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Data Breach Notification Laws: An Argument for a Comprehensive Federal Law to Protect Consumer Data

Jill Joerling *

INTRODUCTION

During the past four years, over 354,140,197 pieces of personal identifying information have been compromised as a result of data breaches. These breaches have imposed a huge financial burden on both companies and consumers. As a result, forty-six states have enacted legislation seeking to protect consumers by requiring companies to notify them when their personal information is compromised as the result of a data breach. This notification allows consumers to take action to protect their information from identity theft.

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2. One study, released by the Ponemon Institute in October 2006, found that information losses to U.S. companies “averaged $182 per lost customer record, an increase of 30 percent over 2005 results. The average total cost per reporting company was $4.8 million per breach and ranged from $226,000 to $22 million.” PONEMON INSTITUTE, 2006 ANNUAL STUDY: COST OF A DATA BREACH (2006), http://download.egp.com/pdfs/Ponemon2-Breach-Survey_061020_F.pdf. See also Tech/404, Tech/404 Data Loss Cost Calculator, http://www.tech-404.com/calculator.html (last visited Oct. 22, 2009) (providing the estimated cost of a breach based on number of affected records).

3. See infra note 34.

4. See Consumer Survey on Data Breach Notification, 2008 JAVELIN STRATEGY & RESEARCH, available at http://www.doestoe.com/docs/952213/2620/Javelin-Research-Consumer-Survey-Data-Breach-Notification-June-2008. “[W]hile notification allows the consumer to take protective action and to monitor their accounts more closely, from a customer service perspective, it is to the advantage of the institution to be proactive and offer assistance on behalf of the customer, especially if the exposed data is highly sensitive.” Id.
This Note argues that existing state laws do not adequately address data security breaches and recommends comprehensive federal data breach notification legislation. Part I provides a brief history of data security breaches precipitating the enactment of data breach notification legislation and an overview of current state data breach notification laws and previously proposed federal legislation. Part II critiques current data breach legislation and outlines the need for federal legislation. Part III proposes guidelines for a federal statute.

I. HISTORY

A. ChoicePoint and the Data Breaches Precipitating Reform

In February 2005, data collector ChoicePoint revealed that it had mistakenly disclosed the private information of over 145,000 United States residents. While this was not the first reported data breach, the large number of individuals affected elevated the event into the national spotlight. The breach occurred when scammers posed as


6. See Grant Gross, ChoicePoint to Pay $15 Million for Data Breach, NETWORKWORLD, Jan. 26, 2006, http://www.networkworld.com/news/2006/012606-choicepoint.html. In the months following the breach, the number of individuals affected was revealed to be closer to 163,000. At least 750 of these individuals were the victims of identity theft as a result of the breach. Id. See also Sullivan, supra note 5.


8. See, e.g., Joseph Menn & David Kolker, More Victims in Scam Will Be Notified: ChoicePoint Says It Will Notify 110,000 People Outside of California of the Security Breach, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 17, 2005, at C1; Robert O’Harrow Jr., ID Theft Scam Hits D.C. Area Residents; 4,500 Caught Up in Loss of Data Conned From Firm, WASH. POST, Feb. 21, 2005, at A01; John Waggoner, ID Theft Scam Spreads across USA, USA TODAY, Feb. 22, 2005, at 1A; Lorene Yue, ID Theft Warnings for Illinois; Personal-data Fraud Threatens 5,000 Here,
legitimate businesses in order to gain access to the company’s databases, which contained a wide variety of consumer data including names, addresses, Social Security numbers, driver’s license numbers, credit reports, and public information such as bankruptcies, liens, and professional licenses. The affected individuals were notified of the breach because of a California law that required notification to California residents. At first the company disclosed the breach only to California residents, but eventually it opted to notify all affected victims.

In the month after news of ChoicePoint’s breach became public, Bank of America, PayMaxx, DSW, and LexisNexis each disclosed data breaches. Combined, it was revealed that the breaches compromised 1,502,000 individuals’ personal information. In the following years, many additional breaches have been disclosed. A
A disproportionately high number of these breaches have occurred at hospitals and universities. In 2006, public concern over the safety of information stored by government entities was raised when the Department of Veterans Affairs revealed that it had suffered a breach that compromised the data of more than 28,650,000 active duty personnel and veterans. Following the Department of Veterans Affairs breach, in an attempt to standardize government breach response, the U.S. Government Accountability Office issued a report containing recommendations to federal agencies for dealing with data breaches.


