

US pushes for thumbprinting and national identity cards

Report by Eugene Oscapella

THE USE OF THUMBPRINTING HAS EXPANDED beyond criminal justice. Employers and businesses in the United States are now increasingly using biometrics as a means of identification.

On February 20th, the *New York Times* reported that some companies are taking thumbprints to enable unfamiliar customers to cash cheques. According to the report, this practice is spreading in Florida, California, Texas and the US mid-west.

A spokesman for the American Bankers Association said that half of the nation's biggest banks, such as Citibank, Bank of America and Bank One, take thumbprints at some of their branches. Some 45,000 employees of one Texas supermarket chain will punch in to work by pressing a finger on a terminal. Texas, California and Georgia require thumbprints on drivers' licences.

Some members of the US public appear to welcome the apparent convenience of thumbprinting. Others are offended by the historical association of fingerprinting with criminal behaviour. Some also fear the consequences if resulting databases are not protected by appropriate security and legislative measures.

Thumbprints have also been suggested as a component of a national identity document. Shortly after the September 11th attacks in the US, Larry Ellison, chairman and CEO of Oracle, advocated the creation of a national ID card system as a way to address airport security. "We need a national ID card with our photograph and thumbprint digitised and embedded in the ID card," he said.

However, some proponents of identification cards suggest standardising drivers' licences instead. A *New York Times* report, dated February 18th 2002, states that more than 90 per cent of American adults hold licences, many of which have bar codes or magnetic stripes. US Congress is now considering legislation that would link state motor vehicle databases into a national database.

An earlier *New York Times* article (January 8th) reported that the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators proposed a system that would use bar codes, biometrics, and linked databases, to allow states to share information. The state officials proposed unified standards that would allow drivers' licences to be used for the same purpose as a national identity card. The proposal would make licences more consistent in appearance and information, and would require states to take uniform

security measures before issuing them.

In response to Mr. Ellison's comments – and other calls for technological measures to enhance security – the US libertarian think-tank, the Cato Institute, urged caution:

"The bottom line is that mandatory national ID cards aren't going to help us catch many bad guys. While the first responsibility of government is to protect our lives and property, we shouldn't rush into giving up some of our freedoms unnecessarily. We need things that actually matter, not just symbolic gestures. Instead of providing such a meaningful solution, national ID cards will become, at a minimum, an unnecessary nuisance for most citizens. Worse yet, in extreme cases, it could produce massive breaches of individual privacy."

The institute observes that national ID cards are not a new idea. They were considered as a possible solution to illegal immigration in the United States. Similar national identifier proposals, the Cato Institute argues, have arisen in debates over gun control, national health care, and social security reform:

"What is new about the various national ID card proposals is that they have become more technologically sophisticated. The prospect of massive computer databases or registries, software data collection systems, digital fingerprinting, handprint scans, facial recognition technologies, voice authentication devices, electronic retinal scans, and other "biometric" surveillance technologies have suddenly become realistic options for government identification purposes."

Concludes the Cato analysis: "If Americans are concerned about the recent proliferation of traffic surveillance cameras on roadways and sidewalks, then they ain't seen nothin' yet."

For further information:
www.cato.org/tech/tk/010928-tk.html