



Office of the  
Privacy Commissioner  
of Canada

# Psst!...

## A Word in Private?



*What is the Office of  
the Privacy Commissioner  
of Canada and why is it  
concerned about your privacy?*



# INTRODUCTION

With technology now affecting every aspect of modern life, there's never been a more important time to think about your privacy, and to safeguard it against a broadening range of threats.

For more than 25 years, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has been doing just that. Our job is to see that the Government of Canada and many of the private-sector organizations that collect your personal information do so with the greatest of care and respect for your privacy.

Governments and companies compile a huge array of personal information about you. Some is gathered when you fill out your tax return or apply for a service. Some is collected when you rent a video, use your credit card or register to vote. And some is picked up by surveillance cameras, radio-frequency identification chips embedded in products and ID cards, and cell phone tracking devices.

But, under the law, your personal information should only be collected, used and disclosed with your knowledge, and often your consent, for legitimate purposes. It must also be stored, shared and disposed of in a way that keeps it secure and confidential.

**THE OFFICE OF THE PRIVACY COMMISSIONER OF CANADA was established in 1983 following the passage of the *Privacy Act*, which governs the personal information-handling practices of federal departments and agencies.**

**The duties of the OPC were extended to the private sector when the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA)* was fully implemented in 2004.**

**The Privacy Commissioner of Canada, who is independent of government, reports directly to Parliament.**

As far back as 1984, the first annual report of the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada underscored the importance of safeguarding personal information as a way of protecting privacy.

"Privacy," the report observed, "is not simply a precious and often irreplaceable human resource; respect for privacy is the acknowledgement of respect for human dignity and of the individuality of man."

Both the public-sector *Privacy Act* and the private-sector *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* protect personal information, or “information about an identifiable individual.” Over the years, Privacy Commissioners and courts have expanded and refined the meaning of personal information to include many things, from the commonplace (name, address and income tax returns) to the more unusual (voiceprints and tracking information collected by GPS).

## WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

There are many ways your privacy can be put at risk.

For instance, you could be vulnerable to identity thieves and other sophisticated swindlers bent on exploiting your personal information for financial gain.

This can occur if you neglect to apply the privacy settings on your social networking site, thereby exposing your personal information to anybody who views the page online.

Personal information that is collected for perfectly legitimate reasons may also be vulnerable to loss, theft or unauthorized use.

Consider the sheer scope of the challenge: Governments, private enterprises and employers collect all kinds of personal information in order to deliver programs and services, fine-tune their marketing and boost their business, or enhance workplace security.

Keeping all that information safe and secure is one of the main objectives of Canada’s two privacy laws.

## TECHNO-THREATS

For all the good it does in society, technology can also threaten your privacy. Here are some of the risks the Office of the Privacy Commissioner is thinking about:

- Genetic technologies can unlock the most personal secrets of your DNA, including an inherited disorder that could come to light in your future.
- Iris scans to verify your identity can also reveal other things about you, including pregnancy and drug use.
- Global position systems (GPS), radio-frequency identification (RFID) and other tiny wireless devices can keep tabs on your every move.
- Video cameras are tiny and cheap, exposing you to surreptitious surveillance and recording.
- People engaged in social networking over the Internet may fail to apply the privacy settings, thereby inadvertently sharing too much personal information.
- Identity thieves use techniques such as ‘phishing’ to trick people into revealing personal information online.
- High-speed communications and data management lets companies outsource business activities abroad, which sends your personal information flashing instantly around the globe under the control of others.



## TWO FEDERAL PRIVACY LAWS

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada oversees two laws:

- the *Privacy Act*, which sets out the rules for privacy protection in the federal public sector, and
- the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act* (PIPEDA), which governs the information-handling practices of private-sector organizations everywhere in Canada except British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, and the health-care sector of Ontario. (Comparable laws apply to organizations conducting business wholly within those jurisdictions.) Even in those provinces, PIPEDA continues to apply to the federally regulated private sector, such as telecommunications, banking and transportation, as well as interprovincial and international transactions.

For more information on the laws, please visit the Legal Corner of our website, listed at the end of this brochure. You will also find a range of fact sheets and other publications on our website.

## WHAT CAN THE OFFICE OF THE PRIVACY COMMISSIONER DO?

As Canada's privacy guardian, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada:

- reports to Parliament on issues that touch on the privacy rights of Canadians;
- answers public inquiries and investigates complaints;
- conducts audits of the privacy policies and practices of federal government departments and agencies, as well as private companies, and advises them on their obligations;
- conducts and commissions research;
- may take cases to Federal Court, and
- engages in public education and outreach.

In fact, we speak out whenever privacy issues are at stake, expressing our views before Parliamentary committees, in the media, in public speeches and our office blog, at international forums and world regulatory bodies, and in the many publications that you can obtain from our Office or on our website.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

By understanding the value of personal privacy, you can do a lot to defend it.

You can limit the information you give out about yourself, and question the collection and use of your personal information by others.

If you're worried that your privacy has been or could be breached, you can call our inquiries line, or lodge a complaint with our Office. There is no fee to make a complaint and our website contains detailed information on how to do it.



## WE'RE HERE TO HELP

The Privacy Commissioner is an ombudsman who tries to resolve disputes through negotiation, mediation and conciliation.

The Commissioner may also launch an investigation into the personal information-handling practices of organizations in the public and private sectors.

The investigation could lead the Commissioner to recommend changes in an organization's practices.

The results of the investigation are reported to the organization, and may also be made public, although complainants' names are not disclosed.

In a typical year, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner receives more than 11,000 public inquiries and investigates more than 1,400 complaints under the *Privacy Act* and the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act*.



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For general inquiries please visit our website at  
**[www.priv.gc.ca](http://www.priv.gc.ca)**  
or call us Monday to Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. ET.

Toll-free: 1 (800) 282-1376  
Tel: (613) 995-8210  
TTY/TDD: (613) 992-9190  
Fax: (613) 947-6850

To submit a complaint under the *Privacy Act* or PIPEDA, please write to us at:

Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada  
Place de Ville, Tower B, 3rd Floor  
112 Kent Street  
Ottawa, ON  
K1A 1H3

Please include your name, address and telephone number, and provide as much detail as possible about your complaint. Note that we do not process complaints sent by e-mail.

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