19. See Ray Mark, VA Data Breach Stirs Washington, INTERNETNEWS.COM, May 23, 2006 http://www.internetnews.com/bus-news/article.php/3608411. In the months following the breach, the Department of Veterans Affairs revealed that two other security breaches had occurred in the past twelve months and had been kept quiet. The Department of Transportation, the Justice Department, the Navy, and other Government entities proceeded to reveal their own data breaches and the lack of security in their systems. See Martin H. Bosworth, Government Scrambles to Secure Data After Breaches, CONSUMERAFFAIRS.COM, Aug. 16, 2006 http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2006/08/govt_data.html.


B. California’s Data Security Law

On July 1, 2003, California enacted the country’s first data breach notification law. The law requires that companies, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies notify California consumers if their personal information is compromised by unauthorized access. This early notification allows consumers to protect themselves against identity theft and mitigate damages resulting from unauthorized access to their information.

Mechanisms should be in place to collect contact information for affected individuals; determining when to offer credit monitoring to affected individuals requires risk-based management decisions; interaction with the public requires careful coordination and can be resource-intensive; internal training and awareness are critical to timely breach response; contractor responsibilities in data breach response should always be clearly defined. U.S. GOV’T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, REPORT TO CONGRESSIONAL REQUESTERS, PRIVACY: LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT DATA BREACH NOTIFICATION (2007), http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07657.pdf. The report urged the Office of Management and Budget to develop guidelines for agencies to reduce the risk of identity theft from data breaches. Many of these “lessons” had been addressed in previous guidance from the Office of Management and Budget.

This guidance, set forth by the President’s Identity Theft Task Force, consisted of three related recommendations: (1) Agencies should identify a core response group that can be convened in the event of a breach; (2) If an incident occurs, the core response group should engage in a risk analysis to determine whether the incident poses problems related to identity theft; (3) If it is determined that an identity theft risk is present, the agency should tailor its response (which may include advice to those potentially affected, services the agency may provide to those affected, and public notice) to the nature and scope of the risk presented. See id. at 21. The GAO recommended further guidance to ensure that the agency determinations regarding when to offer credit monitoring are consistent. OFFICE OF MGMT. & BUDGET, EXEC. OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT, MEMORANDUM FROM THE IDENTITY THEFT TASK FORCE (2006), http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/memoranda/fy2006/task_force_theft_memo.pdf.


in the past, companies usually did not notify their customers when their electronic data had been compromised, subsequently leaving them at risk for identity theft or financial fraud. Now individuals can take the appropriate proactive steps to safeguard their...
Under California’s Security Breach Information Act, a security breach is defined as the “unauthorized acquisition of computerized data that compromises the security, confidentiality, or integrity of personal information maintained by the person or business.”

Personal information is defined as an individual’s first name or initial and last name, in combination with either individual’s: (1) the Social Security number; (2) driver’s license or identification number; or (3) account number, debit, or credit card number, together with any required access code “that would permit access to an individual’s financial account.” The law has been amended to protect medical information and health insurance information as well. A company that has experienced a security breach must make the disclosure in the “most expedient time possible and without unreasonable delay.”

This notice can be delayed when a law enforcement agency determines that the notification will impede a criminal investigation. Notification may be provided to consumers in writing or electronically. However, if the company can demonstrate that the cost of providing notice would exceed $250,000, that the affected class of subject persons exceeds 500,000, or that the company does not have sufficient contact information, then the company can rely on

financial healthy when they learn that their information may have been accessed by hackers or unauthorized employees. . . . This law mandates good corporate stewardship of customer information, not just for businesses located in California, but for any entity that has personal information about Californians.

Id.


29. See California Security Breach Information Act § 1798.82(c).

30. Id. § 1798.82(g)(1)–(2).
substitute notification methods to comply with this requirement. Substitute notice consists of e-mail notice, conspicuous posting of the notice on the company’s website, and notification in a major statewide medium.

