

Written by

Thursday, 24 May 2012 16:49

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Washington D.C. - Today, the Immigration Policy Center (IPC) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) release *From Fingerprints to DNA: Biometric Data Collection in U.S. Immigrant Communities and Beyond* by Jennifer Lynch. The paper outlines the current state of U.S. government collection of biometric information and the problems that could arise from these growing databases of records. It also points out how immigrant communities are immediately affected by the way this data is collected, stored, and shared. There is a growing push to link biometric collection with immigration enforcement. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) takes approximately 300,000 fingerprints per day from non-U.S. citizens crossing the border into the United States, and it collects biometrics from noncitizens applying for immigration benefits and from immigrants who have been detained. In addition, state and local law enforcement officers regularly collect fingerprints and DNA, as well as face prints and even iris scans. All of these government databases are growing and increasingly interconnected. For example, the Secure Communities program takes the fingerprints of people booked into local jails, matches them to prints contained in large federal immigration databases, and then uses this information to deport people.

“Some people believe biometrics and databases are the silver-bullets that will solve the immigrant enforcement dilemma. But biometrics are not infallible, and databases contain errors. These problems can result in huge negative consequences for U.S. citizens and legal immigrants mistakenly identified,” said Michele Waslin, Senior Policy Analyst at the IPC who moderated a tele-briefing today to release the paper.

“Biometric data collection can lead to racial profiling and can disproportionately affect immigrants,” said EFF Staff Attorney and report author Jennifer Lynch. “It also gives the government a new way to find and track people throughout the United States. The government needs to act now to limit unnecessary biometric collection and address the serious privacy issues regarding the amount and type of data collected, as well as what triggers that data collection, with whom the data is shared, and the security of that data.”

“Some in Congress believe that we should address immigrant enforcement by requiring all US workers—citizens and immigrants alike—to provide biometric information for a new employment identification card,” said Jonathan Weinberg, Professor of Law at Wayne State University, also a guest on today’s call. “Under that hugely expensive approach, database and biometric errors would inevitably trip up a huge number of working Americans. This approach would contravene basic American values, limit the ability of the poorest among us to support themselves, threaten

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Americans' privacy, and offer government a new, powerful lever of control over the citizenry. And it would not prevent fraud or end unauthorized employment.”

To view the paper in its entirety, see:

- From Fingerprints to DNA: Biometric Data Collection in U.S. Immigrant Communities by Jennifer Lynch (IPC Special Report, May 2012)