

EDITORIAL

Trap or safety net?

Fingerprints of many people who have worked in security-sensitive jobs during the last half-century are on file with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. To date, excepting those who commit crimes, the FBI records pose no threat to anyone whose prints are stored in the Bureau's files.

Why, then, would anyone object to having a record made of their children's fingerprints?

Concern arises from those traditional uses of fingerprints: police and FBI identification of criminals. And the possibility does exist that at some future time a child could be pinpointed, through his fingerprints, as having been involved in a crime.

In a world where as recently as the 1940s humans were tattooed with numbers, imprisoned, and in many instances made victims of mass extermination for no better reason than that they belonged to a particular race, religion, or culture, these concerns are legitimate.

In a nation where, even now, children of welfare recipients are assigned Social Security numbers at birth, numbers each will carry as long as he or she lives, resistance to yet another dehumanizing process is a natural response in a free society.

Police forces, although necessary to protect the law-abiding from the lawless among us, have been known, in some countries, to overthrow benevolent governments and to impose harsh regimens upon civilian populations. Many people, especially those United States citizens (or their descendants) who fled totalitarian regimes, have good reason to question the fingerprinting of school children.

Even if no record of the prints is kept by the police, they could easily record which children's fingerprints were made and given to parents for safe-keeping. On a dark day years from now, might it not be possible that a court could

subpoena the print records? Such fears are not entirely groundless, given world history.

Flip the coin, now, to see potential good in the program.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children disappear without a trace every year. Some are kidnapped and held for ransom but are never returned to their parents, never found. Some are stolen to satisfy an emotional quirk of a child-snatcher's warped mind. Some are runaways. Some, in these days of broken homes, are removed from one parent's legal custody by the child's other parent and whisked out of state, beyond jurisdiction. Some simply disappear for no apparent reason and are never heard from again.

While nobody enjoys thinking of "worst case" possibilities, were any of these heart-breaking circumstances to occur in your own family, a fingerprint record might help restore a child to its parents, or help identify a child's body, if one were found. Bodies of older people are oftentimes identified through dental work or old bone injuries, but fewer such records are available for young children.

If your child disappeared, and later a child's body were found, wouldn't you want to know that identification was positive, beyond any doubt? Or that your child might still be alive, might still be found? Or that your child was, certainly and without any question, no longer alive?

Perhaps the best solution would be to eliminate the police element entirely and to have the fingerprinting conducted under auspices of less threatening entities. Kits might be made available for over-the-counter purchase. Those parents who so desire might make their own records.

Fingerprinting children is a good idea. Prints could be a useful tool should tragedy strike. The process is not complicated; almost anyone can record another person's fingerprints.