C. Other State Data Breach Notification Laws

In the years since California enacted its law, forty-six states and the District of Columbia have followed its lead and enacted laws of their own. Many of these laws are substantially similar to the California law; however, there are significant differences as well. Variances in applicability; exemptions; notification procedures and timelines; and enforcement can create difficulties for companies attempting to comply with the various laws following a breach.

1. Applicability

After a data breach is discovered, affected companies are forced to determine which, if any, of the many state data breach notification laws are triggered based on the information that has been compromised. California’s Security Breach Information Act applies only to data records stored electronically. While many states similarly have limited their laws, some have expanded the scope of

31. Id. § 1798.82(g)(3).
32. Id.
35. See CROWELL MORING, supra note 34.
Likewise, while many state laws have adopted California’s “standard” definition of personal identifying information, some states have expanded this definition to include additional information. For example, North Carolina’s definition of Personal Information includes digital signatures, biometric data, fingerprints, and parents’ legal surnames prior to marriage. Hawaii and several other states have expanded their laws to require notification when account, credit, or debit card numbers are accessed without password or pin numbers. Given these disparities, a breach could require notification under some state laws but not others.


38. Under the law, personal information means a person’s first name or first initial in combination with either (1) social security number or employer taxpayer identification number; (2) driver’s license number, state identification card, or passport numbers; (3) checking account numbers; (4) savings account numbers; (5) credit card numbers; (6) debit card numbers; (7) personal identification (PIN) code; (8) electronic identification numbers, electronic mail names or addresses, internet account numbers, or internet identification names; (9) digital signatures; (10) any other numbers or information that can be used to access a person’s financial resources; (11) biometric data; (12) fingerprints; (13) passwords; and (14) parent’s legal surname prior to marriage. See N.C. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 75-66 (2007). However, personal information shall not include electronic identification numbers, electronic mail names or addresses, internet account numbers, internet identification names, parent’s legal surname prior to marriage, or a password unless this information would permit access to a person’s financial account or resources. Id. § 75-65(a).

2. Exemptions

Most state data breach notification laws do not require notification of all breaches involving personal information. Instead, the laws allow for exemptions in some situations. All currently enacted state data breach laws provide an “encrypted data safe harbor”—they do not require notification of a breach if the compromised data was encrypted.40 Almost all laws also provide exemptions for information that is publically available.41 Additionally, many states provide a “risk of harm” exemption.42 This exempts a company from its notification requirements if, after appropriate investigation, the company reasonably determines that a breach has not resulted or is unlikely to result in harm to the individuals whose personal information has been acquired.43 For example, Arizona’s law requires notification only if the breach “causes or is likely to cause substantial economic loss to an individual.”44 Hawaii’s law requires disclosure only “where an illegal use of the personal information has occurred.

40. Despite this exemption, Alaska, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia require notification if the encryption key was also compromised in the breach. Massachusetts’s law, for example defines “breach of security” as “the unauthorized acquisition or unauthorized use of unencrypted data or, encrypted electronic data and the confidential process or key that is capable of compromising the security, confidentiality or integrity of personal information.” MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 93H, § 1 (2007). See also ALASKA STAT. § 45.48.090(7) (West Supp. 2009); IND. CODE ANN. § 24-4-9-2-2(b)(2) (West Supp. 2009); MICH. COMP. LAWS ANN. § 445.72(1)(b) (West Supp. 2009); N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 359-C:19 (2006); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 56:8-161 (West Supp. 2009); N.Y. GEN. BUS. LAW § 899-a et al. (1)(b)(3) (McKinney Supp. 2009); N.C. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 75-66 (2007); OKLA. STAT. § 74-3113.1D(2)(B) (2006); Oregon Consumer Identity Theft Protection Act, OR. REV. STAT. § 646.602(11) (West Supp. 2009); 73 PA. CONS. STAT. § 2303(b) (West 2008); VA. CODE ANN. § 18.2-186.6 (2009); W.VA. CODE ANN. § 46A-2A-102(b) (LexisNexis Supp. 2009).


43. See Rawitz & Frid, supra note 25; HUTNIK, supra note 34.

or is reasonably likely to occur, and that creates a risk of harm to a person.” Under Arkansas’s law, “notification is not required if, after a reasonable investigation, the person or business determines that there is no reasonable likelihood of harm to consumers.”

