

Your data has been sold to websites like MyLife and WhitePages. Here's how to remove it

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If you think your privacy is at risk when it comes to social media sites

such as Facebook and Twitter, they're nothing compared to the "people search engines." We're talking WhitePages, MyLife.com, BeenVerified and the like.

Here's the deal: States sell their data to brokers, who in turn feed court and criminal records, housing information, automobile details and more to these websites for a fee.

You never asked for your real estate prices to be posted online, your address, age or other [personal details](#), but they are there.

The good news: Most of the sites will let you remove the data through an opt-out click, although it's not easy. For example, MyLife requires you to call in and make the request personally. And it's really a game of whack-a-mole because when you remove info from one site, it can reappear on some new site.

But here's what to do:

Spokeo

It's the easiest of the sites to work with and most responsive, but it's still a five-click process to remove your data. Start by looking up your name, copying the URL that's been created for you, hitting the BACK button on your browser and then clicking the PRIVACY tab. At the bottom of the page, in small letters, is Opt-Out. Click that, type in the URL you copied and your e-mail address. Spokeo says it will then quickly remove the data. In our tests, it was gone within a day.

WhitePages

Search for your name, copy the URL created and go to the opt-out page,

which is so hard to find, we're just going to give you the URL here: www.whitepages.com/suppression_requests. You will then be asked to confirm and then to give WhitePages a reason you don't want your [personal information](#) stored in their index. (A drop-down menu offers these choices: The info is incorrect, I'm getting too much spam and junk mail, I'm being harassed and I just want my information to be private.) Then WhitePages asks for you to offer your phone number and get a call back, from which you'll be asked to type in a confirmation code.

Been Verified

You can save a step by going straight to the privacy policy (hidden way down, at the bottom of the front page). From there, search for your name (and add the state you live in). Then type in your address and request to be let out. The company adds that it "will not sell the email address that you provide as part of the opt-out process, or use it for any other purpose, without your prior consent."

MyLife

The worst offender: MyLife won't let you opt-out without calling the company first. There's more.

A little background:

MyLife uses scare tactics to get you to sign up for a membership to see the results.

For instance, MyLife told me "you have arrest or criminal records" and offered me the chance to view these, provided I pay \$1 for a three-day trial membership that could be canceled only if I called in. It also said I "may" have bankruptcies and liens, sex offender notices and eviction

reports.

I bit to see what they had. And it turns out I got what MyLife cited as a "minor infraction" traffic ticket in 1991. That's 27 years ago for what I believe was an illegal U-turn.

Worst of all, after calling on Monday (888-704-1900) to demand my removal from the index and being asked to give my name, street address and birth date, as of Friday evening, everything was still there. A follow-up call said MyLife takes five to seven business days for removal. The other sites had me down in less than a day.

Lawsuits

MyLife is being sued by several consumers, with one group accusing it of bait-and-switching people to pay one fee to find out who is searching for them and then getting extra recurring charges. Another group says MyLife has violated the Illinois Right of Publicity Act, reselling their "addresses, employment histories, criminal records, social media pictures and other sensitive and personal information." Spokeo was sued for allegedly displaying inaccurate information, and it went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the company.

Attempts to reach MyLife for comment were not answered.

Meanwhile, what of the data selling? The California Department of Motor Vehicles was in the news recently for pocketing \$50 million yearly for reselling motorists' data to car manufacturers, insurance firms and banks.

A spokeswoman for the DMV, Anita Gore, says the agency is just covering their costs. The data is sold "for legitimate purposes," she says. What if the clients turn around and resell the data? "Our expectation is

that they won't," she says.

And if the websites say all the real estate, court and criminal records are, indeed, "public," why aren't they displayed on the world's most-used search engine, Google, instead of being marketed by companies such as MyLife and WhitePages?

Google says it displays only "publicly" available data, as opposed to information that has to be purchased from databases.

Mark Rumold, a senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, says the issue of public records in the digital age is a thorny one. "It's all been publicly accessible but hard to get. You had to show up in person. Now, it's digitized and there are privacy concerns."

He adds that there's no way to "put the genie back in the bottle," but if consumers are concerned, they should write their local and state lawmakers and complain. Reaching out to [federal officials](#) would be a waste of time, as each state has different laws, he notes.

A new law, California Consumer Privacy Act, goes into effect in January and requires companies to fully disclose what personal data has been collected and to make it easier to demand the companies to delete their data.

So look to the people search engines to offer changes in January. Even if they're not based in California, they do business there, so they'll need to adapt.

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