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Data Theft Update (October 2003)

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Data Theft Update (October 2003)

The University of Texas at Austin regrets that one of its administrative databases was breached in March by a deliberate attack through the Internet. Thousands of names and Social Security numbers were illegally accessed and downloaded to a personal computer. Fortunately, it appears that prompt action by the Travis County District Attorney's Office, the U.S. Attorney's Office, and the U.S. Secret Service has secured the stolen data before they could be misused or further disseminated.

A UT undergraduate student suspected of the crime was arrested by the U.S. Secret Service on March 14. His computer and related paraphernalia were seized and are being analyzed by the Secret Service.

Although the security breach and related charges facing the suspect are indeed serious, the U.S. Attorney's Office has stated officially, "At this point, there is no indication that the stolen data was further disseminated or used to anyone's detriment."

As of October 2003, the University has successfully contacted 92 percent of the individuals known to be affected by the data theft incident, and continues its efforts to reach the remaining affected population. The University is doing everything it can to ensure the security of personal information.

An underlying issue that has received attention is the University's use of the Social Security number as the unique identifier for students, faculty, staff, and other affiliates, a practice that is widespread in universities and elsewhere. The University launched a project in 2001 to migrate database systems and services to a different identifier, and important progress has been made, but the breached system continued to rely upon SSN inputs. **Read about what the University is doing to protect SSNs.**