

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-507T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

SSA has issued about 500 million SSNs and cards since the first design of the SSN and card in 1936. SSA provides a card to each individual when it issues an SSN, as required by law, and also issues replacement cards upon request. Concerns about costs and identity security in an increasingly paperless society have raised the question of whether a paper SSN card is still needed. GAO was asked to examine the use of the card.

This testimony focuses on (1) federal requirements for individuals to present an SSN card; 2) stakeholder views on the purposes for which the cards are used; and (3) potential implications of eliminating SSN cards and developing alternative approaches.

GAO reviewed federal laws and regulations; reviewed SSA fiscal year 2016 data on card costs (the most recent year available); conducted a literature search to identify paperless identification alternatives; and interviewed SSA officials, as well as federal, state, and private sector stakeholders that may need and are legally authorized to collect an SSN. Stakeholders included associations representing state agencies, financial institutions, and human resource managers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any recommendations. DHS and SSA provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-18-507T](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Curda at (202) 512-7215 or curdae@gao.gov.

May 17, 2018

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Observations on Use and Costs of Social Security Cards

What GAO Found

GAO identified two federal requirements for individuals to show a Social Security card. Based on a search of federal statutes and regulations, GAO did not identify any federal statutory requirements for individuals to present their Social Security card. GAO identified two federal regulations that require individuals to present their card in order to verify their Social Security number (SSN) in certain circumstances, such as when updating a service member's or dependent's SSN information in certain Department of Defense records systems.

Stakeholders we interviewed identified certain situations where, even though not required, the card is commonly used to verify identity or an SSN. For example, officials from an association representing human resource managers said the card is one option on a list of acceptable documents that employees can present to prove they are eligible to work in the United States. Financial and education association officials told GAO that they may, in rare circumstances request the card if there is a discrepancy with the SSN provided by the individual. Representatives from an association of state human services agencies also told GAO that the card is not required when applying for certain public benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, although applicants may use it as a form of identification.

Organizations who use SSNs said eliminating the paper card would not change their current processes. Social Security Administration (SSA) officials and stakeholders we interviewed cited some issues to consider for use of cards and for alternative approaches, including:

- **Identity verification:** According to stakeholders, the card can help ensure an SSN is recorded accurately. However, they also noted that it is not sufficient to verify identity, and stakeholders often require electronic verification of SSNs.
- **Cost:** SSA officials said eliminating the card may result in only limited cost savings, if any, and alternatives may create new costs. In fiscal year 2016, SSA estimated that the cost to produce a card ranged from \$6 to \$34, depending on the mode by which the card was requested, including staff time, technology, printing, and postage. Officials said that printing and mailing account for only 60 cents of that cost. In fiscal year 2016, SSA officials stated that the agency spent about \$8 million on printing and delivery of the cards. SSA officials said they have not developed cost estimates for an alternative system because the law requires SSA to issue cards.
- **Other factors:** Stakeholders also said there are other issues to consider in developing electronic approaches, including privacy, cost, and the effect on vulnerable populations, such as individuals with limited access to computers.

Several government entities, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and foreign governments, have begun to use electronic methods rather than cards to authenticate individual identities. For example, one electronic method allows users to print a copy of a document that contains identity information, if needed, although the document is maintained in an electronic system.