



Highlights of [GAO-04-12](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Social Security, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2002, the Social Security Administration (SSA) issued nearly 6 million new Social Security numbers (SSNs), of which 1.3 million were issued to noncitizens. Despite its narrowly intended purpose, the SSN has in practice become the national identifier. SSNs are key pieces of information in creating false identities, underscoring the importance of issuing SSNs only to those eligible for them and of protecting those already assigned to individuals. The flow of noncitizens into the United States and the accompanying number of SSNs issued to them over the last several years add to the importance of having sound practices to avoid issuing SSNs to those who do not qualify for them.

The Subcommittee Chairman asked GAO to describe and assess SSA’s key initiatives to ensure the appropriate issuance of SSNs to noncitizens and identify vulnerabilities to error or fraud SSA has not yet addressed.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that SSA strengthen the integrity of its enumeration policies and procedures by taking actions such as reviewing field compliance with verification requirements for enumerating noncitizens. In its response to GAO’s draft report, SSA agreed with GAO’s recommendations and provided information on planned and current actions to address them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-12.

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

Actions Taken to Strengthen Procedures for Issuing Social Security Numbers to Noncitizens, but Some Weaknesses Remain

What GAO Found

SSA Has Increased Noncitizen Verifications and Begun New Initiatives

SSA has taken steps to prevent the inappropriate assignment of SSNs to noncitizens. SSA now requires field staff to verify noncitizens' identity documents with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in addition to continuing to require visual inspection of these documents, prior to issuing an SSN. However, many field staff GAO interviewed are relying heavily on DHS's verification while neglecting SSA's standard inspection practices, even though both approaches are necessary. SSA has also undertaken new initiatives to shift the burden of processing noncitizen SSN applications and verifying documents from its field offices. In 2002, SSA started implementation of a process called “Enumeration at Entry” (EAE), which relies on State Department and DHS expertise to authenticate information provided by SSN applicants. SSA is in the early stages of planning to evaluate EAE with the State Department and DHS. Also, SSA recently piloted a specialized center in Brooklyn, New York, which focuses on enumeration and uses the expertise of DHS staff and SSA’s Office of the Inspector General investigators.

Some Areas Affecting Issuance of SSNs Not Yet Addressed

While SSA has embarked on these new initiatives, it has not tightened controls in two key areas of its enumeration process that could be exploited by individuals—citizens and noncitizens alike—seeking fraudulent SSNs: the assignment of SSNs to children under age 1 and replacement Social Security cards. SSA changed its policy to require independent verification of birth records for U.S.-born children age 1 and over but still only relies on visual inspection of birth documents of children under age 1. This lack of independent verification remains an area vulnerable to fraud. In fact, by posing as parents of newborns, GAO investigators obtained two SSNs using counterfeit documents. SSA’s policy for replacing Social Security cards, which allows individuals to obtain up to 52 replacement cards per year, and its documentation requirements for U.S. citizens to obtain such cards also increase the potential for misuse of SSNs. Of the 18 million cards issued by SSA in 2002, 12.4 million, or 69 percent, were replacements. While SSA requires noncitizens applying for replacement cards to provide the same identity and immigration information as if they were applying for a new SSN, its evidence requirements for citizens are much less stringent. The ability to obtain many replacement cards with relatively weak documentation may allow individuals to impersonate others by using counterfeit documents to obtain SSNs for a range of illicit uses, including selling them to noncitizens.

Original SSNs and Replacement Social Security Cards SSA Issued in Fiscal Year 2002

Numbers in millions			
Key areas	U.S. citizens	Noncitizens	Total
Original SSNs issued	4.23	1.34	5.57
Replacement Social Security Cards issued	11.45	1.00	12.45
Total	15.68	2.34	18.02

Source: SSA.