



# Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

## *Management Advisory Report*

### Match of National Missing and Unidentified Persons System Information Against Social Security Administration Records

062402 | September 2024



# Office of the Inspector General

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

## MEMORANDUM

**Date:** September 25, 2024

**Refer To:** 062402

**To:** Martin O' Malley  
Commissioner

**From:** Michelle L. Anderson *Michelle L. Anderson*  
Assistant Inspector General for Audit  
as Acting Inspector General

**Subject:** Match of National Missing and Unidentified Persons System Information Against Social Security Administration Records

The attached final report presents the results of the Office of Audit's review. The objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration issued payments to beneficiaries who were reported as missing in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Mark Searight, Deputy Assistant Inspector General for Audit.

Attachment

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

NamUs	National Missing and Unidentified Persons System
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration

## OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) issued payments to beneficiaries who were reported as missing in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs).

## BACKGROUND

The National Institute of Justice is a research, development and evaluation agency of the Department of Justice that funds efforts to investigate missing and unidentified person cases. The National Institute of Justice created NamUs, a centralized repository and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases nationwide. NamUs also helps investigators match long-term missing persons with unidentified remains to resolve cases and bring resolution to families.<sup>1</sup>

SSA must have a current address to contact all beneficiaries<sup>2</sup> when necessary to ensure they are still entitled to benefits.<sup>3</sup> SSA may suspend beneficiaries' payments when their whereabouts are reported as unknown or for address development if benefit checks are returned as undeliverable.<sup>4</sup> When SSA cannot locate the beneficiary, it must suspend benefits and annotate the Special Message field on the beneficiary's payment record.<sup>5</sup> When SSA employees suspend a beneficiary's benefits for whereabouts unknown, they must also document the steps taken to locate the beneficiary.<sup>6</sup> When SSA locates the beneficiary, it should reinstate benefits.<sup>7</sup> When SSA suspends an adult beneficiary's benefits for at least 7 continuous years for whereabouts unknown, SSA should assume the beneficiary failed to request the resumption of benefits because they are deceased. Policy instructs employees to terminate entitlement to benefits effective the date the adult beneficiary disappeared unless there is convincing evidence to establish a more likely date of death.<sup>8</sup>

We obtained NamUs data on 23,458 individuals reported as missing persons as of August 2023.<sup>9</sup> We processed the missing persons' names and approximate dates of birth<sup>10</sup> through SSA's Enumeration Verification System and against SSA payment records to identify

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)*, [namus.nij.ojp.gov](https://namus.nij.ojp.gov) (September 5, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> We use the term "beneficiary" throughout this report in reference to Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance beneficiaries and/or Supplemental Security Income recipients.

<sup>3</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 02605.055, A (July 17, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, A-B (May 30, 2023) and GN 02605.055 (July 17, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 02605.055, B (July 17, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 01010.300 (July 26, 2023) and GN 02602.320 (May 30, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, C.2 (May 30, 2023) and GN 02605.055, B.7 (July 17, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> SSA, *POMS*, GN 02602.320, D (May 30, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> NamUs' publicly available information includes the name and approximate age of missing persons but does not report their Social Security numbers or dates of birth.

<sup>10</sup> The NamUs data included the individual's age when reported missing. We used that information to approximate a range of the individual's date of birth.

beneficiaries in current payment status as of June 29, 2023, whose name and date of birth were consistent with listed missing persons.

## **RESULTS OF REVIEW**

We identified 189 beneficiaries in current, suspended or terminated payment status whose names and ages were consistent with individuals listed as missing persons in NamUs. SSA issued the beneficiaries approximately \$11.9 million in payments after the individuals' dates of last contact reported in NamUs and we estimate SSA will issue an additional \$2.1 million in payments to the beneficiaries in current payment status over the next 12 months.

### **Beneficiaries in Current or Suspended Payment Status**

SSA issued approximately \$10.9 million to 171 beneficiaries in current or suspended payment status after individuals with the same name and age were listed as missing in NamUs. Because the NamUs data we used for this project did not include the missing persons' Social Security number, it is possible the beneficiary and missing person are not the same individual. However, we believe name, age, and circumstances of disappearance information in NamUs provided enough information to raise questions about the vital status of the beneficiaries. For example:

- In 2007, family members reported to law enforcement that a retirement beneficiary was missing. Shortly afterward, a game warden located the beneficiary's abandoned truck in a mountainous area. SSA payment records indicate SSA was notified of the beneficiary's missing persons status in 2007 but did not suspend the payments. Since 2007, SSA has issued approximately \$352,000 in benefit payments.
- In 2017, an individual was reported to law enforcement as a missing person. In a local news article, police asked for the public's help to find the missing individual. The article provided the victim's age and name as well as the address where the individual was last seen. This information matched the age, name, street, city, and town on a retirement beneficiary's payment record. SSA was not aware the beneficiary had been reported missing and has issued approximately \$144,000 in benefits since 2017.
- In 2017, an individual's home burned down. After several searches through what remained of the dwelling and surrounding property, the individual's remains were not found. Since that time, the individual has been reported as missing by local law enforcement. At the time of our review, SSA was issuing payments to a retirement beneficiary with the same age, first, middle, and last name as the victim. SSA has issued approximately \$141,000 in benefit payments to the beneficiary since the 2017 fire.

We provided these beneficiaries' information to SSA in August 2024. Without corrective action, we estimate SSA will issue the beneficiaries in current payment status approximately \$2.1 million in additional payments over the next 12 months.

### **Beneficiaries in Terminated Payment Status**

SSA issued approximately \$1 million to 18 beneficiaries in terminated payment status after individuals with the same name and age were listed as missing in NamUs. All the beneficiaries were in current payment status in July 2023, but, since that time, SSA had terminated their

payments. Although SSA had terminated these beneficiaries' payments, the cases appear to involve improper payments.

For example, we identified a retirement beneficiary whom local law enforcement reported as missing in December 2013 and who had been listed in NamUs as missing since June 2014. SSA records indicate that, in April 2014, the beneficiary's son informed SSA his father was missing. SSA briefly suspended the benefits in May 2014, but, for unknown reasons, resumed issuing benefits in August 2014. In February 2024 (10 years later), fishermen found a truck in a lake that contained the missing beneficiary's remains. The local coroner issued a death certificate that noted the man had been reported missing since 2013 but recorded a February 23, 2024 date of death on the death certificate.

Family members provided the death certificate to SSA in March 2024. SSA was not aware the beneficiary had been reported as missing and input the February 2024 date of death on the decedent's payment and Numident records. SSA had deposited approximately \$100,000 into the deceased beneficiary's account after he was reported missing. However, when the February 2024 date of death was input in SSA records, SSA systems identified no payments after death, which prevented SSA from using Treasury reclamation<sup>11</sup> to recover the overpayment from the deceased beneficiary's bank account. We referred this case to SSA in April 2024 and referred the other 17 cases to SSA in August 2024.

## CONCLUSION

Timely suspending payments to beneficiaries reported as missing could prevent millions of dollars in improper payments. The Department of Justice maintains missing persons data through the NamUs database that SSA could use to identify or prevent improper payments; however, SSA does not obtain or match missing persons data against its records and is not required to do so. We are not making formal recommendations for corrective action. Instead, we provided SSA with information on these beneficiaries so it could review the cases and continue, suspend or terminate benefits, as appropriate.

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<sup>11</sup> Reclamation is a recovery procedure used by the U.S. Department of Treasury to obtain refunds from financial institutions for federal payments issued to an account holder after their death.



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