

SECRET FILECARDS, which were apparently lost earlier this year by a detective working in Brixton, South London, and which have since been seen by the *NEW STATESMAN*, provide a unique and chilling view of police methods of gathering information about individual citizens. They show that police regularly record gossip, hearsay and unsubstantiated information; that they permanently file details of any type of police activity against an individual, irrespective of any charge or conviction; and that they open and update files on people who have never been convicted or even suspected of any criminal offence.

Headed *Metropolitan Police - Section Intelligence - Main Index* the files are part of a series compiled and updated daily by a new breed of policeman officially called a 'collator', but privately known by the more sinister name of 'local intelligence officer'. This officer maintains files on people, addresses, vehicles, crimes, non-crime incidents and *ad hoc* specialised subjects. Information is gathered from every possible source, including daily routine reports from constables' notebooks.

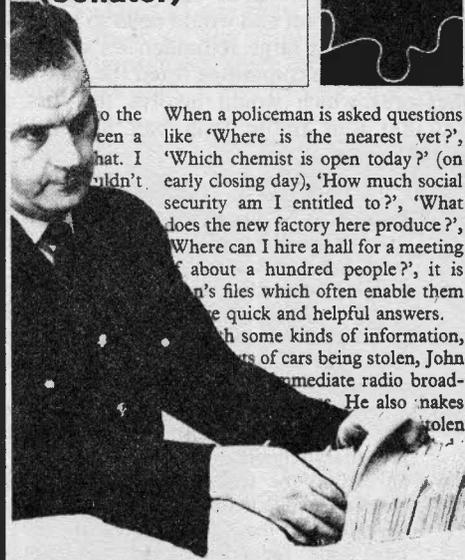
One of the misplaced files concerns a middle-aged mother of three, Carol Wilson (she has asked for her real name to be withheld). Mrs Wilson says she is 'shattered' to find that her local police station has kept files on her. She has never been convicted of any offence, nor - according to the records - has she ever been suspected. But a dossier was opened on her in 1975 when her car was 'seen parked outside' another address which was then being watched by Scotland Yard's serious crimes squad. Her file notes the unsavoury fact that the occupier of the house has convictions for grievous bodily harm, rape and burglary. It does not, however, record whether Mrs White herself ever had anything to do with the occupier, nor why her car was parked there. In fact, Mrs Wilson has never heard of the person under surveillance. On the day in question, she had lent her car to a male friend.

Further entries note that Mrs Wilson stood bail for a lodger in her house in 1976, and moved to a new address in 1979. (Another file, on Mrs Wilson's ex-husband, has been 'updated' with this address, although the couple have not lived together for 13 years.) The latest entry in Mrs Wilson's file in January this year, is a message from Scotland Yard that she has purchased a new MGB car: there is no further information to suggest why this should be relevant to detecting or preventing crime.

Files on Mrs Wilson's two sons, Ted and Joe, show that any type of hearsay or gossip can go down on record, and stay there, even after it has proved to be irrelevant. In July 1976 'a private person . . . overheard . . . a conversation' between Ted and a friend about 'a load of nicked stereo gear that they had'. The report was never investigated and remains completely unsubstantiated. Ted's file was started in 1972, when he was still a schoolboy, for no graver reason than that he had been convicted of being a passenger in an uninsured car and fined £1. Four subsequent entries record encounters with the police which did not result in any conviction: they

HMSO

Man at the centre (Collator)



Police collator at work with files and photo-display of villains of interest. The photo comes from the HMSO careers booklet on the police, which notes that 'the collator's office is the information centre of the Unit Beat system'.

include a caution for carrying an 'offensive weapon' and an occasion when Ted was brought to the police station after a glue-sniffing craze at his school.

Another entry shows how an individual can acquire a longer and more damning record simply because of the amount of attention devoted to him by the police (a factor well beyond his control). Ted's file notes that in January 1978 he was stopped with a friend by the Special Patrol Group 'whilst washing car belonging to Dad' outside his home one afternoon. Ted recalls the incident clearly: three SPG men in plain clothes walked up, pushed him against a wall, and questioned and searched him without explanation. There seems little doubt that he had been singled out as a local 'villain' suitable for the attention of the visiting SPG squad.

The file on his brother Joe - who has several convictions for theft and burglary - contains details of five other individuals. Only two are shown as having criminal records and three are marked down for no better reason than that they were stopped and asked their names one afternoon, when they were walking down the street with Joe. Yet all five are listed as 'associates' of a convicted person and even the three without criminal records of their own will now have files opened on them. Joe's record includes details of charges on which he was acquitted and overheard gossip.

A file on Mrs Wilson's daughter, who had one conviction for a minor offence eight years ago, names a recent 'boyfriend' as her 'associate'. Finally, there is a file on the family's lodger, Peter Long. Mr Long has a substantial criminal record but not all the information on his file is accurate. It alleges that he has a child by a woman (not Mrs Wilson) who is named

as his 'associate': the claim is untrue, and the police never bothered to verify it, but it remains on his file. (The loss of the files - which were initially passed to the London Magazine *Time Out* - is now being investigated by the police.)

SCOTLAND YARD admitted this week that the Metropolitan Police do gather 'masses' of 'local intelligence information', which may often include details about people who are under no suspicion of crime. The Yard's spokeswoman said it would be impossible to say how many intelligence files were kept locally, since there is no way of counting them. But it is known that these files are kept by every police division, sub-division and section, both inside and outside London. Their sophistication and extent depends considerably on the resources and personal interests of the local collator. Thames Valley Police has had all its local intelligence records on computer since 1975, with capacity to store personal information on one tenth of the local population. The computer entry forms show that the Thames Valley police open files even on victims of crime when they report an offence against them to a police station. Likewise, Metropolitan Police have forms to be filled in on victims of arrestees which are almost identical and which include a graded 'identity code' for the person's race - from RC1 (white caucasian) and R2 (dark-skinned Europeans), to RC7 (halfcaste or unknown).

An ex-policeman based in Essex, has told the National Council for Civil Liberties that the collator at Brentwood kept an index file on 'political' matters:

although this was fairly sparse and mainly referred to known 'Communists' or 'Members of other Subversive Groups' and one in particular who was believed to sympathise with the IRA . . . Not only are records kept of known and suspected criminals, but also of ordinary and innocent people who are about their normal work or social affairs.

His comments seem to confirm the recent discovery that a standard form exists for reporting to Scotland Yard on the various details of organisers and participants at political meetings.

The police have not deliberately set about providing flesh for George Orwell's visions. But internal reforms, begun 11 years ago, have gradually transformed the nature of policing into a system based on the anticipation of crime, expectation of behaviour, and speculation and assumption about individuals. The files which have come to light on the Wilson family revealed the basis of this system. The mindless gathering and cross-referencing of such information in these police files is a sure indication that the same methods are applied to millions of other local intelligence dossiers. The disturbing factor about their files is not the legitimate recording of criminal convictions, but the other material that is added. Above all, laws on privacy are needed to govern such activities and provide redress for individuals like the innocent Carol Wilson, who are aggrieved to find they have acquired a police record which is an offensive compound of inaccuracy and irrelevance.