



Highlights of [GAO-06-253T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2004, an estimated 35.7 million foreign-born people resided in the United States, and many legitimately have SSNs. Many of these individuals have Social Security numbers (SSNs) which can have a key role in verifying authorization to work in the United States. However, some foreign-born individuals have been given SSNs inappropriately. Recent legislation, aimed at protecting the SSN and preventing fraud and abuse, changes how the Social Security Administration (SSA) assigns numbers and awards benefits for foreign-born individuals. The chairman of the Subcommittee on Social Security asked GAO to address two questions. First, how does SSA determine who is and is not eligible for an SSN? Second, how does SSA determine who is and is not eligible for Social Security benefits?

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making no new recommendations in this testimony.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-253T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Procedures for Issuing Numbers and Benefits to the Foreign-Born

What GAO Found

SSA determines who is eligible for an SSN by verifying certain immigration documents and determining if an individual's card requires a work restriction. Some foreign-born individuals are eligible for one of three kinds of Social Security cards depending in part on their immigration status: (1) regular cards, (2) those valid for work only with authorization from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and (3) those that are not valid for work—non-work cards. As of 2003 SSA had issued slightly more than 7 million non-work cards to people who need them to receive benefits for which they were otherwise entitled. Both SSA's Inspector General and GAO have identified weaknesses in SSA procedures for assigning SSNs and issuing cards, also known as enumeration. For example, working undercover and posing as parents of newborns, GAO investigators were able to obtain Social Security cards by using counterfeit documents. Congress has enacted recent legislation strengthening the SSN enumeration process and documentation requirements. SSA is implementing the law and is improving document verification and now requires third-party verification of noncitizen documents such as birth certificates and visual inspection of documents before issuing an SSN. SSA also continues to strengthen program integrity by, for example, restricting the number of replacement cards.

Congress and SSA have also improved laws and procedures designed to strengthen program integrity in the payment of benefits to the foreign-born. Due to provisions of the Social Security Protection Act of 2004, some foreign-born individuals who were not authorized to work will no longer be eligible for benefits. To be entitled to benefits, the law requires noncitizens originally assigned an SSN after 2003 to have a work-authorized SSN. Amendments to the Social Security Act in 1996 require individuals to be lawfully present in the U.S. to receive Social Security benefits, though some noncitizens can receive benefits while living abroad, such as noncitizens who have worked in the U.S. and in a country with which the U.S. has a totalization agreement. SSA's totalization agreements coordinate taxation and public pension benefits. The agreements help eliminate dual taxation and Social Security coverage that multinational employers and employees encounter when workers temporarily reside in a foreign country with its own Social Security program. Successful implementation of these agreements requires the countries involved to carefully coordinate and verify data they exchange. Computer matches with foreign countries, for example, may help protect totalization programs from making payments to ineligible individuals. SSA is exploring options for undertaking such exchanges.