Several state laws also exempt government agencies from compliance with the notification provisions. Instead of applying to “agencies” as does the California Act, these laws direct their provisions toward “businesses” or “persons.” Because government agencies do not fall into either of these categories, a loophole is created by these laws for data breaches that occur when information is in the control of a government agency. Of the states whose data security breach laws apply to government agencies, four states specifically exempt these agencies from enforcement proceedings. These states require government agencies to notify consumers, but they do not punish the agencies for non-compliance. Florida’s law specifically states that “administrative sanctions for failure to notify . . . shall not apply in the case of personal information in the custody of any governmental agency or subdivision.” These provisions seriously undermine the effectiveness of the notification laws. This loophole for government entities is especially troublesome given the large number of data breaches caused by government agencies.

45. HAW. REV. STAT. ANN. § 487N-1 (LexisNexis 2009).
46. Personal Information Protection Act, ARK. CODE ANN. § 4-110-105(d) (Supp. 2009).
50. See supra note 49.
51. FLA. STAT. ANN. § 817.5681(1)(d) (West 2006).
52. See Chronology of Data Breaches, supra note 1. In the first half of 2008, government data breaches accounted for seventeen percent of total data breaches. William Jackson, Data Breaches up, but Not in Government Sector, GOVERNMENT COMPUTER NEWS, July 1, 2008,
3. Notification Procedures and Timelines

Even when a company has determined that it must disclose a breach to its consumers, state laws vary as to how and when this disclosure must take place. Most state statutes require that notification be made in “the most expedient time possible” and “without unreasonable delay.” The ambiguity of these terms may cause confusion for companies attempting to comply with breach laws in the aftermath of a breach. Florida requires that notification be made within 45 days and is the only state to provide a specific time period for notification.

Florida and Ohio’s laws impose strict penalties for non-compliance with these deadlines. All of the currently enacted data breach notification laws allow for the use of substitute notification in certain cases. Typically, substitute notice is permitted when the cost of providing notice exceeds $250,000 or the number of affected individuals is more than

http://gcn.com/Articles/2008/07/01/Data-breaches-up-but-not-in-government-sector.aspx. While this number is down from 30 percent just two years ago, government entities still represent large proportion of annual breaches. Id. Additionally, the Veterans Affairs government data breach remains in the top ten largest data breaches. See 10 Largest Breaches Since 2000, supra note 17.

53. See Rawitz & Frid, supra note 25; Hutnik, supra note 34. Notably, however, all enacted state data breach legislation provides for a delay if the notification would impede a criminal investigation. Newer legislation puts the burden onto the law enforcement agency to request that the company delay the notification. See Rawitz & Frid, supra note 25.

54. Hutnik, supra note 34. While not explicitly stated in the laws, regulators in California, North Carolina, and Vermont recommend that notice be provided within ten days following discovery of the breach. Id.

55. FLA. STAT. ANN. § 817.5681(1)(b) (West 2006). This law has been criticized for the possibility that it may discourage businesses from providing notification earlier than the forty-five day deadline. Id.

56. OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 1347.12(B)(1) (West Supp. 2009); see WIS. STAT. 895.507(3)(a) (2006) (notice must be made “within a reasonable time, not to exceed 45 days.”).

57. In Ohio companies can be fined up to $1,000 a day for the first sixty days of non-compliance, $5,000 a day for days sixty-one through ninety, and $10,000 a day for non-compliance after the ninety-first day. See OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 1349.192(A)(1) (West Supp. 2009). In Florida companies are fined $1,000 for every day up to thirty days after the forty-five day enforcement period and $50,000 for each thirty-day period or portion thereof for up to 180 days after the forty-five day notification period. FLA. STAT. ANN. § 817.5681(1)(b)(1) (West 2006).

58. See Rawitz & Frid, supra note 25; Hutnik, supra note 34.
However, the threshold at which substitute notification is allowed has been raised or lowered by some state legislatures. In addition to consumer notification, some state laws require that notice be given to consumer reporting agencies or state regulators.

