

Bush ID Theft Task Force Issues Final Recommendations

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After a year of study, President Bush's identity-theft task force on Monday released its final recommendations on how best to solve the problem.

The committee's report points to Social Security numbers as "the most valuable commodity" for an identity thief and requests that federal agencies reduce their dependency on the numbers.

Federal agencies will be required to participate in an awareness campaign about ID theft intended to educate consumers and businesses about ways to deter ID theft, the report said. Businesses, meanwhile, will be called upon to adhere to national standards for notification in the event that a breach puts customer data at risk.

The standards will be crafted by a coordinated effort between the FTC, federal bank regulatory agencies, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, the report said. The report's wording is vague, however, and orders those writing the rules not to adopt a "one-size-fits-all approach."

Finally, the report calls on lawmakers to amend current statutes to facilitate the prosecution of ID thieves who mishandle information belonging to corporations and organizations. It also includes a list of offenses that, if committed in conjunction with ID theft, would result in a mandatory two-year sentence. Intrastate communications would be added to the electronic data statute that currently only cover interstate

communications, and the definition of cyber-extortion would be expanded.

The significance of Social Security numbers is awkward for the administration, given that last week it was revealed that the Agricultural Department had for years posted the Social Security numbers of financial aid recipients on a publicly available web portal. The information has since been taken down.

That incident, however, was "problematic and does not serve as a timely reminder that all of us, including the government, must be careful when handling people's personal information," Attorney General Roberto Gonzales, a task force member, said at a Monday press conference at the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in Washington.

Several of the final recommendations had already been released points last September as interim recommendations, and all of them either have already been implemented or are in the process of being implemented, Gonzales said.

More than 1,500 law enforcement agencies currently have access to the FTC's ID theft data clearinghouse, a database of one million victim complaints, said FTC Chairman Deborah Majoras.

That information could be funneled through a new National Identity Theft Law Enforcement Center, which would allow law enforcement agencies to share information about ID theft cases for more effective and swift prosecution, according to the report.

"Identity thieves ... do not respect jurisdictional boundaries, and allowing agents and officers across the country to share information will help them connect the dots between seemingly unrelated investigations," Gonzales said.

The task force will also look to Congress for legislative assistance.

Members of Congress have already jumped on the ID theft bandwagon. Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye, a Democrat from Hawaii, partnered with the committee's ranking member, Alaska Republican Ted Stevens, to introduce an ID theft bill last week.

It is similar to the president's recommendations in that it requires businesses to protect their customers' personal information against theft and provide adequate notification. It also calls for the development of best practices and pre-empts state ID theft laws regarding safeguarding and notification.

It goes a step further than the task force in requiring the FTC to develop rules to more strictly evaluate all entities and third parties that handle sensitive information. IT also calls on the FTC and the Department of Justice to look into a possible connection between ID theft and the use of methamphetamines.

"Americans have demanded better protection for their sensitive personal information, and it is imperative that we respond to these demands effectively and expeditiously," Inouye said Friday when introducing the bill, S. 1178.

"Identify theft in the United States has reached epidemic proportions, with Alaska ranked fifth per capita in the number of fraud complaints filed last year," Stevens added in a statement. "Consumers are under attack and we must give them the tools they need to protect themselves."

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