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Highlights

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Improved Agency Coordination Needed for Social Security Card Enhancement Efforts

Why GAO Did This Study

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has issued more than 430 million Social Security numbers (SSN) and cards since the Social Security program began in 1935, of which an estimated 300 million belong to living number holders. SSNs have a key role in verifying individuals' authorization to work in the United States, but SSN cards are also vulnerable to theft and counterfeiting. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 requires that SSA consult with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), form a task force, establish standards for safeguarding the SSN and card, and provide for implementation by June 2006. Concerns about unauthorized workers and the use of counterfeit documents led the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee to ask that GAO (1) review SSA's progress to safeguard the SSN and enhance the card as required under the Intelligence Act, (2) identify key issues to be considered before enhancing the card, and (3) outline the range of options available to SSA for enhancing the card.

What GAO Recommends

As the SSA-led task force works to protect the Social Security card, GAO recommends that DHS and SSA work together to resolve the card's weaknesses in proving employment eligibility. DHS agreed but SSA agreed in part, stating that aspects of the recommendation are beyond the Intelligence Act scope.

What GAO Found

SSA has implemented several provisions of the Intelligence Act intended to help safeguard the SSN and card, but slow action to form the interagency task force may limit card enhancement efforts. SSA has implemented measures to limit the number of replacement cards, verify birth certificates for applicants under age 1, and improve the Enumeration at Birth process. SSA has taken action to include death indicators and initiated work on fraud indicators for Social Security accounts in its database. SSA set specific tasks and timelines to address card enhancement options and made a preliminary decision to improve the current paper card and issue the improved cards only to new card applicants. Although the card plays a significant role in verifying individuals' authorization to work, SSA did not consult DHS about these initial tasks or the formation of the interagency task force until November 2005 and did not convene the task force until late January 2006. This allows less than 6 months for the task force to consider critical issues that affect card enhancements before establishing new safeguards.

The difficulty of counterfeit-proofing the card, the role the card has in determining employment eligibility, and ongoing enhancements to state drivers' licenses and identification cards are critical issues to consider before enhancing the Social Security card. Counterfeit protections were first added in 1983 but older versions of the card remain valid. Millions of older cards never established employment eligibility because SSA did not require that everyone present evidence of age, identity, or citizenship status until 1978. Prior GAO work shows that the employment verification process is jeopardized by document and identity fraud, the wide array of documents that can be used, weak worksite enforcement, and flaws in the voluntary electronic verification system. DHS is currently considering reducing the number of acceptable documents used to verify employment eligibility. Changes to drivers' licenses and identification cards under the Real ID Act will improve verification of identity in the employment process, since states must verify the SSN and legal presence upon application. However, states are not required to check or note employment eligibility.

Once these critical issues are considered, a variety of options exist for enhancing the Social Security card, ranging from enhancing the paper card, to adding machine-readable or biometric features such as photographs and fingerprints, to eliminating the card entirely. Additionally, the costs of implementing each option will vary. Each option provides different alternatives for improving the ability to verify employment eligibility. The type of card and distribution method chosen will have a significant effect on costs and the agency's workload. For example, if cards require a fingerprint or photograph, additional infrastructure will be required to obtain these features; reissuing new cards to the estimated 300 million living cardholders or staggering issuance to certain groups, such as those who change jobs, would require a different investment of resources. However, decisions about the card's role will be crucial in determining costs.

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United States Government Accountability Office