See Rawitz & Frid, supra note 25. For example, Alaska’s law states that substitute notification may be provided “if the information collector demonstrates that the cost of providing notice would exceed $150,000, that the affected class of state residents to be notified exceeds 300,000, or that the information collector does not have sufficient contact information to provide notice.” ALASKA STAT. § 45.48.030(3) (West Supp. 2009). Hawaii allows substitute notification if the cost exceeds $100,000 or if the affected class to be notified exceeds 200,000. HAW. REV. STAT. ANN. § 487N-2(c)(4) (LexisNexis 2009).


Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia have no numerical threshold for regulator notification (although in New Jersey and Maryland the notice must be sent before the consumer notice). See ME. REV. STAT. ANN. tit. 10, § 1348 (Supp. 2008); MD. CODE ANN., COM. LAW § 14-3504 (LexisNexis Supp. 2008); MASS. GEN. LAWS ch. 93H, § 1 (2007); N.H. REV. STAT. ANN. § 359-C:20 (2009); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 56:8-163 (West Supp. 2009); N.Y. GEN. BUS. LAW § 899aa (McKinney Supp. 2009); VA. CODE ANN. § 18.2-186.6(B) (2009). In Hawaii, North Carolina, and South Carolina, the threshold for notification is more than 1,000. See HAW. REV. STAT. ANN. § 487N-2 (LexisNexis 2009); N.C. GEN. STAT. ANN. § 75-65 (2007); S.C. CODE ANN. § 37-20-110 (Supp. 2008). Under Vermont’s law, notification to the Vermont Attorney General must be provided only if an investigation
4. Enforcement

The existing state data breach notification laws also vary as to who has a cause of action following a violation of the law. Some of the laws allow for a private right of action, while others do not. In practice, due to the difficulty of proving actual damages in many data breach and failure-to-notify cases, this private right of action may be of limited value to consumers.

D. Other measures

In addition to data breach notification laws, several states have enacted legislation in recent years that requires companies to protect consumer data prior to a breach. For example, several states have enacted laws that require businesses to implement and maintain systems that will prevent misuse of the breached personal information. This requirement reveals that misuse of the breached personal information is not reasonably possible. See Vt. STAT. ANN. tit. 9, § 2435 (2006).

62. See HUTNIK, supra note 34.


Data security breaches often do not cause any identifiable or quantifiable harm to the individuals whose information was compromised. In certain cases, courts have therefore labeled the damages claimed by plaintiffs as “speculative” or “nonexistent” and have dismissed lawsuits because of this defect. However, certain political and legislative developments indicate that the climate could soon change.

reasonable security measures to protect personal information from “unauthorized access, destruction, use, modification, or disclosure.”

In addition to these information safeguard laws, at least nineteen states have enacted laws that regulate how businesses dispose of records containing personal data. Additionally, many states have adopted laws requiring businesses to protect Social Security numbers from public access.


There are, however, some variances among these laws. The Oregon safeguard law identifies specific administrative, technical, and physical safeguards as examples of the measures necessary to demonstrate compliance with the law. The Texas safeguard law further specifies that the obligation to implement and maintain reasonable safeguard procedures includes taking any appropriate corrective action. The Nevada law also expressly requires businesses to encrypt certain personal information if transferring that information electronically outside of the security business network. The California law also prohibits businesses from recording personal information on transaction records. And about half of the laws expressly require . . . the third parties to protect the personal information to the same extent that the business must protect that information, by contract. Finally, the North Carolina law is limited to licensed insurers, and the Oregon, Texas, and Utah safeguard laws contain an exemption for financial institutions.

67. Id. at 6.

68. Only Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wyoming have failed to enact legislation specifically protecting Social Security Numbers. See Federal Trade Commission, State Laws: Social Security Numbers, http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/idtheft/law-enforcement/state-laws-social-security.html (last visited May 7, 2010). Generally, these laws prohibit business from publically posting or displaying a Social Security number, requiring consumers to transmit a SSN over the internet unless the connection is secure or the number is encrypted, requiring consumers to log onto a website using a SSN without a password, printing
Minnesota has enacted the “Plastic Card Security Act,” which codifies the core requirements of a standard developed by the Payment Card industry. The law is designed to motivate businesses to protect financial cardholder data by transferring the cost of breaches caused by payment card processing from financial institutions to retailers. The law prohibits businesses from retaining card security code data, pin verification code numbers, or any magnetic stripe data for more than 48 hours after a card transaction has been approved. A business that violates these requirements may be required to reimburse card issuers for the reasonable costs undertaken to respond to a breach.

