

## **Would National ID Cards Increase Safety and Preserve Civil Liberties?**

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In the United States today, it is perfectly legal to walk around in public with no identification to prove who you are. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, this makes many people feel vulnerable, and has revived a longstanding debate about the pros and cons of national id cards.

The best argument in favor of national id cards is their exculpatory value. If an airline passenger has dark skin, for example, and an Islamic-sounding last name, he or she could simply flash the card and avoid being hassled at the airport. Advocates in favor of id cards argue that the inconvenience of having to register with the government would be spread across all social groups, and ethnic profiling would end because disfavored groups would not be singled out for negative treatment. National id cards would streamline governmental administration and, if adopted by the private sector, provide useful links between commercial and governmental institutions.

The difficulty with national id cards is that they inevitably increase police powers. They are used in about 100 countries around the world, for a variety of purposes, from determining eligibility for government benefits to eliminating border controls. They do not cut crime rates, but they do improve governmental efficiency.

An important question, therefore, is what national id cards would be used for in this country. If the goal is to track people with criminal records, for example, the magnetic strip could carry information about arrests and convictions. Failure to carry one's id could be grounds for arrest, and the police could perform spot-checks on undesirables everywhere.

Another question is whether national id cards would achieve their purpose. They would not have identified the September 11 hijackers who had valid drivers licenses (not to mention frequent flyer miles). Moreover, ID cards are only as good as the documentation supporting them. Biometric chips can be imbedded in a card, but if the card is issued based on a forged birth certificate, it is still fraudulent. Problems that arise from illegal immigration cannot be cured with a single id card strategy. For example, it is easy to stay in this country after a student visa expires, because colleges and universities are not required to track, monitor, retrieve and deport students from other countries.

The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators has proposed to turn state drivers licenses into de facto national ids. The plan is to use digital photos, holographic images, and magnetic strips to compare licenses against a national criminal information database. Under current law, if you're pulled over while driving, the police can check only to see if your car is stolen or if there are any warrants outstanding for your arrest. The AAMVA proposal would inevitably strengthen the state's police powers.

And consider the opportunities for abuse by the commercial sector. Private companies will quite reasonably wish to use the national id for other purposes, from renting cars to making loans. A national id card will depend upon a national database that identifies trustworthy citizens versus scoundrels, and its value for consumer profiling will be immense.

A thorough and evenhanded discussion of national ids and their use in other countries can be found at [www.privacyinternational.org/issues/idcard/idcard\\_faq.html](http://www.privacyinternational.org/issues/idcard/idcard_faq.html)  
The perils of national id cards are exposed at [www.EPIC.org/privacy/](http://www.EPIC.org/privacy/) and [www.aclu.org/safeandfree/](http://www.aclu.org/safeandfree/)