lee, an American citizen, found that out. He was sloppy in how he handled nuclear secrets. The government locked him away without bail after linking his handling of records to China's known gains in nuclear technology.

At one point, an FBI agent provided false testimony in the case. The spy link was never proved and - after much national publicity - the judge in the case apologized to Lee, saying the court had been "led astray" by the Justice Department and the FBI.

Just last week, it was revealed that during the Korean War, FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover proposed rounding up 12,000 Americans and throwing them in detention camps. This is the same FBI that now plans to spend $1 billion to collect millions of biometric files, including digital images of irises, palm prints, earlobes and face shape, a project dubbed Next Generation Identification.

Ironically, the database might not be all that useful. A 2006 test of face recognition matched travelers' faces

against a database more than 60 percent of the time during the day in good lighting but the rate fell to 10 to 20 percent at night, the Post reports.

That is, if a terrorist happens to be a night owl, he has a 90 percent chance of slipping through an FBI face recognition checkpoint. Such performance is a thin national security reed. It has great potential to invade privacy but does little to make the country safer. Rethink the biometric plan.

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