E. Previously Proposed Federal Legislation

While no federal data breach notification legislation has yet been enacted, numerous bills have been introduced in Congress to address security breaches. Many of these proposed laws resemble those

SSNs on identification card or badges, or printing SSNs on anything mailed to a consumer unless required by law or the document is a form or application. Id. In New Jersey and New York, these measures have been expanded to apply to truncated SSNs as well. Id. See also Hutnik, State Privacy and Data Protection Laws, supra note 66.


. . . a group comprised of the major card issuers along with some larger merchants such as Wal-Mart. PCIA created the PCI Data Security Standard and the Data Security Audit Guidelines in an attempt to develop a self-regulatory solution to identify theft and data security compromises.

In addition to complying with the standard and guidelines themselves, PCIA members must contractually obligate everyone in the chain of payment card transactions to abide by the requirements. . . .

. . . [S]everal states, at the urging of financial institutions have begun to incorporate elements of the PCI standard into legislation.

Id.

70. See Hutnik, State Privacy and Data Protection Laws, supra note 66.

71. See Plastic Card Security Act § 325E.64, subdiv. 2.

72. Id. § 325E.64, subdiv. 3. These costs include the costs of canceling and reissuing credit and debit cards, closing and reopening accounts, stop-payment actions, unauthorized transaction reimbursements, and the providing of breach notification to account holders. Id.

passed by the states.\textsuperscript{74} However, some of the more recently proposed federal laws have suggested sweeping new reforms for data notification policy.\textsuperscript{75}

Of the many data breach notification laws proposed in the 110th Congress, four are especially noteworthy.\textsuperscript{76} S.239, the Notification of Risk to Personal Data Act, was introduced by Senator Feinstein (D-CA).\textsuperscript{77} H.R. 958, the Data Accountability and Trust Act, was introduced by Rep. Rush (D-NJ).\textsuperscript{78} H.R. 836, the Cyber-Security Enhancement and Consumer Data Protection Act of 2007, was introduced by Rep. Smith (D-Wash).\textsuperscript{79} S.B. 495, the Personal Data Privacy and Security Act of 2007, was introduced by Senator Leahy (D-VT).\textsuperscript{80} Each of these bills would preempt state data breach notification laws.\textsuperscript{81} Additionally, all four bills explicitly state that they do not provide a private right of action.\textsuperscript{82} S. 239, H.R. 958, and

\textsuperscript{74}. See also Scott Berinato, \textit{CSO Disclosure Series: What’s Next With Disclosure Legislation?},\textsuperscript{75} CSO ONLINE, Feb. 11, 2008, http://www.csoonline.com/article/217027/CSO_Disclosure_Series_What_s_Next_with_Disclosure_Legislation_?page=? (explaining that most proposed bills are meant to copy what the states have already done).

\textsuperscript{75}. See Anne Broache, \textit{Data Breach Bills Resurface in Congress},\textsuperscript{76} CNET NEWS, Feb. 6, 2007, \texttt{http://news.cnet.com/2100-7348-6156904.html}. For example, The Cybersecurity Enhancement and Consumer Data Protection Act, proposed by Rep. Lamar Smith, would make it a crime punishable by up to five years in prison to withhold information about a major security breach from the FBI and the U.S. Secret Service. \textit{Id.} The bill would require stewards of information that experience a breach to notify those investigative services within fourteen days of discovering it. Failure to do so would result in fines of up to $50,000 a day. \textit{Id. See also} Cybersecurity Enhancement and Consumer Data Protection Act of 2007, H.R. 836, 110th Cong. (2007).


\textsuperscript{77}. Notification of Risk to Personal Data Act of 2007, S. 239, 110th Cong. (2007).

\textsuperscript{78}. Data Accountability and Trust Act, H.R. 958, 110th Cong. (2007).

\textsuperscript{79}. H.R. 836, 110th Congress,\textsuperscript{78} supra note 95.


\textsuperscript{81}. Preemption has been the source of debate between business and privacy group advocates. Industry groups advocate for a narrow federal law that would preempt all differing state laws in order to streamline the notification process for affected companies. Privacy advocates favor a national law that would allow states to enact stronger laws in order to ensure that consumers obtain the strongest protections possible. See STEVENS,\textsuperscript{79} supra note 73.

