

Waste watchers? UK group fears trash bin spies

March 5 2010, By GREGORY KATZ , Associated Press Writer



Wheelin bins await collection from Belfast City Council, in east, Belfast, Northern Ireland, Friday, March, 5, 2010. Monitored by millions of cameras and spied on by a secretive domestic intelligence network, Britons could be forgiven for feeling up in arms over the latest threat to their privacy: Intelligent garbage bins that can monitor how much they throw out. Although the technology is already nearly a decade old, a U.K. privacy rights group says the number of local authorities fitting their trash bins with sensors of some kind has risen dramatically in the past year affecting at least 2.6 million British households. Big Brother Watch says the practice could lead to Britons being charged for how much they throw out and effectively allow the government to go through their garbage. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

(AP) -- It's the new front in the nanny state: Microchips placed in garbage bins to monitor how much people throw away. A pro-privacy group warns in a new report that more than 2.6 million of the chips have

been surreptitiously installed in what is seen as a first step toward charging those who toss too much.

Proponents say it's a bid to push recycling. Opponents say it stinks.

"They should mind their own business," said Terry Williams, an unemployed Londoner who thinks the government is meddling. "I believe they have gone too far. It's not like we are throwing away anything that is illegal."

The [advocacy group](#) Big Brother Watch found through a series of Freedom of Information requests that many local governments, called councils in Britain, are installing the microchips in trash cans distributed to households, but in most cases have not yet activated them - in part because officials know the move would be unpopular.

"They are waiting for the political climate to change before they start using them," said campaign director Dylan Sharpe, who predicted that families that produce large amounts of garbage would be fined.

The trash microchips are now part of the British [information grid](#), which already includes a heavy reliance on closed-circuit television surveillance and cameras to monitor the population, particularly on the crowded public transportation system.

"This is yet another piece of surveillance that the councils are taking on in our daily life," said Sharpe. "With this information they can tell if we are home or not, and the information is stored on their database, which is not that secure."

He said the "pay as you throw" policy councils are planning to implement would discriminate against large families that generate more waste and might encourage people to burn their refuse - or dump it

illegally - rather than pay extra.

"That's what's happened in Ireland, where they're tried this," he said.

"Over the last 10 years we've seen a massive increase in CCTV, and the introduction of laws allowing police to search at random. There has been a general trend in this country toward gathering as much data as possible."

But Gary Hopkins, a councilor in Bristol, said the microchips will be a useful tool in an innovative program to reward people who reduce household waste, not part of a secret plan to charge those who produce high volumes.

"It's voluntary, not compulsory," he said. "A compulsory plan would not work. We've managed to persuade the people of Bristol to participate in the recycling program. We want to encourage the people who aren't using it to join in as well."

The government's ambitious information-gathering plans go still further. Security officials working on counterterrorism plans have lobbied for greater powers to track every e-mail, text, and phone call made in the U.K. The country already maintains an extensive DNA database that is, per capita, the largest in the world.

Then there are the alleged "nanny state" initiatives designed to use laws and regulation to modify troublesome social behavior. The government in January banned some drinking games and bar promotions in an effort to curb binge drinking, and a government-funded design effort is under way to produce a shatterproof pint glass so drunken "lager louts" will be less able to break glasses and use the shards as weapons.

The government may even get involved in the effort to help young women have a better self-image by requiring advertisers who retouch

photos of fashion models to print disclaimers making clear that the airbrushed models don't look that great in real life.

The thinking is that this would make women less like to try to starve themselves into perfection.

The use of microchips in trash bins has spread dramatically in the last year, the new study shows.

Microchips were first fitted into some British trash bins eight years ago, and the debate over whether the state has the right to weigh or otherwise analyze residents' refuse has surfaced periodically since.

In 2006, then-British environment minister Ben Bradshaw told Britons that they might someday have to pay for the amount of waste they produce - arguing that the practice would encourage people to waste less and reduce pressure on landfills while making recycling more popular.

His successor, David Miliband, moved to lift a ban which prevented local officials from offering financial incentives for recycling - further clearing the way for the use of garbage-monitoring microchips.

The nature of the chips and their exact purpose vary across the country: Some of the chips are intended to sense the weight of the garbage piled into a bin. Others are meant to track the whereabouts of the bin itself, or check whether it has been emptied.

None of the chips are used to charge residents in so-called "pay-as-you-throw" plans - at least so far. But many believe the microchips are part of a stealth plan to increase fees and fines.

"It makes me very angry," said Nat Spencer, 35, of London. "I've been thinking of moving out, it's gotten that bad."

More information: Big Brother Watch report: <http://bit.ly/aNIv2d>

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Citation: Waste watchers? UK group fears trash bin spies (2010, March 5) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-03-watchers-uk-group-trash-bin.html>

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