

## **What is a national ID card?**

As proposed, the ID card would contain some sort of “unique identifier,” such as a fingerprint or retinal identifier that could be read by a scanning machine. Through this scanning system, information could be retrieved about the cardholder, such as name and address. The scanners would be linked to government databases so that the person could be checked against the files of agencies such as the INS and law enforcement agencies. About 100 countries already have mandatory national ID cards.

## **Why do advocates of a national identification system believe it will prevent terrorism?**

Supporters of a national ID point out that the terrorists who launched the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks lived freely in the United States without ever being detected, even though some were violating immigration laws. Two of the 9/11 terrorists were on the INS watch list of suspects, yet flew on airplanes freely, used credit cards, had bank accounts, cell phones, and frequent-flier memberships, and took flying lessons. Five of the terrorists were able to obtain Social Security numbers, even with false identities. Seven of the hijackers were able to obtain Virginia driver’s licenses even though they did not live in that state. As a result, a national ID card that would be required for a number of types of transactions would make it easier to catch potential terrorists. Moreover, the way we identify people now, one error on a computer keyboard can allow a potential terrorist to slip by. A “smart” national identification card would prevent this from happening.

## **Why do opponents believe a national ID card will do little to prevent terrorism?**

First, opponents say that identification technology is not reliable at this time. Moreover, there can be errors in government databases, which can also fall prey to hackers. Even if we had the technology, opponents argue, an ID card only confirms your identity and history, not what you intend to do. Those 9/11 terrorists who were not on government “watch lists” might not have been caught by a national ID system. Finally, it is unclear what would be required to get an ID—passports and driver’s licenses are easily forged.

## **Why do opponents believe a national ID card would violate “privacy rights”?**

Opponents believe the government will be able to collect and disseminate an unlimited amount of personal information. Even if the government did not voluntarily distribute the information, government employees would have access to it and might deliberately or accidentally release it. And a national identification system might not stop at being used to prevent terrorism. Government agencies, employers, banks, insurance and health care companies, and consumer businesses might want people to add more information of use to them to the cards. Once people have such a card, there is the potential that they will be required to present it in order to do all sorts of things, including apply for a job, buy a gun, or open a bank account. If a person loses his or her card or has it stolen, he or she might be unable to travel freely, and potentially not be able to do all sorts of everyday tasks.

## **Why do supporters believe a national ID card would not violate privacy rights?**

Supporters say that so much personal information is already gathered by private industry, there would be not much greater threat to privacy rights than exists now. We already require presentation of driver’s licenses to cash checks, get a post office box, board an airplane, buy alcohol,

register to vote in some states, enroll in college and drive. Plus, the trade off for increased security is worth it. Also, some advocates have urged that the system be voluntary, at least for American citizens. However, those who opt not to have the card would be subject to greater inspection at places such as airports.

### **Could a national ID card system be abused by law enforcement?**

Opponents argue that the system might operate so that anyone could be stopped on the street and asked to produce their ID card. If the person forgot or lost the card, or had it stolen, that person could then be immediately suspect, and potentially subject to a search and arrest. Some further argue that a national ID card will increase the incidence of ethnic and racial profiling by law enforcement, in that people who look a certain way would be constantly hassled for their ID card. Supporters argue that it would actually reduce profiling, since an encounter would immediately halt upon production of the card.

### **Are there other possible advantages to a national ID card?**

Supporters argue a national ID card with this technological capacity would have other positive uses, including easy access to emergency medical information, drug allergies or next of kin. Such a card could be used to screen out felons trying to purchase guns if criminal records were added to the card. The cards could be required for all immigrants admitted to the country temporarily. National ID cards could be used to identify registered voters at the polling site, reducing voter fraud as well as addressing the problem of registered voters being mistakenly turned away because of administrative errors.

### **How much would the system cost?**

Opponents say a national ID card would cost billions of dollars to administer, and that a system able to reliably identify forgeries would be particularly expensive. The Social Security Administration has estimated that creating counterfeit-resistant Social Security cards would cost \$4 billion. Simple data-storage cards cost \$10-\$35 a person. We would also need to pay for card readers, staff and overhead, essentially, opponents argue, creating a new bureaucracy to administer the system. However, supporters say a national ID card system would not be expensive. A card might cost \$8 per person and a commercial reader \$50. This, they say, is a reasonable expense for greater security.

### **Who is supporting a national ID system?**

A poll done by Pew right after the attack showed 70 percent of Americans favoring a national ID card. A poll done by Roper in early November found 66 percent of respondents supported a national identification card. Senator Dianne Feinstein has expressed great interest and has already introduced legislation that includes a provision requiring non-citizens to use high-tech visa cards containing a fingerprint, retinal scan or other unique identifier (S. 1627). Representative Steve Horn has called for a federal commission to study national identity cards. Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle Corp., a software company, has called for the creation of such a system and offered to donate the tools for creating the cards. The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators is already developing a plan to create a national identification system that would link all driver databases throughout the country and use a card that has a unique identifier. The Association is asking Congress for up to \$100 million to create the system, and Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, is working on a bill to back the proposal. Due to customer dissatisfaction with longer security clearance lines at the airports, the American Transport Association, representing the airline industry, supports a voluntary "smart card" ID that frequent travelers can pay for and use to expedite check-in time. Such a system would separate travelers that are already known via the airline's database, from unknown people who would be scrutinized more closely.

## Who is opposing it?

President Bush essentially ruled out creating a national ID card system in September, saying it was not being considered by the administration. A number of members of Congress and other elected officials have expressed skepticism. Most civil rights organizations and electronic privacy rights groups are opposed, as well as some more conservative organizations, such as the Cato Institute. Critics also oppose the voluntary system advocated by the airline industry, arguing that given the convenience that such a card would provide, anyone who travels at all would feel pressured to join the system.

## Related Links

ACLU:

<http://www.aclu.org>

Testimony of ACLU's Kate Corrigan:

<http://www.aclu.org/congress/1111601a.html>

[http://www.aclu.org/features/National\\_ID\\_Feature.html](http://www.aclu.org/features/National_ID_Feature.html)

Privacy International:

<http://www.privacyinternational.org>

Feinstein legislation, Bill S. 1627:

<http://www.thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/C?c107:./temp/~c10706dw90>

Feinstein statement:

<http://www.senate.gov/~feinstein/releases01/r-visas1.html>

House Government Reform Committee, Subcommittee on Government Efficiency, Financial Management and Intergovernmental Relations, Hearings on National ID Card:

[http://www.house.gov/reform/gefmir/hearings/2001hearings/1116\\_nationa\\_id/1116\\_witnesses.html](http://www.house.gov/reform/gefmir/hearings/2001hearings/1116_nationa_id/1116_witnesses.html)

Watch the hearing:

[http://www.c-span.org/technology\\_science](http://www.c-span.org/technology_science)

Information from New York State Senate Anti-Terrorism Special Committee, which recommends a national ID card

<http://www.roygoodman.org>

Comments from Representative George Gekas, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims

<http://www.house.gov/gekas/columns/September/2001/28-NationalID.html>

Testimony of Monte Belger, Acting Deputy Administrator of the FAA, which supports use of a traveler ID card, before the Senate Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government Information

<http://www.faa.gov/apa/TESTIMONY/2001/1114temb.html>

Cato Institute:

<http://www.cato.org/tech/tk/010928-tk.html>

Electronic Information Privacy Center:

[http://www.epic.org/privacy/id\\_cards](http://www.epic.org/privacy/id_cards)

Pew Research Center:

<http://www.people-press.org/terrorist01rpt.html>