\textsuperscript{82}. None of the currently pending federal data breach notification laws allow for a private right of action. Under these laws, only state attorneys general could sue for violation of statutes.
S. 458 would allow the Federal Trade Commission to establish guidelines for data security and breach notification. S. 495 and H.R. 958 set forth data security requirements in addition to data breach notification guidelines. H.R. 836 would criminalize the concealment of a data breach. Through these and other data breach notification bills, Congress has made clear that data security legislation is a top priority.

II. ANALYSIS

A. Critique of State Data Breach Notification Laws

While the current state data breach notification laws provide consumers with valuable information regarding the security of their personal information, these laws are far from perfect and for several reasons do not sufficiently address the problems created for both consumers and businesses by data breaches. First, the laws are primarily reactive. As a result, the laws have only a limited chance of preventing breaches. Second, the ambiguous requirements created by the large patchwork of disparate state laws make corporate compliance following a breach difficult and costly. Third, the current system of regulation has left many loopholes in coverage. As a result, many consumers may be left un-notified if their data is compromised.

See Berinato, supra note 74; Davidson, supra note 76.
83. Davidson, supra note 76.

Although the FTC’s mandate has until now not included breach notification, the FTC has a fair amount of experience with enforcing data security standards under its Section 5 authority. The proposed legislation delegates authority to the FTC to promulgate regulations based on criteria similar to those the FTC already follows in its FTC cases: establishment of security policies, enforcement of those policies and monitoring of potentially vulnerable systems.

Id.

84. See Data Accessibility and Trust Act, H.R. 958, 110th Cong. (2007); Personal Data Privacy and Security Act of 2007, S. 495 110th Cong. (2007); Davidson, supra note 76.
86. See Broache, supra note 75 (“the senator [Leahy] listed passage of new data breach security laws among his top priorities.”); Berinato, CSO Disclosure Series: What’s Next With Disclosure Legislation?, supra note 74; Davidson, supra note 76 (“Congressional leaders have emphasized that data privacy and breach notification are top priorities.”).
1. Reactive v. Proactive

One of the primary flaws in state data breach notification laws is that they require notification only after a breach has occurred, while virtually ignoring breach prevention.\(^{87}\) By imposing liability on companies for failing to notify consumers following a breach, rather than for failing to prevent the breach itself, the laws as they currently stand do not adequately incentivize companies to protect consumer data.\(^{88}\) Instead, they merely require companies to master the notification system created by the state laws. The notification requirement itself may motivate some companies to safeguard consumer information in order to avoid the bad publicity surrounding a large data breach. However, the large number of data breaches revealed in the years following the enactment of California’s Security Breach Information Act is a testament to the ineffectiveness of these laws as a means of adequately preventing data breaches.\(^{89}\) As detailed above, some states have taken proactive measures to ensure that consumer data is protected from a breach.\(^{90}\) While these measures are a step in the right direction, a federal law is needed to impose these preventative measures uniformly.

2. Ambiguity

The current system of state data breach notification laws imposes specific obligations on a company following a data breach; however, given the vast disparities among current state laws, these obligations are not clearly defined.\(^{91}\) In the time immediately following a breach,

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87. See California Security Breach Information Act, CAL. CIV. CODE § 1798.82, hist.n.1(R) (stating that the reason for enacting the legislation is to provide “expeditious notification” of security breaches so that victims of identity theft can act quickly to minimize any damage). While the legislators may also have intended the act to lower the number of reported data breaches, this goal is not explicitly stated in the Act. Id.
89. See Chronology of Data Breaches, supra note 1.
90. Infra Part D.
the variations among the laws create challenges for business management personnel in determining with which, if any, of the forty-four data breach notification laws they must comply. 92 Because many modern companies maintain records for consumers from more than one state, a breach often triggers several, if not all, of the currently enacted laws. 93 While these laws are rarely in direct conflict, they do differ in regard to applicability; exemptions; notification procedures and timelines; and enforcement. 94 This can create unnecessary confusion and cost that could be avoided by the enactment of a federal data breach notification law providing clear guidelines for businesses following a breach. 95

