

## Official crime information should be accurate

**By Joan Friedland, policy attorney at the National Immigration Law Center.  
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The Justice Department has an information problem. First an FBI agent embarrassed her bosses last year by pointing out that the agency had failed to follow up investigative leads that might have led to foiling the Sept. 11 conspiracy. Now the department that couldn't connect the dots is degrading the quality of the country's most important database. In a little-noticed order on March 24, the Justice Department ruled that data from the National Crime Information Center do not have to be accurate.

The NCIC is the nation's biggest collection of "actionable" crime information -- the system that police officers hook up to when they want to know whether the person they've just stopped, or arrested, is on any wanted list of ordinary criminals or terrorists. Some 650,000 federal, state and local officers have access to the system, which is administered by the FBI.

The Justice Department's order exempted the NCIC from a long-standing legal requirement that information in major law-enforcement databases be "accurate, relevant, timely and complete." It justifies the change on the curious basis that requiring accurate information would interfere with law enforcement.

The information in the NCIC database already was off limits, for the most part, to people whose names were in its files, with few mechanisms to correct errors. Until recently, it included records related mainly to crimes, terrorists and domestic-violence orders. But as of last year, the NCIC also includes the names of supposed immigration-law violators.

Immigration records are the perfect example of how NCIC information can go awry. For years, the General Accounting Office and the Justice Department's own Inspector General condemned the Immigration and Naturalization Service for the poor quality of its records. These records are -- as anyone who has dealt with the agency can testify -- unreliable, incomplete or simply missing. In the polite bureaucratese of a GAO report this year: "The INS continues to face significant data-accuracy problems."

Last year, the agency let hundreds of thousands of change-of-address notifications sit unread in warehouses. Early this year, a federal grand jury in Los Angeles indicted two employees of an agency contractor who dealt with a backlog of passports, birth certificates, visa applications and a host of other often-irreplaceable documents by shredding some 90,000 of them.

Congress has dissolved the INS and divided its constituent parts into three new divisions of the Homeland Security Department. Presumably the INS employees brought their data-management techniques with them. Immigrants with no ties to terrorists have every reason to fear the consequences of having their names run through the NCIC. With non-U.S. citizens' access to due process eroded since Sept. 11, data errors can lead to detention and even deportation. Immigrants won't be the only ones to pay the price. The Justice Department solution to the data crisis simply passes it on to the nation's first responders -- the patrol officer or the investigator trying to identify possible conspirators. Their time would be better spent following good leads. In Attorney General John Ashcroft's words after Sept. 11, "Information is the best friend of prevention." But only if it's accurate.