

Social Security Administration Correspondence Containing Full Social Security Numbers

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To assess the Social Security Administration's (SSA) use of Social Security numbers (SSN) on external correspondence and the potential risks associated with such use.

Background

The SSN was created in 1936 to allow employers to identify, and accurately report, an individual's earnings covered under the Social Security program so SSA could efficiently administer benefits. However, the SSN has since become one of the keys to identifying records used by Federal agencies, State and local governments, and private organizations.

In 2007, the Office of Management and Budget issued a memorandum requesting that Federal agencies review the unnecessary collection and use of SSNs. Specifically, the memorandum states that agencies should protect personally identifiable information in the Government's possession and avoid its breach.

Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in America. Someone illegally using another's SSN and assuming a false identity can cause many problems. SSA acknowledges that one of the ways a thief may get SSNs is by stealing mail.

Findings

According to SSA, about 233 (66 percent) of the 352 million notices it sent in 2015 included individuals' full SSNs. While it is unknown how many of the intended addressees received these notices, our audit work has shown that the addresses in SSA's records can be inaccurate. In addition, our audit and investigative work have shown that the more SSNs are unnecessarily used, the higher the probability they may be used inappropriately.

SSA has removed SSNs from some of its notices. However, SSA told us that including the SSN on notices is central to its business processes because it supports the Agency's current operational and systems infrastructure.

Many other government and non-government agencies that frequently use the SSN have implemented measures to eliminate or significantly reduce the use of SSNs on correspondence. In 2015, an SSA cross-component workgroup considered options for removing full SSNs from correspondence and recommended that SSA delay the removal of SSNs from all notices at one time. However, SSA stated it will explore leveraging existing information technology projects to replace the SSN with the Beneficiary Notice Control Number on notices on a case-by-case basis as resources are available. The Acting Commissioner approved this recommendation. While we are encouraged by the new position, we believe SSA should adopt a timeframe for implementation.

Although SSA cannot control other entities' collection and use of SSNs, we believe it is important to address any known risk, especially if that risk is under the Agency's control. We believe SSA, as a Federal agency and public servant, has a duty to reduce opportunities for individuals who may have malicious intent to improperly obtain and use another's SSN.

Recommendations

We recommend that SSA (1) make removal of SSNs from SSA correspondence a priority as resources permit and (2) re-evaluate and document the assumptions used to develop SSA's cost estimates to remove SSNs from its correspondence.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.