3. Loopholes/Exemptions

Perhaps the most critical problem with current state data breach notification laws is that the patchwork system created by the state laws does not cover everyone. The forty-five state laws each require companies to provide notification only to consumers residing within the state. This means that residents of the five states that have yet to enact legislation may not receive notification if their information is compromised. Furthermore, several of the current laws create

92. See id.
94. See Lockwood, supra note 91.
95. Id.

In light of the divergent state laws dealing with notification of data breaches and the related compliance burden, many business groups reluctantly have championed legislation at the federal level to bring uniformity to this area. . . . Among the many reasons that none of the widely discussed bills has been passed thus far has been the inability to reconcile the inherent competing interests between consumer groups, who want to have federal requirements layered onto co-existing state requirements, and the demands of the business community for a single federal regime that would preempt state laws and possibly relax some of the more stringent state requirements, such as those imposed by California.
exemptions for government entities. 96 Recent years have shown that these agencies are not immune from data breaches. 97 In fact, these entities suffer from some of the most frequent and largest data breaches. 98 A federal law is necessary to ensure that universal coverage is provided and that consumers are notified every time their personal information is compromised.

III. PROPOSAL

The current state data breach notification system is ambiguous and difficult for companies to navigate following a breach and has created loopholes that have left many consumers unprotected. Additionally, the current laws work primarily to regulate responses following a breach, doing little to address the issue of data breach prevention. Congress should take action immediately to enact a federal data breach notification law. In addition to establishing standardized notification requirements, this law should require companies to take preventive steps to avoid data breaches and impose liability on those companies that fail to do so.

A successful data breach notification law should combine elements of both existing state data breach notification laws and previously proposed federal notification laws. First, federal data breach notification legislation must provide standardization. Replacing the current patchwork of 45 state laws with a single comprehensive federal law would give businesses a clear road map to follow after a breach. This law would eliminate questions regarding what information is covered and when and how notification must be provided, and would preempt all state data breach notification laws. Second, a federal data breach law must cover everyone. Any law that

96. See Alexander, supra note 93.

It’s important to know your customer base and in which states they reside . . . . Be carefully [sic] when considering selective breach disclosures based solely on a lack of legal requirements to notify customers in certain states. The public relations fall-out could be more damaging to your company than the actual disclosure itself.

Id. In many large breaches, companies will notify all affected consumers despite the lack of a technical legal obligation to do so. See supra note 7 and accompanying text.

97. See Chronology of Data Breaches, supra note 1.

98. See supra note 52 and accompanying text.
excludes government entities ignores the reality that consumer information is at risk of disclosure from the public as well as the private sector. Third, a federal law must provide support to affected consumers in the form of credit monitoring. This provision would help notified consumers take action to prevent identity theft. Fourth, a law should have a “risk of harm” exception. Under this exception, a company would be able to forgo notification of a breach that presented no reasonable harm to consumers. This exception would help prevent consumers from receiving an influx of useless notifications. Fifth, the law should require notification of each breach to consumer reporting agencies and create an FTC clearinghouse. This centralized clearinghouse would allow for collection of accurate national data breach statistics. Sixth, both the FTC and state Attorneys General should be given power to enforce the new federal law. Consumers should also be afforded a private right of action. Seventh, companies should be held liable not only for failure to notify, but also if they negligently allow a data breach to occur. This would give companies greater motivation to protect consumer data and prevent data breaches. Eighth, the law should establish data protection and disposal requirements that would help to prevent data breaches. Ninth, the law should require companies to establish policies that would allow them to react quickly if a data breach occurs.99

CONCLUSION

In the years since the ChoicePoint data breach first brought widespread attention to the issue of data breach notification, data breaches have remained an important concern for both consumers and companies. The forty-five existing state data breach notification laws provide some protection by requiring notification to affected consumers following a breach. However, this patchwork of laws has resulted in an ambiguous notification system that is challenging for companies to navigate. The system also fails to provide notification to all affected consumers due to loopholes created by the laws and the

99. Government entities are required to establish such policies under the guidance set forth by the OMB. See OFFICE OF MGMT. & BUDGET, supra note 21.
failure of some states to enact legislation. This ambiguity has created the need for a federal law to provide clear, uniform guidelines for data breach notification. Unlike the current state laws, which generally are reactive, this federal law should take proactive steps to prevent breaches before they occur.