

*The FBI Fingerprint Identification  
Automation Program: Issues and Options*

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**T** HE FBI FINGERPRINT  
**IDENTIFICATION  
AUTOMATION  
PROGRAM:  
ISSUES AND OPTIONS**

**Background Paper**



CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

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## Foreword

The criminal justice process depends on quick and accurate identification of persons arrested for violations of the law. Police, prosecutors, and judges need to know the extent of any arrestee's prior criminal record when making detention, bail, charging, and sentencing decisions.


Fingerprint identification is the most widely accepted method for establishing positive identification, and for linking an arrestee with any prior criminal record. Fingerprinting helps assure public safety by identifying repeat offenders who may need to be detained while a case is pending. It also helps protect the constitutional rights of all persons who undergo criminal record checks—whether arrestees or job, license, and security clearance applicants—by minimizing the chances of misidentification.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has historically played a key role in providing fingerprint identification and criminal history records on a nationwide basis. But the FBI's fingerprint system is technically obsolete and incompatible with the many more advanced State and local systems. The FBI's criminal history file is still not fully automated and complete—as many as half of the arrests listed are missing information on the final disposition of the case.

OTA's background paper assesses the FBI's strategic plans to modernize and fully automate its fingerprint identification and criminal history record system. The paper focuses on key assumptions that will affect the sizing and procurement of the new FBI system, and on other related steps that appear necessary to ensure complete and up-to-date record systems. These include full implementation of a Federal/State/local partnership for maintaining and exchanging fingerprint and criminal history records; enactment of an interstate compact or Federal legislation setting out uniform rules for the exchange of such records; standards and funding for improving criminal history record completeness and disposition reporting; and privacy and security protections for electronic fingerprint and record information.

This study was requested by Rep. Don Edwards, Chairman, Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, House Committee on the Judiciary.

OTA benefited from discussion at a July 1991 workshop, comments on earlier drafts by many law enforcement and criminal justice experts, and prior reports on this topic prepared by or for criminal justice agencies. OTA appreciates the assistance of the FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics; Federal, State, and local agencies that use FBI records; the FBI's National Crime Information Center Advisory Policy Board; SEARCH Group, Inc., a State/local consortium on criminal justice; and groups concerned with the civil liberties implications of criminal justice record systems. The content of the background paper is, however, solely the responsibility of OTA.



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NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the workshop participants. The workshop participants do not, however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this report. OTA assumes full responsibility for the report and the accuracy of its contents.

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